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Citation: Matfin, Jonathan Edward Joseph (2023) Mass higher education under the microscope: an analysis of the department of History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck, University of London, 1963-2003. [Thesis] (Unpublished)

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Mass Higher Education Under the Microscope

An Analysis of the Department of History, Classics and Archaeology
at Birkbeck, University of London, 1963-2003

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2023

Declaration

I confirm that all material presented in this thesis is my own, except where otherwise indicated.

Jonny Matfin

Abstract

The publication of the 1963 Robbins Report marked the start of a seismic shift in British higher education – from an elite system to mass participation. Over the next forty years, the provision of university places was massively expanded; targets for increases to student admissions were exceeded. This unprecedented expansion was not just a matter of numbers, however. Social demand for more degrees was set against shifting economic and political realities. As a result, the period also saw a drastic recasting of relations between higher education institutions and the state. For universities, this meant major changes to funding and scrutiny, including drives towards managerialism and marketisation, which had profound impacts. This thesis presents new perspectives on this historic period for British higher education by radically reducing the scale of its research, to a single department in a single institution: History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck, University of London. Through in-depth analyses of archive files held by the college, plus original oral history interviews with past and present HCA staff and students, it establishes the reality ‘on the ground’ for academics in the post-Robbins era. Vitally, however, this work is not only concerned with what the ‘macro’ – mass higher education expansion – meant for the ‘micro’ – daily departmental life. Critically, it also considers what its ‘microscopic’ findings might mean for historical understandings of the bigger picture.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, a sincere thank you to my supervisor Joanna Bourke. It has been my absolute privilege and good fortune to work under an eminent historian who also specialises in generosity with time, advice and wine for her students.

My thanks to Jerry White, who first encouraged me to consider ‘carrying on’, and to the organisers of the Birkbeck Bicentenary Studentship scheme, through which I was funded. My thanks also to the many other academic, administrative and library staff at Birkbeck who have helped me with my work at the college.

Thank you to my parents, for all their love and support during my long education.

Thank you – so much – to my wife Lucy, who has never doubted my academic ability – and never let me take it too seriously, either. And thank you to our daughter Josephine, the most wonderful distraction a doctoral student could wish for.

Thank you to my friends, particularly the *Monks*, for providing antidotes to academic labour.

And thank you to my in-laws for their help.

Lastly, I am sincerely grateful to all the staff and students, past and present, of Birkbeck’s Department of History, Classics and Archaeology, who helped me with this research.

I hope it does at least some justice to their stories of work and education, and to this unique place.

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Introduction

‘Generalising about universities today is an enterprise fraught with peril. The anomalies are too great, the exceptions too numerous to be contained in a single paragraph, the play of personalities too intricate for summary, and the manifold connections between the university and society so complex as to defy adequate definition.’¹

Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Writing of University History at the End of Another Century*

Birkbeck, University of London was from its beginning different, even within the world of universities. First established as London Mechanics’ Institution in 1823, it prioritised the part-time education of the capital’s working adults.² This mission, inspired by both ancient traditions of Athens and contemporary innovations in Glasgow, was distinct from that of the ‘medieval’ universities.³ Such a direction was not without complication: the socialist radicalism of those who conceived of the new institution – *Mechanics’ Magazine* editors, J. C. Robertson and Thomas Hodgkin – was not shared by the mostly Benthamite reformers – including George Birkbeck – who helped to secure support and funding for its first incarnation.⁴ Similarly, mechanics themselves were soon absent: Birkbeck became an evening school not for militant workers, but for self-improving clerks and others from socially modest backgrounds.⁵ From 1863, the institution’s part-time students could study for

¹ Sheldon Rothblatt, ‘The Writing of University History at the End of Another Century’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 23 (1997), pp. 151-67 (p. 153).

² Joanna Bourke, *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 1-2.

³ C. Delisle Burns, *A Short History of Birkbeck College, University of London* (London: University of London Press, 1924), p. 14.

⁴ Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘Bernal at Birkbeck’, in *J.D. Bernal: A Life in Science and Politics*, ed. by Brenda Swann and Francis Aprahamian (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 235-254 (p. 235). Other notable founders of the college included Lord Henry Brougham, James Mill, George Grote and Francis Place.

⁵ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 42. As Bourke notes, by 1839 a majority of Birkbeck’s students were reportedly clerks, business people and shopkeepers.

degrees awarded by the University of London;⁶ this was followed by rebranding in 1866 and 1907 – first as the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution, and then as Birkbeck College.⁷

Throughout, two vital aspects of heritage were maintained: the democratic involvement of students in governance; and, the attraction of students and staff with radical ideas.⁸ One such thinker, Fabian and ex-Birkbeck student Sidney Webb, was involved in the college's full integration into the University of London in 1920.⁹ Birkbeck subsequently survived two difficult periods – the second more extreme than the first: financial struggle in the 1930s;¹⁰ and destruction in the Blitz, 1940-41.¹¹ In 1952, the institution moved from cramped premises in Fetter Lane to a new building – its current base – in Malet Street, Bloomsbury.¹² It was here that the college experienced the most significant shifts in British post-war university history: an unprecedented expansion of higher education from the early 1960s, and, with it, particularly from the late 1970s, increasing trends of managerialism and marketisation.

These major changes to British universities, from the early 1960s to the early 2000s, are the principal subjects of this research. Much academic work has focused on the university era of expansion – and increasingly on that of managerialism and marketisation. However, as American scholar Sheldon Rothblatt warns, 'Generalising about universities today is an enterprise fraught with peril.'¹³ Certainly, Birkbeck presents its own exceptional history of facilitating part-time adult education in the metropolis. Moreover, the significant shifts in

⁶ Ibid., p. 125.

⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

⁸ Hobsbawm, 'Bernal at Birkbeck', p. 236.

⁹ Bourke, p. 132. As Bourke explains, the Royal Commission on University Education in London recommended in 1913 that Birkbeck become a 'Constituent College' of the University of London. In return, Birkbeck had to cease all teaching in the daytime, and on economics. Webb, a co-founder of the London School of Economics in 1895, was likely involved in the stipulation to stop economics teaching. Birkbeck's formal incorporation into the University was subsequently delayed by the First World War.

¹⁰ Hobsbawm, 'Bernal at Birkbeck', p. 237.

¹¹ E. H. Warmington, *A History of Birkbeck College, University of London, during the Second World War, 1939-1945* (London: Birkbeck College, 1954), p. 53.

¹² Hobsbawm, 'Bernal at Birkbeck', p. 236.

¹³ Rothblatt, 'The Writing of University History', p. 153.

university policy from 1963 to 2003 were received within the institution not simply as reports and recommendations by lifeless committees, but on multiple levels by active staff and students – all with their own intricate relations and reactions.

Accordingly, my research seeks to invert the historical problem presented by such massive changes to British universities from 1963: it aims to investigate the origins, mechanisms and consequences of major policy shifts up to 2003 in depth, by reducing the scale of study to a single department in one institution; it is a *microhistory* of the Department of History, Classics and Archaeology (HCA) at Birkbeck, University of London.¹⁴ As such, it asks: How did HCA develop at Birkbeck between 1963 and 2003 – first as separate academic departments, and, subsequently, as a joint unit? What were the impacts of mass university expansion, including drives towards managerialism and marketisation, at this departmental level? How did such extensive changes affect teaching and research in history, classics and archaeology at Birkbeck? How did they affect the social composition of HCA’s faculty – and relations between its staff and students? And, what – if anything – was distinctive about the experience of mass higher education expansion for an institution prioritising part-time and mature study – and how was any such difference manifested within HCA?

Historiography

In historiographical terms, this project looks first at existing literature on the development of Birkbeck, University of London. Most notably, Joanna Bourke’s recent book, *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People*, provides an unprecedented survey of the

¹⁴ HCA is used throughout this project as an acronym for the Department of History, Classics and Archaeology; the full, contemporary departmental title used here also refers to all separate and associated forms of the three sub-departments during the period 1963 to 2003, for example, the Department of Classics and Ancient History, which existed as a separate academic unit from 1963 to 1992.

college's foundation and development since 1823.¹⁵ Bourke's research, marking Birkbeck's bicentenary in 2023, includes deep and detailed explorations of the institution's financial, intellectual, social, cultural and political history – from the early nineteenth century into the twenty-first. This major new work aside, however, previous studies of the college are dated and limited in number, comprising mostly biography – and hagiography – of key founder George Birkbeck (d. 1841), plus accounts of the college up to 1945. John Godard presents the pre- and early history of the institution through a laudatory memoir of George Birkbeck as pioneer;¹⁶ Cecil Burns is similarly supportive in his account of the college's first century.¹⁷ Eric Warmington – Professor of Classics at Birkbeck until 1965 – presents a record of life at the college during the Second World War;¹⁸ Thomas Kelly adds to the work of Godard, with a deeper examination of George Birkbeck's career and role as founder.¹⁹ Birkbeck as an institution is naturally included in histories of the University of London, although such federal accounts provide little material: Negley Harte's history of the University, 1836-1986, gives only basic information on Birkbeck's development;²⁰ another 150-year account, edited by F. M. L. Thompson, is similarly brief on the college;²¹ a further summary of the same period by Christine Kenyon Jones is briefer still.²²

More broadly, and more recently, intellectual histories of renowned Birkbeck academics have necessarily referred to the institution. F. David Peat dedicates a chapter to the college in his biography of pioneering physicist David Bohm, although little detail is

¹⁵ Bourke, *Birkbeck*.

¹⁶ John George Godard, *George Birkbeck: The Pioneer of Popular Education: A Memoir and a Review* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1884).

¹⁷ Burns, *A Short History of Birkbeck College*.

¹⁸ Warmington, *A History of Birkbeck College*.

¹⁹ Thomas Kelly, *George Birkbeck: Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool: University Press, 1957).

²⁰ N. B. Harte, *The University of London 1836-1986: An Illustrated History* (London: Athlone, 1986).

²¹ *The University of London and the World of Learning, 1836-1986*, ed. by F. M. L. Thompson (London: Hambledon Press, 1990).

²² Christine Kenyon-Jones, *The People's University: 150 Years of the University of London and Its External Students* (London: University of London External System, 2008).

revealed.²³ The Birkbeck career of celebrated crystallographer J. D. Bernal is reviewed by perhaps *the* Birkbeck scholar, Eric Hobsbawm, in a collection edited by Brenda Swann and Francis Aprahamian.²⁴ Hobsbawm's account of Bernal's period as professor between 1938 and 1968 includes a brief institutional history, plus contextual information regarding the college's students and academic atmosphere.²⁵ Birkbeck is also referenced, albeit more fleetingly, in a biography of Bernal by Andrew Brown.²⁶ More notably for this project, Hobsbawm's career at the college is explored in depth by another renowned past professor of HCA, Richard J. Evans.²⁷ Evans's work provides significant information on Hobsbawm's long-term relationship with the department, and the institution as a whole – including points of disillusionment with both. Brief insights into Hobsbawm's time at Birkbeck are, of course, also provided in his autobiography, *Interesting Times*.²⁸

A much larger literature exists on the wider history of universities. Developments in this expanding field have been extensively reviewed by Rothblatt – himself an important contributor to it.²⁹ Rothblatt states that, 'The history of universities has always been a restless genre, a subfield whose focus is mercurial and whose loyalty to a single discipline is suspect.'³⁰ Correspondingly, his study of university history covers a diversity of periods (from medieval to contemporary), subjects, and approaches. Institutional accounts range from single-author texts, such as Martin Duberman's study of Black Mountain College, North Carolina, to major, collaborative works.³¹ The University of Cambridge commissioned several authors to produce separate, chronological volumes – a reflection of the sheer number

²³ F. David Peat, *Infinite Potential: The Life and Times of David Bohm* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

²⁴ Hobsbawm, 'Bernal at Birkbeck'.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-254.

²⁶ Andrew Brown, *J.D. Bernal: The Sage of Science*, paperback edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

²⁸ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Abacus, 2003).

²⁹ Rothblatt, 'The Writing of University History'.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³¹ Martin B. Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, 1st edn (New York: Dutton, 1972).

of sources available.³² The history of the London School of Economics by Lord Ralf Dahrendorf – a former director of the institution – is presented as an example of a ‘house’, or *in-house*, account – one notable for its critical approach, in spite of personal ties.³³

Biographical approaches to university history highlighted by Rothblatt include F. M. G. Willson’s study of medical professionals and the formation of the University of London.³⁴ A broader biographical mode is mentioned in A. H. Halsey and M. A. Trow’s survey of British academics, undertaken during nationwide university expansion in the 1960s;³⁵ Harold Perkin’s history of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) is a further example.³⁶ More diverse works on academic life promoted by Rothblatt include Carol Dyhouse’s examination of women in British universities;³⁷ Helen Horowitz’s study of student communities – chiefly concerned with US colleges;³⁸ and R. D. Anderson’s research on students at Aberdeen University.³⁹ As Rothblatt suggests, biography is also linked – through intellectual histories – with developmental accounts of individual disciplines;⁴⁰ Reba Soffer’s research on academic history involves such an approach.⁴¹

Significantly, for this project, Rothblatt identifies a gap in university history concerning comprehensive analyses of academic faculties and *departments*.⁴² Similarly, in terms of internal, structural understandings, Rothblatt notes a lack of studies regarding

³² Rothblatt, ‘The Writing of University History’, p. 154.

³³ Ralf Dahrendorf, *LSE: A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895-1995* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁴ F. M. G. Willson, *Our Minerva: The Men and Politics of the University of London, 1836-1858* (London: Athlone, 1995).

³⁵ A. H. Halsey and M. A. Trow, *The British Academics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971).

³⁶ Harold Perkin, *Key Profession: The History of the Association of University Teachers*, 1st edn (London: Routledge, 2018).

³⁷ Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex?: Women in British Universities, 1870-1939* (London: Routledge, 2016).

³⁸ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

³⁹ R. D. Anderson, *The Student Community at Aberdeen, 1860-1939* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988).

⁴⁰ Rothblatt, ‘The Writing of University History’, p. 155.

⁴¹ Reba N. Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870-1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁴² Rothblatt, ‘The Writing of University History’, p. 160.

university boards of trustees;⁴³ the work of Clark Kerr and Marian Gade on governance in US colleges is presented as a potential model.⁴⁴ As Rothblatt cites, some historical research has been done on the control and funding of universities, including Michael Shattock's assessment of the University Grants Committee (UGC).⁴⁵ Investigations of external authority and power structures in relation to universities have been conducted through examining links with the state:⁴⁶ Richard Hofstadter's research on academic freedom is a noted example;⁴⁷ work by Ron Eyerman and colleagues on the development of ties between universities and the state in Western societies is another.⁴⁸ Halsey has also charted a weakening of academic autonomy, or 'Decline of Donnish Dominion', in the UK.⁴⁹ For Rothblatt, such explorations reveal an important area for further study – the impact of successive governments, and their higher education reforms, from 1979.⁵⁰

Indeed, more recent research on university history has sought to address major shifts towards managerialism and marketisation in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Most notably, the work of Stefan Collini is concerned with the impact of these changes on academic priorities and standards. Collini's scholarly assessments include: brief histories of the university in Britain; discussions of contested ideas, such as 'useless knowledge';⁵¹ changes in government

⁴³ Ibid., p. 161.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 165.

⁴⁵ Michael Shattock, *The UGC and the Management of British Universities* (Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1994). Created in 1919, the University Grants Committee acted as an intermediary body between universities and government, with academic members shaping funding and governance in response to ministerial priorities. This semi-autonomy for universities changed significantly after 1979, and the UGC was replaced in 1989 by a Universities Funding Council (UFC). The UFC was subsequently replaced by the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs) for England, Wales and Scotland, as polytechnics gained university status in 1992. Michael Shattock, 'The Change from Private to Public Governance of British Higher Education: Its Consequences for Higher Education Policy Making 1980-2006', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62 (2008), pp. 181-203 (p. 183).

⁴⁶ Rothblatt, 'The Writing of University History', p. 157.

⁴⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁴⁸ *Intellectuals, Universities, and the State in Western Modern Societies*, ed. by Ron Eyerman, Lennart G. Svensson and Thomas Söderqvist (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1987).

⁴⁹ A. H. Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion: The British Academic Professions in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ Rothblatt, 'The Writing of University History', p. 157.

⁵¹ Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London; New York: Penguin, 2012).

policy since the 1960s; and shifting concepts of public and private in university education.⁵² Similar studies, such as that led by Mike Molesworth, focus on the development of university students as consumers.⁵³ Shattock and Aniko Horvath provide a critical survey of British university governance, including the impacts of funding cuts and market forces on academic quality, creativity and innovation.⁵⁴ A less critical recent history – and future perspective – on university changes in Britain is presented by David Willetts, a former Conservative Minister of State for Universities and Science.⁵⁵ Peter Mandler, meanwhile, warns against a conflation of the history of university *policy* with the history of *universities*; his own in-depth analysis of the transition to mass higher education emphasises the importance of public demand for university courses and degrees.⁵⁶

Academic and policy literature also exists on the past, present and future of higher education more widely.⁵⁷ The significance of historical tradition in higher education is explored by Jussi Välimaa.⁵⁸ Higher education as a concept is considered by Ronald Barnett;⁵⁹ policies of higher education expansion are analysed in a collection by David Jary and Martin Parker;⁶⁰ expansion and reform are further examined in a work edited by David

⁵² Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London; New York: Verso, 2017).

⁵³ *The Marketisation of Higher Education: The Student as Consumer*, ed. by Mike Molesworth, Elizabeth Nixon and Richard Scullion (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵⁴ Michael Shattock and Aniko Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education: The Impact of Governmental, Financial and Market Pressures* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

⁵⁵ David Willetts, *A University Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵⁶ Peter Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵⁷ Higher education is defined in this research as all UK tertiary education leading to academic degrees between 1963-2003, including that provided outside of universities – for example, in polytechnics, prior to their reclassification as universities in 1992. Shattock, 'The Change from Private to Public Governance of British Higher Education', p. 183.

⁵⁸ Jussi Välimaa, 'On Traditions and Historical Layers in Higher Education', in *Towards a Cartography of Higher Education Policy: A Festschrift in Honour of Guy Neave*, ed. by Jürgen Enders and Frans A. van Vught (Enschede, Netherlands: Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, 2007), pp. 67-76.

⁵⁹ Ronald Barnett, *The Idea of Higher Education* (Milton Keynes: Society for Research into Higher Education, 1990).

⁶⁰ David Jary and Martin Parker, *The New Higher Education: Issues and Directions for the Post-Dearing University* (Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University Press, 1998).

Finegold.⁶¹ The seismic move from elite to mass higher education, including shifts in state funding, is also scrutinized by Peter Scott.⁶² Issues of higher education access, or ‘widening participation’, are investigated in an edition edited by Annette Hayton and Anna Paczuska,⁶³ academic arguments around wider access to higher education are critically assessed by Penny Jane Burke.⁶⁴ Significantly, for this study, Malcolm Tight considers the specific nature of part-time higher education – including a brief history of its development in the UK.⁶⁵

Research on the history of adult education more broadly has been surveyed in depth by Mark Freeman.⁶⁶ As Freeman reports, a recent decline in developmental studies of adult education has to some extent reflected a ‘retreat’ in the sector itself.⁶⁷ Also, even within the wider history of education, *adult* education has ‘sometimes appeared to be a marginal area of interest’.⁶⁸ Archives within adult education institutions are ‘full’, but ‘largely underused’.⁶⁹ Furthermore, as Freeman observes, adult education has maintained ‘a powerful sense of its own marginality’;⁷⁰ much of the historiography that has been produced has been ‘defensive, inward-looking, and lack[ing] connections to wider historical debates and themes’.⁷¹ More positively, however, Freeman argues for the present and future potential of adult education as a field for fresh historical enquiry. New meaning might be found, in part through exploring

⁶¹ David Finegold, *Higher Education: Expansion and Reform* (London: IPPR, 1992).

⁶² Peter Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education* (Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education, 1995).

⁶³ *Access, Participation, and Higher Education: Policy and Practice*, ed. by Annette Hayton and Anna Paczuska (London: Kogan Page; Sterling, VA: Stylus Pub., 2002).

⁶⁴ Penny Jane Burke, *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁶⁵ Malcolm Tight, *Higher Education: A Part-Time Perspective* (Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1991).

⁶⁶ Mark Freeman, ‘Adult Education History in Britain: Past, Present and Future (Part I)’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 56 (2020), pp. 384-395; Mark Freeman, ‘Adult Education History in Britain: Past, Present and Future (Part II)’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 56 (2020), pp. 396-411.

⁶⁷ Freeman, ‘Adult Education History in Britain: Past, Present and Future (Part I)’, p. 384; Freeman, ‘Adult Education History in Britain: Past, Present and Future (Part II)’, p. 410.

⁶⁸ Freeman, ‘Adult Education History in Britain: Past, Present and Future (Part I)’, p. 386.

⁶⁹ Freeman, ‘Adult Education History in Britain: Past, Present and Future (Part II)’, p. 400.

⁷⁰ Freeman, ‘Adult Education History in Britain: Past, Present and Future (Part I)’, p. 384.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

‘auxiliary’ areas, such as community-led learning, including that of women’s groups.⁷²

Vitaly, for this research, institutional histories also still have a place in this progressive context – but only if they are linked with ‘wider social and political processes’.⁷³ As Freeman suggests, ‘we should take advantage of the materials that are available, but in a way that recognises the limitations of a narrowly institutional approach.’⁷⁴

Finally, particular changes and challenges faced by adult learners – as opposed to ‘school leavers’ – are addressed by Etienne Bourgeois and colleagues.⁷⁵ Further barriers to higher education are discussed in depth by Stephen Gorard and others;⁷⁶ links between access and social class are also examined by Louise Archer, Merryn Hutchings and Alistair Ross.⁷⁷ Social justice in higher education is explored by Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel;⁷⁸ urgent concerns over race equality in universities are highlighted by Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza.⁷⁹ Similarly, ethnicity is examined in the context of higher education employment by John Carter, Steve Fenton and Tariq Modood;⁸⁰ and Marion Bowl investigates access for working class and ethnic minority adults.⁸¹ This broad and varied historiographical range, from institutional and intellectual studies, to analyses of contemporary higher education economics and politics, represents, then, the wider research landscape within which the particular history of Birkbeck and HCA can be further explored.

⁷² Ibid., p. 390.

⁷³ Freeman, ‘Adult Education History in Britain: Past, Present and Future (Part II)’, p. 400.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 401.

⁷⁵ *The Adult University*, ed. by Etienne Bourgeois and others (Buckingham; Philadelphia, PA: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1999).

⁷⁶ Stephen Gorard, *Overcoming the Barriers to Higher Education* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 2007).

⁷⁷ Louise Archer, *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2003).

⁷⁸ *Higher Education and Social Justice*, ed. by Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel (Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 2009).

⁷⁹ *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*, ed. by Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (New York; Palgrave Macmillan; Cham, Switzerland: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2018).

⁸⁰ *Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education*, ed. by John Carter, Steve Fenton and Tariq Modood (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1999).

⁸¹ Marion Bowl, *Non-Traditional Entrants to Higher Education: ‘They Talk About People Like Me’* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham, 2003).

Historical Context

In terms of timescales, the research period for this project is bookended by two major events in British university policy: the 1963 Robbins Report, and a 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*. The Robbins Report, a product of the Committee on Higher Education, led by Lord Robbins, is widely considered as a key catalyst in the expansion of British universities from the 1960s.⁸² The Report, commissioned by the Government and accepted by it in October 1963, aimed to raise the percentage of those receiving full-time higher education in the UK from about 8 per cent to about 17 per cent by 1980.⁸³ Its conclusions promoted the meritocratic principle that university education should be provided for all who achieved appropriate entry qualifications and wished to pursue further study.⁸⁴ For some scholars, the Report also represented the state's first attempt to align higher education with economic aims.⁸⁵ A similar synthesis of economic ideas with university policy during the Conservative Thatcher era was reflected in the 1985 Jarratt Report. Commissioned jointly by the UGC and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom (CVCP), this considered universities as enterprises, with students as customers – and as such encouraged managerialism and marketisation in higher education.⁸⁶ The 1997 Dearing Report again promoted university expansion as a political priority, albeit one that students should help pay for: the New Labour government announced an introduction of tuition fees at £1,000

⁸² Margaret Edwards, 'Commodification and Control in Mass Higher Education', in *The New Higher Education: Issues and Directions for the Post-Dearing University*, ed. by David Jary and Martin Parker (Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University Press, 1998), pp. 253-272 (p. 262).

⁸³ Burke, *The Right to Higher Education*, p. 13.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁸⁵ Edwards, 'Commodification and Control in Mass Higher Education', p. 262.

⁸⁶ Heather Clark, Jim Barry and John Chandler, 'On Whether it is Better to be Loved than Feared: Managerialism and Women in Universities', in *The New Higher Education: Issues and Directions for the Post-Dearing University*, ed. by David Jary and Martin Parker (Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University Press, 1998), pp. 207-222 (p. 209).

per year, to start in 1998.⁸⁷ This was followed by the 2003 White Paper, which set out radical reform and investment in universities, including plans to provide wider access, in return for a possible introduction of higher fees.⁸⁸

At Birkbeck, the 1963 Robbins Report prompted urgent, top-level discussions. Concern at the college – led by Sir John Lockwood, as Master – centred on what the government’s policy paper meant for part-time higher education: such was the Report’s heavy focus on full-time university learning, Birkbeck’s Governors and Academic Board were unsure of their position.⁸⁹ This uncertainty sparked ‘intense argument’ on senior committees convened to discuss the college’s development.⁹⁰ According to Birkbeck’s annual report for 1963-64, there was ‘direct confrontation’ between prioritising part-time teaching and moving to more full-time courses.⁹¹ Full-time admissions were subsequently considered, particularly for science subjects, where practical work stood to benefit from consecutive teaching. More generally, the move aimed to help meet the Robbins Report’s plea for an urgent increase in university places.⁹² Birkbeck was also expanding architecturally, most notably with an extension to its main Malet Street base – although space remained an issue.⁹³ On finances, total income at the college in 1963-64 was £766,697. The vast majority of this figure (almost 84 per cent) consisted of grants from the University of London; only around 6 per cent (£43,441) came from fees.⁹⁴ Expenditure was balanced against income, with around two-thirds (£513,109) spent on academic departments, including teaching salaries.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Burke, *The Right to Higher Education*, p. 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸⁹ Sir John Lockwood continued as Master until 1965-66, when Vice Master Professor E. H. Warmington took over as Acting Master; F. Kenneth Hare was appointed as a formal successor in 1966-67.

⁹⁰ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1963-64* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1964), p. 13. Birkbeck’s institutional title varies across *Report*, *Calendar* and *Prospectus* editions, depending on year of publication – for example, ‘Birkbeck College, University of London’ is later replaced by ‘Birkbeck, University of London’. Birkbeck’s *Report* was also later published as the *Annual Report*, and, subsequently, as the *Annual Review*.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Table 1: Birkbeck income each decade from 1963-64 to 2003-04.⁹⁶

Year	Income (£)	Grants (£)	Fees (£)	Research (£)	Other (£)
1963-64	766,697	643,181	43,441	-	80,075
1973-74	2,419,083	2,184,778	116,559	-	117,746
1983-84	-	-	-	-	-
1993-94	30,820,000	18,302,000	6,063,000	3,945,000	2,510,000
2003-04	53,838,000	26,926,000	14,227,000	8,819,000	3,866,000

Table 2: Birkbeck expenditure each decade from 1963-64 to 2003-04.⁹⁷

Year	Expenditure (£)	Academic (£)	Admin. (£)	Research (£)	Other (£)
1963-64	766,697	513,109	51,177	-	202,411
1973-74	2,419,038	1,693,276	208,290	-	517,472
1983-84	-	-	-	-	-
1993-94	28,043,000	14,755,000	1,895,000	3,305,000	8,088,000
2003-04	52,993,000	-	-	-	-

⁹⁶ Tables 1-3 show figures from each decade between 1963-64 and 2003-04 to provide an overview of changes in HCA during the period. The figures in all three tables are collated from Birkbeck's annual *Report* and *Calendar*; the years shown are academic, that is, from 1st August to 31st July. The source of grants for Birkbeck in 1963-64 and 1973-74 was the University of London; in 1993-94 and 2003-04, the source of grants was HEFCE. No equivalent figures are available for 1983-84 (they were not included in the *Report* or *Calendar* for that year). Some other figures are not available due to further omissions in the *Report* and *Calendar*. *Birkbeck College, Report, 1963-64*, p. 85; *Birkbeck College, University of London, Report, 1973-74* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1974), p. 93; *Birkbeck College, Annual Report, 1993-94* (Birkbeck College, University of London, 1994), p. 19; *Birkbeck College, University of London, Annual Review, 2003-04* (London: External Relations, Birkbeck, University of London, 2004), p. 19.

⁹⁷ The academic spending shown in Table 2 includes salaries and library costs. Again, no equivalent figures are available for 1983-84; and some other figures are not available due to omissions in the *Report* and *Calendar*. *Birkbeck College, Report, 1963-64*, p. 84; *Birkbeck College, Report, 1973-74*, p. 92; *Birkbeck College, Annual Report, 1993-94*, p. 19; *Birkbeck College, Annual Review, 2003-04*, p. 19.

Ten years on from the Robbins Report, as Birkbeck marked its 150th anniversary – partly with a visit by the Queen Mother, college patron, in December 1973 – expansion in higher education was still a critical issue.⁹⁸ In the 1973-74 Birkbeck Report, Master Ronald C. Tress raised concerns over whether government planning on higher education recognised the college’s unique provision: Birkbeck’s focus on ‘recurrent education’ did not fit with a linear concept of post-school learning for students aged 18 to 25.⁹⁹ The Master also feared that national cuts in university grant funding would affect the college disproportionately: government reductions in response to an over-estimation of school leavers seeking university places – as originally forecast in the Robbins Report – were set to hit Birkbeck harder than most institutions, due to its high number of mature admissions. Meanwhile, government criticisms over value for money on post-graduate spending failed to consider the college’s ability to provide precisely the type of education cited by critics as an alternative model – namely, qualifications for students starting part-time courses after a period of employment.¹⁰⁰ By 1973-74, Birkbeck had a total of 2,387 students, with the vast majority over the age of 22 (almost 88 per cent) and part-time (more than 87 per cent).¹⁰¹ The college had added a third faculty – the Faculty of Economics;¹⁰² it had also secured further extension at Malet Street.¹⁰³ Total income had increased to £2,419,083, with an even greater majority (more than 90 per cent) received in grants via the University of London. Just 5 per cent of the total (£116,559) came from fees.¹⁰⁴ Total expenditure was again balanced, with almost 70 per cent (£1,693,276) spent on academic departments.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰² The Faculty of Economics started as the Faculty of Economics and Political Science in 1971-72 and was renamed a year later; it offered its first MSc and research degrees in 1973-74.

¹⁰³ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 11. This major building work was achieved despite cuts to capital grants and a government moratorium on public-sector spending.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Table 3: Students at Birkbeck each decade from 1963-64 to 2003-04.¹⁰⁶

Year	Student total	Part-time	Full-time	First degree	Postgrad.	Research	Other
1963-64	1,568	1,398	170	947	621	-	-
1973-74	2,387	2,086	301	1,167	581	508	131
1983-84	2,663	2,422	241	1,154	-	431	-
1993-94	5,541	4,997	544	3,345	1,587	609	-
2003-04	7,615	6,921	694	4,071	2,889	655	-

By 1980-81, with W. G. Overend as Master, the subject range at Birkbeck had not greatly increased – although single subjects could now be combined at BA and BSc level, for example English and History of Art.¹⁰⁷ A total of 2,591 students were enrolled, with a vast majority (more than 91 per cent) studying part-time.¹⁰⁸ Major changes were seen during the decade: in 1987-88, on the appointment of Baroness Tessa Blackstone as Master, the college’s teaching departments were grouped into ‘Resource Centres’ – for example, ‘Humane Sciences’ (Classics, History, History of Art, Philosophy, and Politics and Sociology), subsequently renamed ‘Studies in the Humanities’.¹⁰⁹ More significantly, in 1988-89, the University of London’s Centre for Extra-Mural Studies was incorporated into the college. Thus, by 1990-91, ‘Arts’ courses at Birkbeck were offered by both a Centre for

¹⁰⁶ In 2003-04, the total including Faculty of Continuing Education students (11,942) was 19,557. Again, some figures are not available due to omissions in the *Report and Calendar*. Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 80; Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 89; Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1993-94*, p. 5; Birkbeck College, *Annual Review, 2003-04*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁷ W. G. Overend was appointed in 1979-80; he was succeeded in 1987-88 by Baroness (Tessa Ann Vosper) Blackstone.

¹⁰⁸ These admissions figures saw a small increase during the 1980s: by 1987-88, the total number of students admitted was 2,716 (2,380 part-time; 336 full-time).

¹⁰⁹ The Centre for Humane Sciences was rebranded as the Centre for Studies in the Humanities by 1990-91.

Studies in the Humanities *and* a Centre for Extra-Mural Studies (CEMS).¹¹⁰ The early 1990s also saw the college reaffirm its historic commitment to part-time students – in line with a government move away from full-time higher education (including a funding freeze).¹¹¹ Despite the shift in government focus, institutional grant support for the college – a specialist in part-time learning – remained level, and close to the median for all universities.¹¹² Meanwhile, student numbers and teaching at Birkbeck continued to expand: by 1993-94, the student total was 5,541.¹¹³ The result was an effective reduction in government resources per student.¹¹⁴ Total income in 1993-94 was £30,820,000, with almost 60 per cent received in grants from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE); just under 20 per cent (£6,100,000) came from fees.¹¹⁵ Total expenditure was £28,043,000, with just over half (£14,755,000) spent on academic departments.¹¹⁶

At the start of the 2000s, under Master Professor Timothy O’Shea, Birkbeck had four faculties: Arts, Science, Social Sciences, and Continuing Education (replacing CEMS).¹¹⁷ The total number of students had increased significantly to 6,091 (excluding the Faculty of Continuing Education), with more than 90 per cent studying part-time. If Continuing Education students are included, the total was 14,526.¹¹⁸ By 2003-04, the combined student total was a massive 19,557, with 11,942 from Continuing Education.¹¹⁹ The college also saw

¹¹⁰ The Centre for Extra-Mural Studies also offered a broad range of science courses, including Astronomy and Microcomputing, in addition to those offered by the college’s centres for Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, Computer Science, Economics, Geography, Mathematics and Statistics.

¹¹¹ Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1993-94*, p. 2.

¹¹² *Ibid.* The college’s grant settlement from HEFCE saw an increase of just 2.8 per cent for 1994-95.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1993-94*, p. 19. Birkbeck’s remaining income came from research grants (just under 13 per cent); endowments (just over 2 per cent); and ‘other’ sources (just under 6 per cent).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ CEMS was renamed the Faculty of Continuing Education in 1998-99; the three other faculties, replacing teaching centres, and completing a four-faculty model, were introduced in 1999-00.

¹¹⁸ These figures increased steadily during the first half of the decade: by 2004-05, there were 7,472 students, excluding Faculty of Continuing Education admissions (6,786 part-time; 686 full-time); the total including Faculty of Continuing Education students was 19,887.

¹¹⁹ Birkbeck College, *Annual Review, 2003-04*, p. 3 and p. 18.

a 14 per cent growth in international students – with an associated rise in revenue.¹²⁰ Total income had increased to £53,838,000, with almost exactly half (£26,926,000) from funding council grants; just over a quarter (£14,227,000) came from fees and support grants.¹²¹ Total expenditure was £52,993,000, including staff costs of just over 65 per cent (£35,044,000).¹²²

Birkbeck was also developing in other ways. The college's Malet Street building reopened after large-scale renovation, with a new entrance onto Torrington Square creating a more campus-like environment. In addition, Birkbeck joined five other branches of the University of London in the Bloomsbury Consortium – to improve teaching and research, and to save money on administration.¹²³ Forty years on from the 1963 Robbins Report, however, the college's most senior academics once again found themselves struggling with recommendations from a major Government review. The 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, proposed that universities be allowed to increase full-time undergraduate fees – but the policy did not fit with Birkbeck, due to its lack of full-time BA and BSc students.¹²⁴ Master David Latchman concluded in the college's annual report:

In discussions with the Government and HEFCE it became clear that this decision did not reflect a lack of support for the part-time sector but simply indicated a mindset in which higher education is about 18-year-olds taking three-year degrees full-time.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 19.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 2.

¹²⁴ Department for Education and Skills, *The Future of Higher Education* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2003), via Education in England website, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2003-white-paper-higher-ed.pdf> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹²⁵ Birkbeck College, *Annual Review, 2003-04*, p. 2.

These wider institutional changes provided the setting for the development of Birkbeck's Department of History, Classics and Archaeology. In 1960, separate departments of History, and Classics and Ancient History (Classics), existed within the college's Faculty of Arts.¹²⁶ The Department of History had a total of nine staff, headed by Professor R. R. Darlington – and including Eric J. Hobsbawm, as a Reader. A third of these were women, including administrators: two academics – Alwyn A. Ruddock (Reader), Mary Cumpston (Lecturer) – and one secretary, Juliet M. Fox. Courses offered by the Department at BA level included: Medieval and Modern English History; Medieval and Modern European History; Medieval and Modern Political Ideas; Economic History; Diplomatic Relations; Tudor England; and British Colonialism. In 1960-61, it awarded twenty-six BA degrees and one MA. The Department of Classics had a total of four staff, led by Professor Eric H. Warmington; its only female member was Greek specialist Professor A. Marjorie Webster. BA courses offered by this second department included Roman History and Greek Constitutional History; in 1960-61 it awarded just two degrees – both at MA level. Meanwhile, Archaeology at the college existed only as a special subject – Anglo-Saxon Archaeology – offered by the Department of English Language and Literature (English).

The Department of History also included Douglas Dakin (Senior Lecturer), Graham C. Gibbs (Lecturer), Patrick M. McGurk (Lecturer) and Michael J. Wilks (Lecturer). It retained almost all its staff throughout the 1960s (indeed, several of its historians pursued careers at the college into the 1970s, 1980s, and even the 2000s).¹²⁷ Notably, its Secretary in 1962-63, Edith Emma Mason, became a Research Assistant in 1965-66;¹²⁸ and was appointed

¹²⁶ The full title of Birkbeck's Department of Classics and Ancient History is abbreviated throughout this work to the 'Department of Classics' and, simply, 'Classics'.

¹²⁷ Douglas Dakin was part of the department, lastly as Emeritus Professor, until 1976-77; Mary Cumpston was still involved as Emeritus Reader in 1983-84; Graham Gibbs and Patrick McGurk held posts, lastly as Emeritus Readers, until 1986-87; most remarkably, Hobsbawm was still connected, as Emeritus Professor, in 2004-05.

¹²⁸ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1965-66* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1965), p. 89.

Lecturer in 1969-70.¹²⁹ By 1970-71, the Department had a dozen staff – two Professors, four Readers, four Lecturers, a Research Assistant and a Secretary; a quarter of this total were women, including the administrator, Ann T. Myles. Further recruits included Barry Coward and James L. Sturgis as Lecturers.¹³⁰ New courses included *The Growth of the British Commonwealth, 1980-1932*.¹³¹ The Department of Classics had expanded to five staff, headed by Professor Robert Browning, and including Giuseppe Giangrande as Reader; Secretary Susan Archer was its only woman.¹³² Meanwhile, the college offered a postgraduate diploma in Western European Archaeology, via the Department of English and in cooperation with the University of London's Institute of Archaeology. MPhil and PhD research on Anglo-Saxon Archaeology was also supported.¹³³

Entering the 1980s, the Department of History was headed by Professor Michael J. Wilks, with Hobsbawm now also a Professor, alongside Roderick Castle Floud, as Professor of Modern History. In total, the Department had fourteen staff, including three Professors, three Readers, six Lecturers and two administrators; of these, four were women: Cumpston (Reader), Mason (Lecturer), Myles (Secretary) and Seana Cahill (Secretary).¹³⁴ In 1980-81, it awarded a total of just over fifty degrees: twenty-nine BAs, eighteen MAs, two MPhils and two PhDs. Classics had by the same year expanded to six staff, including Giangrande now as Professor, and Judith Higgins as Secretary (and still the only woman); Athanasios Angelou was the Department's first member of research staff, externally funded.¹³⁵ Between them, they awarded a total of three BA and one MPhil degrees. Both departments at Birkbeck were also now able to offer prospective undergraduates joint-subject degrees. At MA level, History

¹²⁹ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1969-70* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1969), p. 115.

¹³⁰ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1970-71* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 1970), p. 17.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹³⁴ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1980-81* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1980), pp. 26-27 and p. 32. Roderick Floud was on Leave of Absence in 1980-81.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24 and p. 31.

applicants could opt for Commonwealth or Social and Economic History.¹³⁶ Applications at MA, MPhil and PhD level were also being accepted by a new department at the college – Anglo-Saxon Archaeology, staffed solely by Professor Vera I. Evison.¹³⁷ The addition was short-lived, however: by 1983-84, the small department had been dissolved.¹³⁸

By 1990-91, the Department of History – now part of Birkbeck’s Centre for Studies in the Humanities – still had fourteen staff, including Professor Richard Evans. Only two of the total were women, excluding the department’s Secretary: these were Mason (now Senior Lecturer) and Vanessa A. Harding (Lecturer).¹³⁹ Course options for BA students included: European Feminism, 1750-1950; British Imperial Policy and Decolonization, 1938-1963; and British Imperial Relations with non-European Peoples, from the late eighteenth century to 1939.¹⁴⁰ The Department expanded considerably during the 1990s, totalling twenty-two staff by 1998-99 (including two administrators).¹⁴¹ Significantly, this number was balanced exactly in terms of gender – albeit including two female secretaries. Notable among the female academics were Joanna Bourke (first appointed in 1991-92, and by then Reader) and the long-standing Mason (also by then Reader).¹⁴² In Classics, long-standing senior staff including Giangrande had gone by the beginning of the 1990s, as part of a forced merger with King’s College, London.¹⁴³ The Department now consisted of just one academic and one administrator, both women – Jane L. Rowlandson (Lecturer), and Elizabeth C. Dove.¹⁴⁴ By

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 24 and pp. 63-65. The Department of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology was introduced in 1979-80, within the Faculty of Arts.

¹³⁸ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1983-84* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1983), p. 24.

¹³⁹ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1990-91* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1990), p. 21, p. 25 and p. 28.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁴¹ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1998-99* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 1998), p. 25

¹⁴² Joanna Bourke is a member of the Department of History, Classics and Archaeology at the time of writing, now as Emeritus Professor; Edith ‘Emma’ Mason was still connected as Emeritus Reader in 2004-05.

¹⁴³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 142, p. 12. Following a national audit in 1985-86, the UGC recommended the closure of Birkbeck’s Department of Classics and its merger with King’s College by the end of 1989-90. This significant episode in HCA’s history is examined in Chapter 3, *Classics*.

¹⁴⁴ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1990-91*, p. 18 and p. 28. Giangrande’s Birkbeck career ended after 1988-89 – along with Roland G. Mayer (Lecturer), who first joined Classics in 1979-80; Lecturer Jane Rowlandson was the sole classicist at Birkbeck by 1990-91.

1992-93, the diminished Department was no longer listed in the teaching section of the college's *Calendar*; it was not to be reinstated as an independent body.¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the college's new Centre for Extra-Mural Studies had hired a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology, Anthony James Legge; it offered courses in both Archaeology and Field Archaeology.¹⁴⁶

The end of the 1990s marked the start of a new School of History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck, headed by David M. Feldman (Senior Lecturer, History), and housed within the Faculty of Arts, under a four-faculty model.¹⁴⁷ In 1999-2000, the new School had a total of thirty staff: five Professors (now including Bourke, as the Department's first female Professor), two Readers, five Senior Lecturers, ten Lecturers, one Emeritus Professor (Hobsbawm), four Visiting Professors (including Evans), one Researcher and two departmental secretaries;¹⁴⁸ just under half (fourteen) of the total staff were women – again, albeit including administrators. In 2000-01, BA degrees were offered by the School in Classics, Classical Studies, History, and History and Archaeology.¹⁴⁹ MA degree options included: Archaeology; Classical Civilization; Contemporary History and Politics; Historical Research; Imperialism and Post-Colonial Studies.¹⁵⁰ In addition, prospective Birkbeck students could apply for the broad range of courses offered by the college's Faculty of Continuing Education, including Archaeology, Egyptology and Genealogy.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1992-93* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1992), p. 18. During this transitional period, administration relating to the former Department of Classics was processed by the Department of History.

¹⁴⁶ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1990-91*, p. 20 and p. 83.

¹⁴⁷ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1999-00* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 1999), p. 21. The School of History, Classics and Archaeology was introduced with the four-faculty model in 1999-00. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21. The Department of History had previously appointed female *Visiting Professors*: Jane Caplan in 1996-97; Linda Colley in 1997-98; and Judith M. Bennett and Cynthia B. Herrup in 1999-00. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1996-97* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1996), p. 23; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1997-98* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1997), p. 22; Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1999-00*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁹ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1999-00*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116. These courses were offered through the Faculty of Continuing Education's School of Arts and Cultural Studies, introduced in 1999-00.

Methodology

These institutional and departmental developments between 1963 and 2003, in relation to wider shifts in British university policy, form the contextual framework of this thesis. The project aims to further our understanding of these changes, through presenting novel historical perspectives based on original, *microhistorical* research. This investigative work is based primarily on two collections of archive materials – both owned by Birkbeck. The first, held on-site at the college in Malet Street, includes annual in-house publications – most notably, a separate *Calendar* and *Report* for each academic year, 1963 to 2003.¹⁵² The formats and contents of these two Birkbeck booklets vary during this period, but typically they together provide annual summary information on: college officers – including Master, governors and board members; college, faculty, school and departmental structures; academic and clerical staff positions and names; degree levels, structures and awards; course and syllabus structures and contents; college progress and policy plans. As such, these small publications can be used to build a historical framework of Birkbeck from the early 1960s to the first years of the new millennium. In addition, the on-site store also contains copies of three Birkbeck student magazines: *Lodestone*, *Minerva* and *The Lamp & Owl*.¹⁵³ The latter, *The Lamp & Owl*, provides the most useful, contemporary material to compare and contrast with the college's official reports.

A second, more significant collection of Birkbeck archive materials was until recently held by the college at an off-site facility in Ely, Cambridgeshire – before being moved to a new on-site space at Malet Street, in October 2022. This larger store consists of more than seventy boxes of institutional files, ranging from telephony records to senior committee

¹⁵² A *Prospectus* was also produced.

¹⁵³ Birkbeck Archive; Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street, London: BBK 11/3/3.

meeting minutes. Vitally, for this project, the second collection contains correspondence, staffing and finance records for HCA.¹⁵⁴ These departmental records provide crucial material for understanding academic and administrative life in HCA at Birkbeck from 1963 to 2003, including: staff and student relations and hierarchies; intra-departmental politics and priorities; financial concerns and strategies; and departmental responses to funding cuts and crises. The larger store also provides context for this departmental information, through files on associated branches of Birkbeck, for example: CEMS; the Students' Union and trade unions; the Faculty of Arts; and the Faculty of Continuing Education. Moreover, the now-rehoused collection can be used to cross-reference departmental, centre and faculty records with files at college level and above, including materials on: Birkbeck's Academic Policy Committee; the College Joint Committee; the UGC; and HEFCE.

In addition to its archival work, this project incorporates oral history interviews with past and present Birkbeck staff. The research draws upon transcripts of recent interviews conducted by a former post-doctoral colleague, Dr Lorraine Blakemore, as part of wider work under Professor Joanna Bourke on the history of Birkbeck – ahead of the institution's 200th anniversary in 2023.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, original interviews have been recorded with ten current and former members of academic and clerical staff, including Mason – whose longevity of service to the department is second only to that of Hobsbawm. These fresh interviews, together with use of Blakemore's transcripts, were conducted in accordance with ethical practices established by the Oral History Society.¹⁵⁶ The nature and purpose of this research

¹⁵⁴ Due to the shifting structure of HCA at Birkbeck from 1963-2003, these files relate variously to HCA as a complete school or department – and to History, Classics and Archaeology as separate departments.

¹⁵⁵ Subjects interviewed by Blakemore, in the academic year 2018-19, included Professors Evans and Floud.

¹⁵⁶ The author completed an intensive training course organised by the Oral History Society (OHS) and the Institute of Historical Research (IHR) in April 2019. This three-day workshop, held at London Metropolitan University, was led by oral history practitioners Paul Thompson, Jenny Harding, Joanna Bornat and Joel Morley. A summary of the OHS's ethical (and legal) guidance for oral historians can be found on the organisation's website. See: 'Is your oral history legal and ethical?', Oral History Society website, <https://www.ohs.org.uk/legal-and-ethical-advice> [accessed on 1st May 2023]

project was made clear in the first approach to all interviewees.¹⁵⁷ In advance of any recorded conversations, individuals were asked to sign a Participation Agreement, which outlined how interview content was to be used and stored at Birkbeck, as part of academic work on the history of the college. After each interview, subjects were asked to sign a Recording Agreement, which explained copyright terms and conditions. Locations for interviews were agreed in consultation with participants: these varied from private homes to quiet library spaces – before the COVID-19 pandemic reduced all meetings to online exchanges, facilitated by applications such as *Zoom*.¹⁵⁸ While subsequent online interviews suffered from inevitable issues in terms of technical hitches and ease of personal communication, all ethical standards were maintained. All recordings were stored locally – as opposed to online ‘cloud’ locations. The interviews for this project were also conducted and processed in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidance, introduced in 2018 – most notably article 89(2) relating to recording and storing data for ‘historical research purposes’.¹⁵⁹

Further methodological approaches in this project include the use of archive photo filing software *Tropy*, and the potential publishing of archive documents in the online public sphere.¹⁶⁰ Finally, all aspects of original research for this project – the exploration of the two Birkbeck archive collections, and the oral history interview recording and transcript reading –

¹⁵⁷ Interviewees for this research were contacted in the first instance by letter where possible, and by email or phone where necessary.

¹⁵⁸ Interviews for this research began in 2019. Due to the schedule of the project, funded under Birkbeck’s Bicentenary Studentship Scheme, a decision was taken by the author and his supervisor, Joanna Bourke, to continue with interviews when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. A majority of interviews for this work were subsequently conducted online, via both *Zoom* and *Skype* – depending on the preference of the interviewee. Furthermore, some interviews were also conducted online or by phone for reasons of ill-health unrelated to COVID-19 (White) and foreign residence (Dench and Porter).

¹⁵⁹ ‘Dealing with GDPR’, Oral History Society website, <https://www.ohs.org.uk/gdpr-2> [accessed on 1st May 2023]

¹⁶⁰ *Tropy*, developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Centre for History and New Media (RRCHNM), the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), and Digital Scholar; supported by the Mellon Foundation, <https://tropy.org> [accessed on 24th April 2023]

were carried out with consistent and close reference to the secondary literature on the college, the history of universities and higher education outlined above.¹⁶¹

The methodology of this research is framed by the theory and practice of microhistory. This sub-discipline is explained in depth by two of its current leading proponents: Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó.¹⁶² Microhistory was originally developed by Italian Marxist scholars in the 1970s, as *microstoria* – most famously, by Carlo Ginzburg;¹⁶³ Edoardo Grendi was an early advocate of ‘microanalysis’;¹⁶⁴ Giovanni Levi is also renowned for innovations on scale in research.¹⁶⁵ Similar, ‘multiscopic’ approaches were developed in France – departing from the *Annales* social science school – by historians including Arlette Farage and Jacques Revel.¹⁶⁶ In Germany, microhistory developed in association with *Alltagsgeschichte*, or ‘everyday history’.¹⁶⁷ Robert Darnton’s writing on ‘the Great Cat Massacre’ of 1730s Paris is a leading example from the British and American academy.¹⁶⁸ Joyce Appleby and colleagues have critically assessed microhistory in relation to postmodernism;¹⁶⁹ Gianna Pomata has examined the development of tensions between social and cultural approaches within the sub-discipline;¹⁷⁰ Matti Peltonen has investigated methodological problems related to the so-called ‘micro-macro link’.¹⁷¹ Magnússon and Szijártó have most recently promoted microhistory’s capacity to combine social and cultural history, through progressive theory and practice.¹⁷²

¹⁶¹ Please see *Historiography* above for literature relating to this research.

¹⁶² Sigurður G. Magnússon and István Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁶³ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

¹⁶⁴ Magnússon and Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory?*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁵ Giovanni Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁶⁶ Magnússon and Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory?*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

As a historical approach, microhistory is principally concerned with a reduction in scale.¹⁷³ Szijártó, representing a new wave of microhistorians, defines the sub-discipline as ‘the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well-defined smaller object’.¹⁷⁴ Notable microhistories have focused on a single village or community;¹⁷⁵ this study is concentrated on a single university department. Crucially, however, and in line with established microhistory principles, this research is simultaneously concerned with a larger historical subject: the development of universities and higher education in Britain since the 1960s. As Szijártó states, microhistory is ‘a “connective” rather than “reductionist” enterprise’.¹⁷⁶ Key to this micro-macro link is a particular focus on agency:¹⁷⁷ microhistory views historical subjects as ‘active individuals, conscious actors’.¹⁷⁸ Accordingly, this project adopts another microhistorical idea – that of seeking out anomalous individuals, or what Grendi might term ‘normal exceptions’, *eccezionalmente normale*.¹⁷⁹ In-depth investigation of the experiences of such subjects can help to throw structures of authority into sharp relief; the *micro* – departmental life – can thus be used to question prevailing understandings of the *macro* – university and higher education policy.

This microhistory of HCA at Birkbeck between 1963 and 2003 is presented through seven chapters. Chapter 1, *Tradition and Political Identity*, explores the nature of historical tradition in UK universities: it considers the existence of a unique institutional tradition at Birkbeck, relating to part-time and mature provision, and analyses the political identity of the college – and HCA within it. Chapter 2, *The Battle for Birkbeck*, examines the impact of government cuts to higher education through the focused study of an existential crisis for

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁷⁴ ‘Microhistory Today: A Roundtable Discussion’, ed. by Thomas Robisheaux, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 47 (2017) pp. 7-52 (p. 9).

¹⁷⁵ Magnússon and Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory?*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Microhistory Today: A Roundtable Discussion’, p. 12.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

Birkbeck in the late 1980s – an institutional emergency caused by a severe state funding slash, and survived only through a passionate, public campaign. Chapter 3, *Classics*, questions prevailing, negative assumptions concerning classics as a contemporary university subject. It presents fresh perspectives by charting the discipline’s development at Birkbeck, from independent department in the early 1960s, through crisis and closure in the 1980s, to shared existence in a new, joint HCA by the end of the period. Chapter 4, *Expansion*, investigates what Scott terms the ‘plural meanings’ of the shift to mass higher education. Through a specific focus on HCA at Birkbeck, the impacts of various paces and phases of expansion, from the immediate post-Robbins era, to the turn of the millennium, are analysed in depth.

Chapter 5, *Diversification*, closely charts the development of academic disciplines within HCA over the period, including the influence of both internal and external factors. In particular, it considers what Geoff Eley cites as ‘two massive waves of innovation’ – the advance of social history from the early 1960s, and the emergence of a new cultural history by the 1990s. Chapter 6, *Gender, Race and Ethnicity*, analyses changes to the social composition of HCA’s faculty during the transition from elite to mass university education. It considers both limited shifts in gender equality, and a much lower level of change – reflecting depressing national trends – in racial and ethnic diversity. Chapter 7, *Students*, explores the composition of HCA’s student body, and the nature of relations between its staff and students. This final chapter also questions the extent to which HCA’s teaching practices and dynamics can be considered as exceptional within UK universities more broadly.

In a series of powerful critiques of recent government policy on UK higher education, Collini mounts a conceptual defence of the university. Through exploring the question of what universities are *for*, Collini concludes that higher education institutions, ‘embody an

alternative set of values.¹⁸⁰ Such values, he argues, have been demoted during drives towards managerialism and marketisation; they are not easily captured by contemporary higher education audits. This project asks similar questions, including: what is an institution prioritising part-time and mature higher education *for* – and what is a Department of History, Classics and Archaeology *for*? Its primary aim, however, is not to reach universal or conceptual conclusions; rather, it seeks to establish the exceptional and the particular – the part-time, the mature, the departmental, and the individual in higher education between 1963 and 2003. In short, it strives to make a contribution to the ends achieved by critics such as Collini, but to do so through different, *microhistorical* means. In so doing, it hopes to expose in part the human impact of plans and policies which have inadequately accounted for the heterogeneous nature and value of UK higher education; to demonstrate that, as Rothblatt warns, generalising about universities is a dangerous enterprise.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 199.

¹⁸¹ Rothblatt, 'The Writing of University History', p 153.

Tradition and Political Identity

‘In the real life of higher education institutions[,] the focus of a tradition is not on the past, but on the future.’¹

Jussi Välimaa, *On Traditions and Historical Layers in Higher Education* (2007)

‘[Birkbeck’s] students earned their living during the day, and such political tradition as it had was on the left.’²

Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* (2003)

‘[HCA] was a broad church, but a broad left church.’³

Professor Roy Foster, faculty member, HCA, Birkbeck (1974-1991)

Introduction

Universities are institutions widely associated with historic traditions. In the UK, popular ideas of ‘ivory towers’ with ancient ways prevail due to the cultural dominance of the nation’s medieval universities – Oxford and Cambridge. As the scholar and critic Collini observes, however, the UK university is in reality more a nineteenth-century phenomenon.⁴ It was in this period that Oxford and Cambridge were modernised.⁵ In the 1820s, University

¹ Välimaa, ‘On Traditions and Historical Layers in Higher Education’, p. 67.

² Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 181.

³ Professor Roy Foster, interviewed by the author on 27th January 2021, 00:25:05.

⁴ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

College and King's College, London – England's third and fourth universities – were established.⁶ And in the industrial heat of the 1870s, the 'red-brick' universities of Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Liverpool were founded.⁷ Moreover, it was not until the second half of the *twentieth* century that UK universities were revolutionised, through shifts from an elite to a mass system. This unprecedented expansion of higher education from the early 1960s was reflected in the creation of the 'plate-glass' universities: Sussex, York, Essex, East Anglia, Warwick, Kent and Lancaster.⁸ A further significant development followed in the early 1990s, with the reclassification of polytechnics as universities.⁹ Throughout these changes, the primacy of tradition has remained largely intact: successive new waves of universities have sacrificed distinctiveness in attempts to conform to older, Oxbridge models.¹⁰ At the same time, through the major transformation of higher education since 1963, including government drives towards managerialism and marketisation, university traditions have been eroded by new *political* forces, based on economic dogma.¹¹ As such, the reception of these radical changes across UK universities can be best understood not just as a matter of tradition, but of politics, too.

Birkbeck, in terms of tradition and politics, was different and 'left' from its beginning. Founded in 1823, its principal aim – unique in London – was to provide university education for working adults.¹² The institution owed its conception to reformist radicals, and while it was only realised with support from more moderate liberals, an association with this radicalism remained.¹³ Similarly, although Birkbeck's typical student soon changed from worker to clerk, it could still legitimately claim distinction through the provision of evening

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹² Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 2003-2004* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 2003), p. 146.

¹³ *Ibid.*

tuition for men and women with day-time jobs.¹⁴ As such, compared to other universities in the UK – based more on ‘medieval’ models – the college’s origins and mission always set it apart, and to the left.

Birkbeck’s Department of History, Classics and Archaeology (HCA) was rooted in this unique institutional context.¹⁵ Indeed, it might be assumed that at the start of the research period, in the early 1960s, a sense of left-leaning exceptionalism was inherent to HCA. In addition, through the public reputation of its most celebrated scholar, Eric Hobsbawm, HCA has a further, popular association with left-wing politics, namely Communism. Such ideas on institutional tradition and political identity at departmental level matter, as they can inform our understanding of how HCA developed – and, in particular, how it received historic shifts to UK higher education between 1963 and 2003. In consideration of this significance, it is also clear that any assumption over institutional and political values within HCA requires further examination.

Existing research on HCA’s tradition and politics consists of a small number of institutional and intellectual histories, academic biographies and obituaries. Richard J. Evans, himself a former Professor and Head of Department in History at Birkbeck, has charted Hobsbawm’s long career in depth: in a recent biography, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*;¹⁶ and in articles including an extensive British Academy obituary.¹⁷ Similar, posthumous pieces exist for other notable HCA staff, including another well-known communist, the polyglot and former Head of Classics at Birkbeck, Robert Browning.¹⁸ More broadly, scholars including Geoff Eley have traced the development of history as an

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ HCA at Birkbeck existed firstly, and until almost the end of the twentieth century, as just two separate departments: History and Classics. The joint unit of HCA, including Archaeology, was formed in 1999-00.

¹⁶ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*.

¹⁷ Richard J. Evans, ‘Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 14 (2015), pp. 207-260.

¹⁸ Averil Cameron, ‘Robert Browning, 1914-1997’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 105 (2000), pp. 289-306.

academic discipline in relation to political shifts, particularly post-1968.¹⁹ Wider still, the contemporary history of UK universities in different political contexts, including the emergence of a right-wing Conservative populism in the late 1970s and 1980s, and New Labour in the 1990s, is well documented.²⁰ Meanwhile, the higher education scholar Jussi Välimaa has called for a more dynamic approach to university traditions, based on the ‘negotiation processes’ that occur when political change meets institutional practices.²¹ What is still missing, however, is a critical investigation of tradition and politics at *departmental* level, which merges the various approaches above.

This chapter aims to use such a combined, detailed focus to move beyond assumptions about the institutional and political identity of HCA. In so doing, it aims to better understand HCA’s reception of major changes to universities from the early 1960s, when Birkbeck’s traditions were increasingly tested by new political pressures. It asks: What institutional traditions existed within HCA during the period, and how were these developed and maintained? How significant was the communism of Hobsbawm and others within HCA, and how did such politics relate to institutional traditions? What other political identities, including conservatism, were present within HCA during the period? And, lastly, can HCA be accurately considered as a ‘broad left church’ – and, if so, how did this overall identity relate to institutional traditions and wider university politics? These questions are answered in four sections. Section one, *Tradition*, explores the nature of tradition within universities, and the existence of a ‘Birkbeckian’ identity within HCA. Section two, *Communism*, investigates the mythology around Hobsbawm and Browning, as key intellectual and political figures within HCA. Section three, *Conservatism*, considers the reality of a heterogenous

¹⁹ Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2005).

²⁰ Notable recent examples include Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*; and Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*.

²¹ Välimaa, ‘On Traditions and Historical Layers in Higher Education’, pp. 67-76.

political identity within HCA, including right-wing elements. And section four, *'A Broad Left Church'*, examines claims that HCA's defining political identity was broadly left-wing – and the relation of such a position to internal traditions and external politics.

Tradition

Välilmaa provides two concepts through which to understand tradition in universities. The first is 'historical layers', whereby successive shifts to higher education settle on top of previous developments.²² Broadly, in terms of UK universities, there are perhaps six 'historical layers'. A base layer comprises Oxford and Cambridge – established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, respectively, and both elite and ecclesiastical in character.²³ Next came the ancient Scottish universities – St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen, in the fifteenth century; Edinburgh in the sixteenth – still elite, but more democratic.²⁴ In the 1820s, University College and King's were founded in London – further developing a more metropolitan, meritocratic model.²⁵ Then in the 1870s and 1880s, came the five industrial-city 'red-bricks' – civic, practical and aspirational.²⁶ A historic shift from elite to mass higher education from the 1960s was reflected in the seven 'plate-glass' institutions.²⁷ A further major 'layer', marking a transition from 'welfare-state' to market-driven expansion, followed

²² Ibid., p. 68.

²³ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 23.

²⁴ 'History and heritage', University of St Andrews website, <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/history> [accessed on 9th February 2023]; 'Papal Bull', University of Glasgow website, <https://universitystory.gla.ac.uk/papal-bull> [accessed on 9th February 2023]; 'Historical Milestones', University of Aberdeen website, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/about/history> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

²⁵ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, pp. 27-28.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 28. The 'red-brick' institutions of Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Liverpool were later followed in the 1940s and 1950s by the reclassification of five regional colleges – Hull, Leicester, Nottingham, Reading and Southampton – as universities.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 29. In addition to the new universities of Sussex, York, Essex, East Anglia, Warwick, Kent and Lancaster, the 1960s were marked by the reclassification of Colleges of Advanced Technology (including Bradford, Brunel, Loughborough, Salford and Surrey) – a process that continued into the 1970s.

in the early 1990s, with the reclassification of almost forty polytechnics as universities.²⁸ Significantly, Välimaa suggests that, as with archaeological layers, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between these different strata: ‘each historical layer is influenced by preceding historical developments, because previous layers may continuously influence the intellectual landscapes and practices of new layers.’²⁹ In terms of UK universities, the medieval has continued to exert powerful influence over the modern. As Collini observes, in line with Välimaa, ‘the newer and different types of institution increasingly shed their distinctiveness and more and more conformed to the culturally dominant [Oxbridge] model.’³⁰

The second concept proposed by Välimaa is that of ‘negotiation processes’, whereby universities develop in tension with internal and external pressures.³¹ As such, ‘historical layers’ in higher education are formed through struggles involving both institutional dynamics and wider social, economic and political forces. In terms of UK universities, the developmental strata summarised above suggest a long history of such ‘processes’. As Välimaa asserts, the past of higher education ‘has always been full of details and competing and conflicting traditions and practices’.³² Critically, however, in terms of scale and speed, the mass expansion of UK higher education from the early 1960s can be considered as an unprecedented period of ‘negotiation’. Collini argues that in the forty years following the 1963 Robbins Report, ‘the pace of change [was] so fast that no decade can plausibly be chosen to represent the “normal” condition of the system.’³³ For the higher education academic Peter Scott, shifts in relations between the state and universities during this period

²⁸ Ibid., p. 29 and p. 31.

²⁹ Välimaa, ‘On Traditions and Historical Layers in Higher Education’, p. 68.

³⁰ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 28.

³¹ Välimaa, ‘On Traditions and Historical Layers in Higher Education’, p. 67.

³² Ibid., p. 68.

³³ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 22. As such, the period represents a particularly acute version of a historical problem raised by Collini – the difficulty of identifying any long-standing tradition in UK higher education against which changes can be measured.

of transition to mass participation are key.³⁴ In particular, Scott points to a subordination of universities – and their established practices – by government-enabled market forces: ‘their former autonomy [...] has been replaced by entrepreneurial freedom; and collegiality (and institutional solidarity) by competition.’³⁵ Vitaly, the reaction of UK universities to these wider, external pressures is closely related to the particularities of their own internal structures and dynamics. As Välimaa suggests, it is also in the ‘everyday practices [...] in departments’ that the ‘negotiation processes’ of the move to mass higher education, and its impact on traditions, have been played out.³⁶

Birkbeck’s own development, the deposition of its ‘historical layers’, started in 1823, with a meeting in a tavern on the Strand to finalise plans for a London Mechanics’ Institution.³⁷ Based on a Glaswegian model of higher education for workers, the LMI was successful until the death of key founder George Birkbeck in 1841 – after which it suffered a decline in numbers and standards.³⁸ In 1866, a change of name to the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution marked a new era, with reformed management, and advanced classes aimed at more literate and ambitious students.³⁹ Two further name changes followed: in 1891, to the City Polytechnic; and in 1907, to Birkbeck College.⁴⁰ Between these dates, in 1898, links with the University of London were formalised, with some Birkbeck lecturers,

³⁴ Peter Scott, ‘The “Nationalisation” of UK Universities 1963-2007’, in *Towards a cartography of higher education policy: A Festschrift in Honour of Guy Neave*, ed. by Jürgen Enders and Frans A. van Vught (Enschede, Netherlands: Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, 2007), pp. 59-65 (p. 63).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59. Notably, university responses to new market pressures have included attempts by older institutions to distinguish themselves based on historic identity. For example, current branding for the University of Manchester highlights part of the word ‘Manchester’ to spell out ‘Est 1824’ (this date marking the foundation of Manchester Mechanics’ Institution, the first form of today’s University). ‘History and heritage’, The University of Manchester website, <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/history-heritage> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

³⁶ Välimaa, ‘On Traditions and Historical Layers in Higher Education’, p. 73.

³⁷ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-2004*, p. 146.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 1. As Bourke notes, Birkbeck was briefly renamed the City Polytechnic following a merger with Northampton Polytechnic and the City of London College. The union did not last long due to financial reasons.

and their students, afforded ‘internal’ status.⁴¹ In 1920, the college became an official School of the University – a move delayed by the First World War – with a proviso that it teach only evening classes to part-time students.⁴² This agreement was suspended during the Second World War, when Birkbeck was forced to teach in daytime hours.⁴³ In the post-war era, the College briefly admitted full-time school-leavers, before its distinct purpose within a wider expansion of higher education was reaffirmed in a 1966 report.⁴⁴ From the late 1970s, as with UK universities nationwide, Birkbeck suffered from severe government funding cuts – leading to existential crisis in the 1980s.⁴⁵ In line with broader higher education shifts, the College subsequently returned to expansion at higher rates in the 1990s.⁴⁶

Each of these ‘historical layers’ of Birkbeck’s development were the products of ‘negotiation processes’ involving internal and external pressures. Birkbeck’s very foundation was achieved within a wider context of industrialisation and industrial relations. As such, it was not without political controversy: conservative critics feared the revolutionary potential of higher education for workers.⁴⁷ There was also related, internal conflict: the LMI’s most radical founders subsequently severed relations with George Birkbeck and other moderates over how the institution was to be funded.⁴⁸ Similarly, Birkbeck’s formalisation from 1866 reflected broader social and economic changes, with students now seeking university degrees in order to access an expanding administrative class.⁴⁹ Again, however, in terms of scale and speed, it is shifts starting in the 1960s that arguably represent Birkbeck’s most acute period of

⁴¹ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-2004*, p. 148.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 149. Again, as Bourke notes, Birkbeck was also forced to stop teaching economics ‘on the grounds that this was the prerogative of the London School of Economics’. Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 132.

⁴³ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-2004*, p. 149.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁴⁸ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, pp. 32-35. As Bourke explains, Joseph Robertson, founder-editor of *Mechanics’ Magazine*, and a key figure in the foundation of Birkbeck, led opposition to a move by George Birkbeck to finance a new lecture theatre for the LMI. Robertson claimed that Birkbeck’s offer of a loan, to be repaid with 4 per cent interest, would plunge the fledgling institution into debt and ‘dangerous subserviency’.

⁴⁹ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-2004*, p. 147.

‘negotiation’. The mass expansion of UK higher education, including government drives towards managerialism and marketisation, had an unprecedented impact on the institution’s development, and tradition. Between 1963 and 2003, Birkbeck’s student population rocketed from 1,500 to 7,600 – a historic increase of more than 400 per cent.⁵⁰ As with universities nationwide, however, such expansion had to be paid for. The consequence, in broad terms, was increasing conflict with the state over new forms of government higher education funding and scrutiny. Within this context of heightened external pressures, Birkbeck was repeatedly forced to defend its unique mission – and tradition – of university teaching for part-time and mature students. And again, vitally, these acute ‘negotiation processes’ were played out not just at institutional, but *departmental* level.

Birkbeck’s ability to defend itself in the face of increased government cuts and scrutiny depended on a sense of unique institutional purpose. At the start of the 1960s, such a ‘Birkbeckian’ identity existed at institutional level: the college’s history, including its particular provision for working students, was promoted through official publications and events.⁵¹ But what about at departmental level? In 1963, HCA consisted of just two, separate departments: History and Classics.⁵² It might be assumed that, as Birkbeck staff, academics in these departments were aware of the wider, institutional promotion of the college’s history and tradition. There is, however, a lack of evidence in terms of explicit reference to Birkbeck’s identity or mission in departmental correspondence – at least until the late 1970s. Instead, a sense of unique institutional purpose can be detected implicitly, within the day-to-

⁵⁰ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 80; Birkbeck, *Annual Review 2003-04*, p. 18. By 2003-04, Birkbeck had a total of 7,615 students: 4,071 undergraduates; 2,889 taught postgraduates; and 655 postgraduate researchers. This total excludes 11,942 students based in the college’s Faculty of Continuing Education – previously a department of the University of London.

⁵¹ For example, Birkbeck hosted an annual Foundation Oration. In 1960-61, this institutional lecture was given by Sir Alexander Fleck, who spoke on ‘Birkbeck’s ideas in their modern setting’. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1960-61* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1961), p. 13. Birkbeck’s annual *Calendar* for each academic year also contained a section on the college’s history and purpose. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1963-64* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1963), pp. 7-13.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 60 and p. 87.

day actions of HCA staff. For example, Robert Browning, Head of Classics at Birkbeck in the 1960s and 1970s, showed a clear awareness that his students were part-time and mature, and as such required special support. In March 1969, Browning asked the college's Master, R. C. Tress, to help secure unpaid leave for a Classics student, H. S. Marlow, so that he might focus on finishing his degree. Browning's appeal to Tress was based on Marlow's 'poor original qualifications, his age and the demanding nature of his job'.⁵³ Such personal interventions by HCA staff point to the continuation of a 'Birkbeckian' tradition – not just as an abstract, institutional identity, but as a practical, departmental process.

Critically, a sense of unique institutional tradition and purpose within HCA was strongest during times of crisis, or acute 'negotiation processes'. In the mid-to-late 1970s, the Department of Classics at Birkbeck was threatened by 'rationalisation' – a merger with equivalent departments across the University of London. Classics professor Giuseppe Giangrande reacted with a personal petition to Birkbeck's Master, in defence of his department's particular, part-time provision. Giangrande pleaded to Tress, in October 1976, that

in so far as we at Birkbeck exist to duplicate (i.e. offer to evening students) what is taught during the day by the Classics Departments of London University, we cannot be involved to any extent at all in the process of 'rationalisation' [...] we are totally outside [its] scope.⁵⁴

This sense of an exceptional 'Birkbeckian' purpose within HCA became more pronounced during the 1980s, as crises caused by government higher education funding

⁵³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 010, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 025, p. 2.

cuts became more severe. A climax was reached in 1986, when a drastic decision by the University Grants Committee (UGC) to slash financial support for part-time and mature provision pitched Birkbeck into existential crisis. In response, HCA academics including Roderick Floud, Head of History, helped to fight a spirited, public campaign in defence of the college's unique mission. Floud explicitly told *The Times* in June 1986 that, 'Birkbeck is special and therefore has to be treated specially.'⁵⁵ This campaign, known as the 'Battle for Birkbeck', forced debates in both Houses of Parliament.⁵⁶ It stands as a further demonstration of institutional tradition and purpose manifested through departmental action. And, vitally, it also confirms a link between tradition and politics in higher education.

Communism

That tradition is linked with politics in higher education raises key questions for this research. What were the politics of HCA? How did these relate to Birkbeck's institutional tradition? And how might they have affected the reception of government shifts to higher education? In terms of popular understanding, the political identity of HCA – and Birkbeck as a whole – is inevitably linked with that of its most famous scholar, Eric Hobsbawm. Such is the strength of Hobsbawm's public reputation as a Marxist historian, and perhaps even more so as a communist, there is a lasting association between his long-term workplace and far-left politics. Hobsbawm was also not alone in his political beliefs within HCA. Robert Browning, Head of Classics, was a fellow member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).⁵⁷ Indeed, both Hobsbawm and Browning were members of the influential Communist Party

⁵⁵ Our Education Correspondent, 'College's Fight to Keep Funds', *The Times*, Friday 27th June 1986, p. 3.

⁵⁶ This episode, which also involved HCA students, is fully examined in Chapter 2, *The Battle for Birkbeck*.

⁵⁷ Cameron, 'Robert Browning, 1914-1997', p. 297.

Historians' Group (CPHG) – Hobsbawm more notably so.⁵⁸ Furthermore, there were other committed communists elsewhere at Birkbeck, including the crystallographer J. D. Bernal, and his colleagues Alan Mackay and J. W. Jeffrey.⁵⁹ These communist academics were considered politically dangerous enough – at least during the height of the Cold War – for Birkbeck to be placed under MI5 surveillance, with a particular focus on HCA and the Department of Crystallography.⁶⁰ Beyond public perception and Cold War caution, however, what political influence did Hobsbawm and Browning really have within HCA at Birkbeck – and how might their communist beliefs have related to institutional tradition and wider higher education politics?

Hobsbawm was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1917.⁶¹ He grew up in Vienna and later Berlin, following the deaths of both parents by the early 1930s.⁶² A non-German, Jewish teenage orphan, his allegiance to communism was forged, as Richard Evans notes, ‘in the red-hot crucible of Berlin politics on the eve of the Nazi seizure of power’.⁶³ Hobsbawm took part in the last public communist rally in Berlin, in January 1933.⁶⁴ Two months later, his family moved to Britain.⁶⁵ In 1936, Hobsbawm won a scholarship to King’s College, Cambridge, and joined a student branch of the CPGB.⁶⁶ He was in Paris that same year for street parties marking the advent of the Popular Front.⁶⁷ The following year, he worked as a translator at a world Communist Congress, and around this time made international Party contacts.⁶⁸ In 1943, Hobsbawm married a fellow communist, Muriel Seaman, whom he had

⁵⁸ Ibid. Hobsbawm was a leading member of the CPHG’s largest sub-section, its Modern History group. Evans, ‘Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012’, p. 221.

⁵⁹ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, pp. 359-60.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 359 and p. 373.

⁶¹ Evans, ‘Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012’, p. 207.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 208-209.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 227.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 211.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 212-213.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 214.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

met in London.⁶⁹ In 1947, he was appointed to a lectureship in the Department of History at Birkbeck.⁷⁰ The new recruit was put under surveillance by MI5. He was also subjected to internal obstruction by the Head of History, R. R. Darlington, who, according to Evans, blocked Hobsbawm's promotion due to 'political animus'.⁷¹ While an HCA academic, Hobsbawm took part in political protests, lectured at teach-ins, visited Cuba and spoke in debates against the Vietnam War.⁷² He also hosted far-left political figures at Birkbeck, including members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC).⁷³ Throughout, Hobsbawm remained a member of the Communist Party.⁷⁴

Browning, senior to Hobsbawm by just three years, was born in Glasgow in 1914.⁷⁵ He won a scholarship to the city's university, before progressing in 1935 to Balliol College, Oxford, where he was likely first drawn to communism.⁷⁶ During the war, the polyglot was recruited for intelligence work in Cairo, where he mixed with local left-wing activists.⁷⁷ He was subsequently deployed in Italy, Bulgaria and Greece – where he developed a passion for Greek history and languages.⁷⁸ Browning joined the Classics department at University College London in 1947.⁷⁹ He was made Reader in 1955, and earlier that same year visited Moscow as part of a delegation of British Marxist historians, also including Hobsbawm.⁸⁰ Like Hobsbawm, Browning retained his CPGB membership despite the pivotal events of 1956 – Nikita Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin's atrocities and the Soviet invasion of

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 216.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 230.

⁷¹ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 427.

⁷² Evans, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012', p. 227.

⁷³ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 381.

⁷⁴ Evans, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012', p. 226. Hobsbawm was a member of the CPGB until its dissolution in 1991.

⁷⁵ Cameron, 'Robert Browning, 1914-1997', p. 290.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 293 and p. 297. According to Cameron, 'Like many others at the time, not least at Balliol, [Browning] saw in communism the most effective force against Nazism.' Browning was interested in central and eastern Europe and had visited Vienna at the time of the Anschluss with Austria. Cameron, p. 294.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 294-5. The Marxist historian Rodney Hilton, also ex-Balliol, was with Browning in Cairo at this time.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 295.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 299.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 296; Evans, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012', p. 224.

Hungary. Indeed, he never lost his commitment to the Party.⁸¹ The Byzantinist maintained links with Soviet scholars, sometimes to the disapproval of Western colleagues.⁸² He was also a regular contributor to Party publications including the *Daily Worker* and *Labour Monthly*.⁸³ A former UCL academic, David Furley, remembered Browning once trying to recruit him for a CPGB meeting.⁸⁴ Browning was appointed to a chair in the Department of Classics at Birkbeck in 1965.⁸⁵ According to Heather White, a Research Officer in the Department from 1977 to 1989, Browning attempted to recruit staff and students at the college. White alleges that Browning asked students to help with extra-curricular tasks, including the delivery of private packages.⁸⁶ White also claims that students and staff were explicitly asked to join the CPGB, sometimes with promise of career progression.⁸⁷ Furthermore, White recalled being interviewed by MI5 at Birkbeck, due to concerns over her proximity – as a junior Classics academic – to Browning.⁸⁸

In these ways, Hobsbawm and Browning perhaps contributed to what another former HCA academic, Roy Foster, remembered as ‘a whiff of radical politics in the corridors’ of Birkbeck.⁸⁹ Crucially, however, the political impact of the two communists on HCA and the college was likely never much more than this, and should not be overstated. While Hobsbawm and Browning were subjects of state surveillance at Birkbeck, such activity was most acute at the height of the Cold War, and, as such, was perhaps more reflective of wider political events than the individuals themselves. Both remained Party members throughout their careers at Birkbeck, but neither was extreme or dogmatic in their political beliefs. After

⁸¹ Cameron, ‘Robert Browning, 1914-1997’, p. 297.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁸⁶ Dr Heather White, interviewed by the author on 23rd January 2020, 00:01:22.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 00:02:22.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 01:46:49.

⁸⁹ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:22:38.

the crises of 1956, both Hobsbawm and Browning petitioned against the CPGB's official, tendentious responses.⁹⁰ Hobsbawm in particular had a reputation within the CPGB for being remote;⁹¹ and was in Britain politically more concerned with the Labour Party.⁹² Indeed, as Evans records, Hobsbawm dissuaded a PhD student, Donald Sassoon, from joining the CPGB, insisting that it was "a complete waste of time!"⁹³ Also, while it is true that Hobsbawm received far-left political figures at Birkbeck, he also hosted others with political allegiances different to his own. According to White, Hobsbawm met a young Nicolas Sarkozy – then already committed to the French right-wing – at the college, to discuss socio-economic developments in Paris's *Banlieue*.⁹⁴ Browning was rumoured to have taken on Greek PhD students between 1967 and 1974, to help them escape the dictatorial right-wing *junta* at home – but any such action was perhaps as much a reflection of his humanity and love of Greece than any communist aims.⁹⁵ Furthermore, while White alleges that Browning tried to recruit HCA staff and students to the CPGB, others who worked with the Byzantinist recall a 'disjuncture' between his politics and departmental life.⁹⁶

Something similar might be said of Browning and Hobsbawm's academic impact. Certainly, both scholars were members of the CPHG in the 1940s and 1950s, alongside other Marxist academics, including John Morris, Christopher Hill and Rodney Hilton.⁹⁷ Browning

⁹⁰ Evans, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012', p. 225. Hobsbawm and Browning both signed a letter condemning the 'uncritical support given by the Executive Committee of the Communist Party', drafted by Christopher Hill and Rodney Hilton and published on 18th November 1956 in the *New Statesman*. The letter also criticised 'years of distortion of fact, and failure by British Communists to think out political problems for themselves'. According to Evans, 'from this point onwards Eric ceased to be active in any capacity within the Communist Party of Great Britain.' *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁹³ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 425.

⁹⁴ White, 23rd January 2020, 01:46:49.

⁹⁵ Cameron, 'Robert Browning, 1914-1997', p. 303.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 298. Cameron claims that, 'most of those who knew [Browning] as students...say that they never remember his expressing left-wing or communist principles even in relation to such obviously relevant topics as the fall of the Roman Empire.'

⁹⁷ Evans, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012', pp. 221-222 and p. 224. The CPHG effectively broke up due to the fallout of communist crises in 1956; most of its members resigned from the Party to form the 'intellectual nucleus' of the British New Left. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-6.

and Hobsbawm also became important figures at the journal *Past & Present*, launched by members of the Group in 1952.⁹⁸ Notably though, as Evans points out, the now-prestigious publication was ‘never officially sanctioned by the Group, still less by the Party’;⁹⁹ and while presenting Marxist analyses, it also drew increasingly on non-Marxist ideas and editors.¹⁰⁰ Browning was separately a regular contributor to the communist press. Significantly, however, his political views were seldom made explicit in his scholarly work. As a fellow Byzantinist and biographer of Browning, Averil Cameron, observes, ‘in only one article in a British academic journal [...] did he attempt a critical analysis of Byzantine society based on his social principles.’¹⁰¹ Hobsbawm was more prominent than Browning at the CPHG and *Past & Present*, and has the greater reputation as a Marxist scholar.¹⁰² Indeed, during his early career at Birkbeck, Hobsbawm’s notoriety as a Marxist figure attracted students from across the federal University of London to his works.¹⁰³ As Evans suggests, however, those taught by the historian ‘didn’t even have the sense that he was purveying a left-wing view of history; certainly, didn’t feel he was trying to indoctrinate’.¹⁰⁴ Hobsbawm deliberately kept an intellectual and academic distance from the Soviet Union, for decades choosing to focus on nineteenth-century history.¹⁰⁵ Hobsbawm later claimed that he ‘didn’t want to be involved in debates that would [...] have brought me into conflict with my conscience as an academic’.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, also according to Evans, even in the first half of the 1950s, ‘Eric’s intellectual development [...] was already taking him progressively further away from

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 222. The founding meeting of *Past & Present* took place at the home of John Morris in late 1949; the first issue was published a little over two years later.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Non-Marxist ideas in *Past & Present* notably included those of the French *Annales* school; non-Marxist editors appointed to the journal included the early modernist Lawrence Stone. Ibid., pp. 222-3.

¹⁰¹ Cameron, ‘Robert Browning, 1914-1997’, p. 298.

¹⁰² Evans, ‘Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012’, p. 221.

¹⁰³ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, pp. 427-8.

¹⁰⁴ Professor Richard J. Evans, interviewed by the author on 28th January 2021, 00:11:24.

¹⁰⁵ Evans, ‘Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012’, p. 228.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 228.

the mainstream of Communist ideology.¹⁰⁷ As such, Hobsbawm's academic work increasingly reflected a *Marxisant* approach, distinguished more by its vast intellectual range than any dogmatism.

Evans suggests that Hobsbawm's academic impact was not only 'very wide', but 'very diffuse' and 'many-sided'; his intellectual influence is therefore 'quite hard to pin down'.¹⁰⁸ Hobsbawm's legacy lies in

his ability to see the big picture, to organise and frame his subjects, to devise arresting new concepts, to excite major historical debates, to combine analysis and interpretation with striking and appropriate examples often chosen from obscure yet telling material.¹⁰⁹

As Evans explains, Hobsbawm's scholarship inspired not a school but a 'Hobsbawm generation', who 'read everything Eric wrote, debated it, absorbed it, quarrelled with it and profited from it'.¹¹⁰ In HCA at Birkbeck, this meant the attraction of new scholars, who were motivated more by Hobsbawm's expansive and innovatory approach to history than any Marxist values, *per se*. Vanessa Harding, who joined History at Birkbeck in 1984-85, recalled clearly that 'we weren't teaching Marx'.¹¹¹ Similarly, David Feldman, appointed to History at the college in 1994-95, claimed that there was 'never a serious Marxism in the Department'.¹¹² As Evans also suggests, the Department of History at Birkbeck, particularly during Hobsbawm's early career, was too small to support

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 223. According to Evans, Hobsbawm had by the mid-1950s moved from 'writing about the rising industrial working class to writing about the dispossessed and the marginalised'. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

¹¹¹ Professor Vanessa Harding, interviewed by the author on 14th January 2021, 00:16:00.

¹¹² Professor David Feldman, interviewed by the author on 11th February 2021, 00:16:45.

individual impact on the curriculum: its academics were required to cover a broad range of subjects and periods.¹¹³ Notably, Browning faced a similar situation, in an even smaller unit – the Department of Classics.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, according to Cameron, Browning would not have sought curricular changes because ‘it was not in his nature to overturn what was well-established’.¹¹⁵

Between all these factors, there is little evidence that the politics of Hobsbawm and Browning significantly influenced the everyday practices of HCA at Birkbeck. Arguably, however, the practices and traditions of HCA and the college did have an impact on the two communists. Hobsbawm and Browning came to Birkbeck partly because the institution – unlike many others during the peak of the Cold War – accepted them. As Hobsbawm himself confirmed, Birkbeck provided ‘a built-in, unforced protection against the pressures of the Cold War outside’.¹¹⁶ While Hobsbawm suffered internal obstruction under Darlington in the Department of History, the political climate outside the college was harsher, even in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Evans, Hobsbawm was by the mid-1960s ‘frustrated by Birkbeck’s lack of appreciation for his growing public reputation’.¹¹⁷ The talented scholar began to look elsewhere, but several potential transfers were stifled by political hostility. Evans reveals that Hobsbawm ruled himself out of a Professorship at University College London in 1966, due to likely opposition ‘on ideological grounds’.¹¹⁸ Hobsbawm’s application for a Professorship in Economic History at Oxford in 1967 was blocked by Hugh Trevor-Roper who, as Evans notes, ‘respected Eric as an historian but detested him as a Communist.’¹¹⁹ Applications

¹¹³ Evans, ‘Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012’, p. 230.

¹¹⁴ When Browning joined Birkbeck in 1965, the Department of Classics had a total of four teaching staff, compared with eight in History. Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1965-66*, p. 63 and p. 89.

¹¹⁵ Cameron, ‘Robert Browning, 1914-1997’, p. 299.

¹¹⁶ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 182.

¹¹⁷ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 428.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

for the Chair of Economic History at Cambridge in both 1965 and 1971 resulted in Hobsbawm being passed over for less able candidates.¹²⁰ Meanwhile, Browning's communism might have been a factor in his unsuccessful attempt to return to Balliol as a classical tutor in the early 1950s – the position being filled by a more 'mainstream' applicant.¹²¹ Such experiences, together with the record of MI5 surveillance, provide a sense of 'McCarthyism' at work in the British academy. In stark contrast then – and albeit not always by preference – HCA at Birkbeck provided political outliers like Hobsbawm and Browning with professional shelter and opportunity.

Birkbeck and HCA were capable of such support because they were different. Compared with higher education more widely, the college was not 'mainstream'; it was primarily concerned with university education for part-time and mature students.¹²² Indeed, Hobsbawm himself linked Birkbeck's 'exceptional' absence of anti-communism with its unique provision for working students, which meant that 'such political tradition as it had was on the left'.¹²³ Critically, while the Cold War sanctuary offered by the college held obvious appeal for communist scholars, its particular mission was perhaps also an attraction in its own right. As such, that both Hobsbawm and Browning had very long careers in HCA was not simply a result of doors being closed elsewhere. There were perhaps practical advantages to evening teaching in terms of freeing up daytime hours for research and writing.¹²⁴ Leading late classes for tired students also provided an 'acid test' – in Hobsbawm's words – for potential book material.¹²⁵ Most significantly, however, the

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 428.

¹²¹ Cameron, 'Robert Browning, 1914-1997', p. 297.

¹²² Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 618.

¹²³ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 181.

¹²⁴ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 269. According to Evans, Hobsbawm referred to Birkbeck as 'the poor man's All Souls' – a reference to the Oxford college, which had no students and did no teaching.

¹²⁵ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 299. As Evans notes, all three books in Hobsbawm's famous trilogy – *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *The Age of Capital* (1975) and *The Age of Empire* (1987) 'drew heavily on his Birkbeck lectures'. Evans, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012', p. 240.

tuition of part-time and mature students was possibly also a matter of alignment with personal, political values. As Evans observes, Hobsbawm was ‘proud of [Birkbeck’s] mission to teach ordinary working people rather than privileged undergraduates, and he felt at home in its politically progressive atmosphere’.¹²⁶ Hobsbawm and Browning were key members of academic staff in History and Classics at Birkbeck for thirty-five and sixteen years, respectively.¹²⁷ While there is little evidence that the long-standing scholars had any political impact on teaching and research in HCA, the combined commitment of both to departmental aims over several decades perhaps points to the influence of the college’s institutional tradition on the two communists. As Foster suggests, on Hobsbawm, ‘Eric certainly added a left-wing image, but I think in a way he found Birkbeck as much as Birkbeck found him.’¹²⁸

Conservatism

In reality, beyond any mythology surrounding the communism of Hobsbawm and Browning, the political identity of HCA at Birkbeck from the 1960s was heterogeneous. This broader spectrum of politics at departmental level included not just various left-wing views, but right-wing values, too. Most prominently in HCA, Darlington, Head of Department in History for almost a quarter of a century, from 1945 to 1969, was a staunch conservative.¹²⁹ Darlington, also a Chair of the Board of Studies for History across the University of London, had trained

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 231.

¹²⁷ Browning joined Birkbeck in 1965 and retired in 1981. Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1965-66*, p. 63; Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1981-82* (Hertford, Stephen Austin, 1981), p. 24. Hobsbawm joined Birkbeck in 1947 and retired in 1982, after which he became an Emeritus Professor. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1947-48* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1947), p. 68; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar 1982-83* (Hertford, Stephen Austin, 1982), p. 26.

¹²⁸ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:21:38.

¹²⁹ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1945-46* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1946), p. 6; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1969-1970*, p. 47.

as a medievalist in the 1920s, and remained an ultra-empiricist.¹³⁰ As such, Darlington was opposed to progressive historical research methods – not least the Marxist approaches of Hobsbawm, which, as Head of Department, he sought to obstruct.¹³¹ This academic traditionalism also translated into other aspects of Darlington’s life. According to the scholar’s biographer, R. Allen Brown, an ‘almost monastic’ commitment to work extended to a life of total celibacy.¹³² More significantly, and also according to Brown, Darlington had a ‘certain insularity of interest’ which was perhaps a precondition of an ‘Anglo-Saxon attitude’.¹³³ Darlington did not like going abroad.¹³⁴ He allegedly once referred to the Norman Conquest of England as ‘the last of the barbarian invasions’.¹³⁵ Brown further suggests that Darlington’s beliefs were perhaps, ‘a matter of generation [...] as though the last days of an Empire which placed Britain and England at the centre of the world produced a unique and exclusive English History to explain it.’¹³⁶ Such values stood in stark contrast to those of the Marxist, internationalist Hobsbawm. And as such, they feasibly formed the basis not just of academic disagreement, but of ‘political animus’ as well.¹³⁷

Darlington was not the only academic in HCA at Birkbeck with a reputation for conservatism. Michael Wilks, another medievalist, and second successor to Darlington as Head of Department in History, from 1974, was remembered by Evans as being ‘very conservative’.¹³⁸ Mary Cumpston, who oversaw British colonial history at Birkbeck for more than two decades from the 1960s, was the daughter of an Australian government minister.

¹³⁰ R. Allen Brown, ‘Reginald Ralph Darlington, 1903-1977’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 66 (1980), pp. 426-437 (p. 428 and p. 435).

¹³¹ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 427. (See also *ibid.*, p. 481 and p. 727n27.)

¹³² Brown, ‘Reginald Ralph Darlington, 1903-1977’, p. 435.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 431. Brown notes that some of Darlington’s academic articles on late Anglo-Saxon England, ‘must now seem a little dated, not in their learning or their factual content, but in an attitude and an interpretation of the evidence which may even seem close at times to prejudice – prejudice derived, again, from insularity.’

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

¹³⁷ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 427.

¹³⁸ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:04:48.

She was later described by Foster, a historian of Ireland, as a ‘dyed-in-the-wool commonwealth imperialist’;¹³⁹ and ‘probably deeply right-wing’.¹⁴⁰ Harding, a long-standing early modern scholar in History at the college, described the overall character of the department as having some ‘really quite conservative, small “c” conservative’ aspects.¹⁴¹ Dorothy Porter, social historian of medicine, who joined History at Birkbeck in 1991-92, meanwhile recalled that her colleague, the early modernist Julian Swann, jokingly referred to himself as ‘the only Tory in the department’.¹⁴² Conservatism also existed elsewhere at Birkbeck, outside HCA. Most notably, Roger Scruton, of the college’s Department of Philosophy, from 1971 to 1992, was a highly prominent conservative thinker, writer and activist. According to Foster, Scruton was, ‘always on the radio and television spouting his conservative beliefs, and it was considered bizarre that he was at Birkbeck.’¹⁴³ Furthermore, conservatism was present at the highest levels, among senior scholars in charge of the college. In particular, Evans suggests that the classicist Sir John Francis Lockwood, Master of Birkbeck in the early 1960s, was ‘really quite right-wing’.¹⁴⁴

How then, did these conservative elements within HCA and Birkbeck relate to the institution’s tradition of university provision for working people? Darlington was remembered for his professional commitment while Head of Department in History – though this did not necessarily extend to any particular concern for part-time and mature students. Wilks, by contrast, was noted for his devotion to Birkbeck’s unique institutional mission. According to Brenda Bolton, who taught medieval history at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, Wilks

¹³⁹ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:25:10.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 00:25:23.

¹⁴¹ Harding, 14th January 2021, 00:19:12.

¹⁴² Professor Dorothy Porter, interviewed by the author on 23rd February 2021, 00:50:17.

¹⁴³ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:21:59.

¹⁴⁴ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:11:24.

willingly chose to meet the challenge presented by the tradition of mature study at Birkbeck College within London University, something which he was to defend vigorously throughout the whole of his life.¹⁴⁵

According to Bolton, Wilks's 'enthusiasm never waned' despite 'a gruelling routine of daytime administration and evening teaching', for which he gained an 'exceptional' reputation.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Cumpston was credited by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS) with developing part-time courses on British colonial history at Birkbeck with 'care, skill and continuity'.¹⁴⁷ *Prima facie*, for HCA academics, conservative or right-wing values did not preclude any personal-professional alignment with Birkbeck's institutional purpose. Indeed, during the severe crises of the 1980s, some public arguments in defence of the college were mounted on right-wing, conservative principles. Such appeals in the press and Parliament, to the Thatcher Government's values of 'self-improvement', might have been pragmatic.¹⁴⁸ But the relevance of Birkbeck's tradition to the political right, as well as the left, perhaps also points to part-time and mature higher education as having 'transpolitical' significance.

¹⁴⁵ Brenda Bolton, 'Obituary: Professor Michael Wilks', *The Independent* website, 27th June 1998, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-professor-michael-wilks-1167739.html> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 145.

¹⁴⁸ Professor Roderick Floud, interviewed by Dr Lorraine Blakemore in 2018-19. Floud states that, 'there were also the Conservatives, who were keen on people pulling themselves up from their own bootstraps and so on. So, it's an easy message to sell – about Birkbeck students and the sacrifices they're making to achieve a higher education.'

‘A Broad Left Church’

The predominant political identity of HCA at Birkbeck – at least by the second half of the research period – was, as Foster suggests, ‘a broad left church’.¹⁴⁹ Hobsbawm, writing of his early career at the college, recollected that, ‘The mood in the small, crowded and friendly staff common room suggested that it was overwhelmingly composed of Labour voters.’¹⁵⁰ Things were somewhat different within HCA in the early 1960s, where the political atmosphere was still quite conservative. In the Department of History in 1963, Hobsbawm was a political outlier in a small staff of eight academics.¹⁵¹ Darlington represented rather right-wing values;¹⁵² others, such as Douglas Dakin, expert on modern Greece, were politically closer to the centre. In his memoirs, Hobsbawm referred to Dakin as a ‘Tory’;¹⁵³ Foster, meanwhile, remembered him as ‘a man of the left’.¹⁵⁴ These two perspectives perhaps point to a moderate political identity, with the overall position of the Department likely being right-of-centre. Significantly, by the end of the decade, the political profile of History within HCA – limited in scale, such as it was – had shifted slightly to the left. In 1966, the Department appointed a new assistant lecturer, Barry Coward, from the University of Sheffield.¹⁵⁵ Coward, an early modernist, was later described by Swann as a ‘firm supporter of the traditional values of the Labour Party’.¹⁵⁶ This change was followed in 1969 by the retirement and death of Darlington, leading to the succession of Dakin as Head of History.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁹ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:25:05.

¹⁵⁰ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 181.

¹⁵¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-64*, p. 60.

¹⁵² Darlington’s politics are outlined under *Conservatism* above.

¹⁵³ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 181.

¹⁵⁴ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:21:38.

¹⁵⁵ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1966-67* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1966), p. 91.

¹⁵⁶ Julian Swann, ‘Barry Coward Obituary’, *The Guardian* website, 11th April 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/11/barry-coward-obituary> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁵⁷ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 430.

Under Dakin, and in the absence of the obstructive Darlington, Hobsbawm was promoted to Professor in 1970.¹⁵⁸

These early developments in HCA were followed by further shifts to the left in the 1970s. As a senior figure in History, Hobsbawm played a key role in the recruitment of Roderick Floud, a young economic historian from the University of Cambridge, in 1974.¹⁵⁹ Floud was known to Hobsbawm: his father was a Labour politician, Bernard Floud, who had been in the Communist Party and the Civil Service with Hobsbawm's first wife.¹⁶⁰ According to Floud, this acquaintance between his father and Hobsbawm likely meant the scholar was 'politically sympathetic' towards him;¹⁶¹ it might therefore have contributed to Hobsbawm's suggestion that Floud should apply for the position of Head of History at Birkbeck.¹⁶² Furthermore, Floud was a nephew of Peter and Jean Floud, who had joined the CPGB as students – Jean later becoming a prominent, left-leaning educational sociologist.¹⁶³ Evans, reflecting on political identities in HCA, described Roderick Floud as 'certainly on the left'.¹⁶⁴ Floud, meanwhile, referred to himself as having always been 'rather a middle of the road Labour Party supporter'.¹⁶⁵ As a faculty member at Cambridge from the late 1960s, Floud had campaigned in support of women during what he termed a 'lengthy and acrimonious debate' over the introduction of female students to Emmanuel College.¹⁶⁶ At

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 430.

¹⁵⁹ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1974-75* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1974-75), p. 23. Hobsbawm's role in the recruitment of Floud to HCA is explored fully in Chapter 5, *Diversification*.

¹⁶⁰ Professor Roderick Floud, interviewed by the author on 4th February 2021, 00:08:42; Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 430. Bernard Floud was elected as a Labour MP in 1964. He was denied security clearance by MI5 due to erroneous suspicions that he had been a member of a communist group at the University of Oxford in the 1930s. Tragically, he committed suicide in 1967 following the death of his wife, Ailsa, earlier that same year. Letter to the editor, Jean Floud, 'Victim of Circumstance', *The Times*, 30th March, 1981, p. 13.

¹⁶¹ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:09:09.

¹⁶² Ibid., 00:04:57.

¹⁶³ Martin Childs, 'Jean Floud', *The Independent* website, 15th May 2013, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/jean-floud-sociologist-whose-work-revealed-the-impact-of-class-on-educational-attainment-8617810.html> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁶⁴ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:12:55.

¹⁶⁵ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:09:09.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 00:07:01.

Birkbeck, the new recruit was considered by Hobsbawm as a suitable successor to Dakin, as Head of Department.¹⁶⁷ While Wilks was first appointed to the post following Dakin's retirement, also in 1974, Floud subsequently shared the role on a rotational basis.¹⁶⁸ He was later credited by Emma Mason, a long-standing medieval scholar in the Department, with introducing a more liberal form of 'open government' – in contrast to the conservative, paternalistic days of Darlington.¹⁶⁹ Other notable appointments around this time included Foster, in 1974 – remembered by Floud as a 'kindred spirit';¹⁷⁰ and 'also on the left'.¹⁷¹ Broadly, while Classics at Birkbeck remained a small, relatively conservative unit, History approached the turbulent 1980s with a more left-leaning political composition.

HCA and Birkbeck subsequently faced acute crises over the next decade, caused by severe government funding cuts across UK higher education.¹⁷² Most notably, the Department of Classics was effectively closed down in the late 1980s through a merger with King's College, London, as part of a nationwide UGC 'rationalisation' scheme.¹⁷³ Consequently, the political identity of HCA at Birkbeck essentially became that of the larger, surviving Department of History. Significantly, a further change in the political profile of the History faculty also started at this time, with the appointment of Evans, from the University of East Anglia, in 1989.¹⁷⁴ Evans, distinguished historian of modern Germany, was himself moderately left-wing.¹⁷⁵ As Head of History from the early 1990s, he helped to rapidly expand the department's academic staff, in response to a resurgence in government support

¹⁶⁷ Hobsbawm's role in the selection of Dakin's successor is discussed further in Chapter 5, *Diversification*.

¹⁶⁸ This rotational arrangement is also discussed further in Chapter 5, *Diversification*.

¹⁶⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 115. In May 1980, Mason wrote to Birkbeck's Master, W. G. Overend, in support of Floud continuing as Head of Department, citing his style of leadership. Mason's full name is Edith Emma Mason; she was professionally known at Birkbeck by her middle name.

¹⁷⁰ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:04:11.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 00:12:30.

¹⁷² These critical events during the 1980s are examined in depth in Chapter 2, *The Battle for Birkbeck*.

¹⁷³ This episode is explored fully in Chapter 3, *Classics*.

¹⁷⁴ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1989-90* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1989), p. 23.

¹⁷⁵ Richard J. Evans, email to the author, 'Re: Birkbeck Fact Checks', 2nd May 2023.

for university growth.¹⁷⁶ Critically, many of those recruited came from a new generation of historians, including more women, whose progressive research reflected left-wing sympathies. Over the decade, the department nearly doubled in staff size, from eleven to nineteen full-time academics.¹⁷⁷ This wave of female recruitment included three appointments in 1991-92: the socialist-feminist Joanna Bourke,¹⁷⁸ the postcolonial scholar Hilary J. Sapire,¹⁷⁹ and the expert on ethnicity in antiquity, Emma Dench.¹⁸⁰ David Feldman, a specialist on the history of antisemitism, who joined History at Birkbeck from the University of Bristol in 1994-95, recalled that, ‘through the nineties there were a number of us in the department who were all part of the History Workshop collective’ – a left-wing organisation.¹⁸¹ Feldman added that the unprecedented recruitment wave in History during the 1990s had created a ‘path dependency’ in terms of HCA’s intellectual – and political – identity.¹⁸²

The development of a predominant, broad-left political identity in HCA also reflected wider events. At Birkbeck, Baroness Tessa Blackstone had replaced W. G. Overend as Master in 1987-88.¹⁸³ Overend was remembered by Foster as a ‘dozy chemist’, who lived in ‘an Anglican otherworld’;¹⁸⁴ he was not notably political.¹⁸⁵ By contrast, Blackstone, an LSE-trained educational sociologist, arrived at Birkbeck having served as a cabinet advisor to Jim

¹⁷⁶ This development of HCA in the 1990s is examined fully in Chapter 4, *Expansion*.

¹⁷⁷ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1989-90*, p. 23; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1999-00*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁸ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1991-92* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1991), p. 22.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Professor Emma Dench, interviewed by the author on 13th January 2020, 00:02:14.

¹⁸¹ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1994-95* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1994), p. 22; Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:33:56.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1986-87* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1986), p. 2; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1987-88* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1987), p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:03:56; 00:32:55.

¹⁸⁵ After his death in 2012, Overend was not remembered for any particular political affiliation. He had however, held positions on government advisory committees, including the Home Office Poisons Board. ‘Professor George Overend 1921-2012: Tribute to a Former Master of Birkbeck from 1979-1987’, Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/professor-george-overend-1921-2013-2012> [accessed on 21st February 2023]

Callaghan's Labour government in the late 1970s.¹⁸⁶ Immediately prior to joining the college, Blackstone had helped to moderate union negotiations at the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA).¹⁸⁷ In the year of her appointment as Master, Blackstone was awarded a life peerage by the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock – with whom she later shared a 50th birthday party.¹⁸⁸ In short, Birkbeck's new Master, who remained in post for a decade, was a prominent centre-left figure. Notably, Blackstone's effective deputy for much of this period, college Secretary Christine Mabey, was also a staunch Labour Party supporter.¹⁸⁹ Others in Birkbeck's administration shared similar politics. Marie-Louise 'Mary-Lou' Legg (née Jennings), a former HCA student under Foster, and then part-time lecturer in the Department of History, served as the college's Alumni Governor from 1998-2002.¹⁹⁰ In her first career, Legg had worked as a secretary for a number of Labour MPs, including Kinnock and Tony Benn;¹⁹¹ in the early 1970s she successfully stood for election as a Labour councillor in London.¹⁹² Both Mabey and Legg had also worked at the ILEA.¹⁹³

Furthermore, also in the 1990s, Hobsbawm found new political status at Birkbeck, and beyond. Significantly, the end of the 1980s saw the collapse of the Soviet Union, with

¹⁸⁶ Donald MacLeod, 'Tessa Blackstone: Naval Gazing', *The Guardian* website, 12th July 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2005/jul/12/academicexperts.highereducationprofile> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁸⁷ Colin Hughes, 'Flying High with the Red Baroness', *The Guardian* website, 20th March 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/mar/20/books.guardianreview8> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:45:56. According to Evans, Mabey was a 'big Labour Party figure' in her local constituency; at her funeral, in 2019, the Labour anthem, *The Red Flag*, sung by the Party's choir, was played on record.

¹⁹⁰ 'Lady Marie-Louise Legg', Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/fellows/downloads/mary-louise-legge.doc> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁹¹ [Author unknown], 'Editor of Eighteenth-Century Texts and Historian of the Provincial Press: Marie-Louise Jennings: September 3rd, 1993 - August 3rd, 2015', *The Irish Times* website, 5th September 2015, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/editor-of-18th-century-texts-and-historian-of-the-provincial-press-1.2340791> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁹² 'Lady Marie-Louise Legg', Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/fellows/downloads/mary-louise-legge.doc> [accessed on 9th February 2023] Legg's father was Humphrey Jennings, the filmmaker and co-founder of the Mass Observation movement.

¹⁹³ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:46:38; 'Lady Marie-Louise Legg', Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/fellows/downloads/mary-louise-legge.doc> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

major implications for CPGB members in the UK, culminating in the Party's dissolution in 1991.¹⁹⁴ As Feldman observed, 'by the nineties, the Communist Party was supporting Neil Kinnock; that was *Marxism Today's* posture – Eric was part of that. Communism wasn't what it used to be.'¹⁹⁵ Meanwhile, the political distance travelled by Hobsbawm at Birkbeck, from Cold War obstruction to institutional icon, was marked in 2002, with election to the honorary position of college President.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, since the late 1970s, Hobsbawm's writings had become a source of inspiration for the future leaders of New Labour.¹⁹⁷ In particular, Hobsbawm had warned of the necessity for the Labour Party to form broader coalitions.¹⁹⁸ New Labour's subsequent landslide election victory in 1997 resulted in an Honour for the eminent historian, in 1998.¹⁹⁹ As Evans notes, Tony Blair 'clearly felt he owed a debt to Eric for the role he had played in laying the intellectual foundations for New Labour'.²⁰⁰ The shift in government also prompted Blackstone's departure from Birkbeck, to serve as a Minister of Education for the new Labour administration.²⁰¹ As such, by the end of the research period, there was perhaps some sense of alignment between HCA, the college and centre-left politics more widely.

How then, did a predominant, broad-left political identity within HCA relate to Birkbeck's institutional tradition of university provision for part-time and mature students? Significantly, while a broad-left profile, at least in the Department of History, further emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, academics present at the time suggest that, in terms of

¹⁹⁴ Evans, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012', p. 226.

¹⁹⁵ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:35:52.

¹⁹⁶ 'Eric Hobsbawm 1917-2012: Magnificent Historian and Colleague', Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/obituaries/eric-hobsbawm-magnificent-historian-and-colleague> [accessed on 9th February 2023].

¹⁹⁷ A prime example was Hobsbawm's essay 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?', published in *Marxism Today*, in 1978. Evans, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest, 1917-2012', p. 248.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 560. Hobsbawm was awarded the Companion of Honour; a Knighthood was judged potentially too difficult for him to accept.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ 'Tessa Blackstone', University of London website, <https://www.london.ac.uk/tessa-blackstone> [accessed on 9th February 2023].

HCA's identity, personal politics were always secondary to institutional tradition. Floud, who left Birkbeck in 1988, reflected that, 'The majority of the other staff members, but not probably all of them, were left, Labour supporters – but there really was no overt political tone to the department at all.'²⁰² He continued

People's devotion to Birkbeck – the radical and social purposes of Birkbeck – was in a sense rather kept separate from any political allegiances on a kind of national or international scale. The individual politics of individual members of staff [...] were really rather irrelevant.²⁰³

Similarly, Harding, while confirming that 'Scruton was an outlier', and that 'the general thrust of the department, the college [...] was to a more left-wing perspective', also stated that

I was very well aware of [Birkbeck] having a mission to teach students who didn't otherwise have an opportunity for university education. So, that was, in a sense, what one felt Birkbeck was about – and that the left-wing orientation was not a necessary concomitant of that, though it happened to be there.²⁰⁴

Furthermore, Feldman suggests that any broad-left politics within HCA during the late 1970s and 1980s likely reflected views held in similar departments in universities across the UK, observing that, 'humanities higher education was a "pinko" place [...] feeling out of sorts, in opposition to the Conservative Government.'²⁰⁵

²⁰² Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:12:51.

²⁰³ Ibid., 00:14:54; 00:16:16.

²⁰⁴ Harding, 14th January 2021, 00:14:54.

²⁰⁵ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:32:45.

While HCA perhaps had no ‘overt political tone’ during the 1970s and 1980s, something different might be said of the 1990s and early 2000s. For Evans, one measure of political identity within university departments is change to curriculums.²⁰⁶ Arguably, from the early 1990s, broad-left politics were reflected in new courses offered by the Department of History, including options on gender, sexuality and post-colonialism.²⁰⁷ Moreover, such was the prevalence of broad-left perspectives among HCA staff by the end of the research period, a link between this type of personal politics and institutional tradition cannot be easily discounted. Indeed, while a ‘left-wing orientation’ might not have been a ‘necessary concomitant’ of teaching part-time and mature students, for many in HCA, such politics did align closely with Birkbeck’s institutional purpose. This situation is perhaps best illustrated through Coward, a Professor in History by 2003-04. While certainly not overtly political in his academic work, Coward, a stalwart member of HCA’s faculty, particularly well-respected for his teaching, was likely motivated during a long career at Birkbeck – spanning almost the whole period – by his own traditional Labour values.²⁰⁸ As Swann observed, after Coward’s death, in 2011, ‘the college’s mission to bring university education to all fitted perfectly with his own philosophy.’²⁰⁹ Harding described Coward as ‘an absolutely central figure in the department’ who ‘bridged the Darlington-Hobsbawm years right into the twenty-first century’.²¹⁰ Significantly, she added that as a moderate left-winger, devoted to Birkbeck’s part-time and mature provision, he was ‘more characteristic of how the department worked, than either somebody at one end [communist] or at the other [conservative].’²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:14:20.

²⁰⁷ This idea is explored further in Chapter 5, *Diversification*.

²⁰⁸ Julian Swann, ‘Barry Coward Obituary’, *The Guardian* website, 11th April 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/11/barry-coward-obituary> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ Harding, 14th January 2021, 00:19:12.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Analyses of tradition and political identity within universities can help us to understand how such institutions developed – and, in particular, how they received major shifts to UK higher education from the 1960s. Välimaa suggests that tradition in higher education can be understood in terms of ‘historical layers’ of development. These are formed through ‘negotiation processes’, involving both internal, institutional dynamics and external social, economic and political forces. Critically, for Välimaa, these ‘processes’ also include ‘everyday’ practices at departmental level. Birkbeck’s institutional tradition, of part-time university provision for workers, was a product of political struggles by social progressives in the industrial era of the early nineteenth century. As with higher education more widely, however, the four decades from the early 1960s were a most acute period of ‘negotiation’ for the college, and HCA. It was during this period that Birkbeck and HCA underwent an unprecedented expansion. And, relatedly, it was over this same time that both experienced increasing conflict with the state, over new forms of government scrutiny and funding. Notably, at least until the late 1970s, there is a lack of explicit reference to Birkbeck’s mission for part-time and mature learners in departmental correspondence. Actions by HCA’s staff in support of working students during this sub-period, however, point to the continuation of a ‘Birkbeckian’ tradition – not as an abstract, institutional identity, but as a practical, ‘everyday’ process. Moreover, a sense of Birkbeck’s exceptionality at departmental level was heightened during existential crises in the 1980s, as evidenced in spirited defences of the college by HCA academics.

This link between Birkbeck’s institutional tradition and wider politics raises the question of HCA’s own political identity. Such is Hobsbawm’s public reputation as a

Marxist historian, and a communist, there is an association between his long-term workplace and far-left politics. Hobsbawm was not a lone traveller in HCA: Browning was also a committed communist. Both scholars were members of the CPGB, and the CPHG; and both were placed under surveillance by MI5 while at Birkbeck. In particular, allegations that Browning tried to recruit Department of Classics staff and students to the Party must be taken seriously. The existence of a communist identity within HCA during the period should not be overstated, however. That Hobsbawm and Browning were monitored by MI5 might be considered more a reflection of Cold War climate than individual threat. And while both remained in the CPGB even after 1956, neither were extreme or dogmatic in their political beliefs. In many ways, there was a ‘disjuncture’ between Hobsbawm and Browning’s communism and their departmental lives. Certainly, there is little evidence that the two had any political influence on teaching and research in HCA. Birkbeck was able to accommodate Hobsbawm and Browning during the Cold War because its tradition of university provision for workers had always set it apart, and to the left. Significantly, that both figures enjoyed long careers at the college points to some personal-political alignment with this institutional mission. In this sense, as Foster suggests, Hobsbawm and Browning perhaps ‘found Birkbeck’ as much as it found them.

In reality, HCA’s political identity was heterogenous. This broader spectrum of politics included right-wing, conservative elements. Notably, Darlington was a pillar of conservatism – and Head of Department – in History, until the late 1960s. Elsewhere at Birkbeck, too, senior academic posts were occupied by right-wing figures. Ostensibly, such values did not preclude personal-professional alignment with the college’s tradition. Indeed, during the severe crises of the 1980s, some defences of Birkbeck were mounted on Thatcherite principles. Such moves were perhaps pragmatic, but they also point to part-time and mature university provision as having ‘transpolitical’ significance.

Meanwhile, the predominant political identity of HCA over the period was that of a 'broad left church'. This emerged from the 1960s and 1970s, with key appointments including Coward, Floud and Foster. It was subsequently consolidated in the 1990s, largely through an unprecedented wave of recruitment under Evans, involving a new generation of historians. A broad-left identity was also reflected beyond HCA, by the Master and others in Birkbeck's administration – and, moreover, in the Hobsbawm-inspired triumph of New Labour. Significantly, Floud and Harding suggest that personal politics were kept separate from the 'radical and social purposes of Birkbeck'; and that HCA had 'no overt political tone'. This was perhaps truer of the first half of the period, however. Arguably, in the 1990s, left-wing politics did influence HCA's curriculum. Furthermore, the sheer prevalence of broad-left politics within HCA by the end of the period points to a compatibility with Birkbeck's institutional mission. Ultimately, HCA's tradition and political identity is perhaps most accurately illustrated by Coward, who combined 'Birkbeckian' purpose and 'Labour' values in a decades-long commitment to everyday, departmental practices.

The Battle for Birkbeck

‘The UGC and the government and so on were almost exclusively concerned with full-time higher education, didn't realize the significance of the funding proposals that they were making for part-time higher education and then found it extremely difficult to wriggle themselves out of it – you know, to admit that they'd made a mistake.’¹

Professor Roderick Floud, faculty member, HCA, Birkbeck (1975-1988)

‘Obviously, our jobs were threatened and that's never nice – but I think also we felt an issue of great importance: the teaching of part-time students.’²

Professor Roy Foster, faculty member, HCA, Birkbeck (1974-1997)

Introduction

The exceptional mission of part-time university education for working students at Birkbeck and HCA came under increasing strain from repeated financial cuts in the 1980s. But at no point was economic threat to the college and HCA more acute than in 1986, when a massive funding miscalculation by the University Grants Committee (UGC) pitched Birkbeck into existential crisis. From the early 1980s, radical shifts in government university policy, reflecting significant setbacks in the economy, led to severe reductions in higher education funding. At Birkbeck, and inside HCA, this national policy change forced ‘drastic measures’

¹ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:22:34.

² Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:30:00.

in 1981-82, including freezes on staff recruitment;³ by the mid-1980s, the financial outlook for the college, and the departments of History and Classics, was ‘extremely depressing’.⁴ It was at this significantly low point in the period 1963 to 2003 that Birkbeck and HCA received catastrophic news: in late May 1986, the UGC announced plans to drastically slash its funding for part-time UK students.⁵ Critically for Birkbeck and HCA, with their fundamental focus on evening tuition for students with day-time jobs, the shock shift meant a potential £2 million cut, putting institutional and departmental futures in peril.⁶ The major incident threw the state of government university policy, and the apparent priorities of the UGC, into sharp relief. And it left individual academics in Birkbeck and HCA with no choice but to mount a public fight – in the press, and all the way to Parliament – for the unique provision of part-time higher education to which they were passionately committed.

This episode of acute crisis, commonly referred to within the college as ‘the Battle for Birkbeck’, was highly significant at institutional, and departmental, levels. For HCA, the 1986 emergency – together with the closure of Classics at Birkbeck soon after – broadly marked a watershed between a frustrating and restrictive 1980s, and a more optimistic and expansive 1990s.⁷ Something similar can be said of universities nationally, which entered the 1980s as a prime target for public spending cuts under an ascendent Thatcher administration, and left the decade buoyed by promise of funding increases under John Major’s Conservative government.⁸ Important developments in higher education are also reflected at this key

³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 002, p. 1.

⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 013, p. 1.

⁵ Lucy Hodges, ‘College in Peril from Cash Curbs’, *The Times*, 6th June 1986, p. 2. The UGC announced that it was set to recalculate part-time students at half the rate of those studying full-time; previously, Birkbeck had received funding at a level equivalent to four-fifths the full-time rate.

⁶ Lucy Hodges, ‘College in Peril from Cash Curbs’, *The Times*, 6th June 1986, p. 2. Birkbeck faced a drop in annual funding from £7.5 million to £5.5 million under the UGC’s new funding plans for part-time higher education.

⁷ The Department of Classics at Birkbeck was effectively closed down in 1989-90 through a forced merger with King’s College, London, following a national review of classics by the UGC in 1985-86. A full assessment of the circumstances and consequences of this separate UGC action is provided in Chapter 3, *Classics*.

⁸ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 130. This shift in government higher education policy and funding during the 1980s is explored further in Chapter 4, *Expansion*.

juncture through the story of the UGC – chief protagonist in both the 1986 crisis, and the closure of Classics – which was itself dissolved in 1989 after 70 years as a ‘buffer’ between the state and universities.⁹ These major, national-level transitions for universities in the 1980s have been analysed as part of the considerable critical and historical literature on post-war changes to UK higher education. Notably, Peter Scott examines the decline and fall of the UGC system, and deeper shifts to state-university relations in the 1980s;¹⁰ Michael Shattock and Aniko Horvath explore the ‘interface between governments and institutional governance’, also including the UGC.¹¹ Recently, however, Peter Mandler has suggested that much existing work on higher education in the 1980s, and the post-war period more widely, suffers from two consistent flaws: a tendency to mistake the history of university policy for the history of *universities*, and, relatedly, a pre-occupation with party-political and ideological factors (and this, according to Mandler, often with a left-wing bias).¹²

This chapter is a fresh investigation of the 1980s as a pivotal decade for UK universities, including Birkbeck and HCA. It aims to add to the research of Scott and others, and to respond to Mandler’s concerns, by taking a different, *microhistorical* approach. Scale is radically reduced: massive shifts in higher education during the decade are scrutinised at institutional and departmental levels; in particular, through the impact of one moment of crisis, ‘the Battle for Birkbeck’, in 1986, for the college and HCA. Crucially, the chapter also focuses on individual academics – the human aspect of institutional and departmental reactions to extensive changes for universities on a national level. Such an approach seeks to provide novel perspectives on a much-analysed period of higher education history – in part, by thinking again about party-political and ideological factors. By switching between zoom

⁹ The UGC, a committee of senior academics, which acted as an intermediary between the demands of government and universities, came under increasing pressure in the 1980s as a result of higher education funding cuts. Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, pp. 17-20.

¹⁰ Scott, ‘The “Nationalisation” of UK Universities 1963-2007’; Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*.

¹¹ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 11.

¹² Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*.

lenses and wider pictures of universities in the 1980s – the *micro* and *macro* – this chapter asks several significant questions: How did nationwide cuts in the early 1980s affect part-time higher education within Birkbeck and HCA – and how did this experience relate to the 1986 crisis? What caused the 1986 crisis – and to what extent were its causes considered by Birkbeck and HCA academics as party-political or ideological? What can the impacts of major changes to UK universities in the 1980s for Birkbeck and HCA tell us about government higher education policy, and the UGC? And what do responses at different levels – individual, departmental, institutional, national – during Birkbeck’s ‘Battle’ tell us about how *part-time* higher education was valued by academics, government and the public?

The research questions raised in this chapter are answered in three sections. Section one, ‘*Drastic Measures*’, analyses the impacts of UK university funding cuts in the early 1980s on Birkbeck and HCA, and considers to what extent negative experiences at this stage influenced institutional and departmental responses to the crisis of 1986. This section also briefly sketches the state of government-university relations in the early 1980s, and, in particular, the priorities of the UGC – with a focus on part-time and mature study. Section two, *Crisis, 1986*, examines in depth the UGC’s decision to severely reduce funding for part-time higher education; it considers both wider higher educational context and particular Birkbeck and HCA experiences to explore the UGC’s motives. Section three, ‘*The Battle for Birkbeck*’, closely considers three different forms of response to the 1986 crisis at Birkbeck, and within HCA: Professor Roderick Floud, Head of the Department of History, as an individual campaigner; the ‘Zoo Group’, as a campaign body formed by Floud and fellow Birkbeck academics at inter-departmental level; and, the wider public campaign projected outside the college by Floud, other HCA scholars and the Zoo Group – via the press and Parliament.

‘Drastic Measures’

The early 1980s were an inauspicious time for UK higher education, including Birkbeck and HCA. Prior to the start of the decade, in the 1970s, demand for university places had slumped, interrupting the post-war student boom predicted by the 1963 Robbins Report.¹³ This stalling of applications had multiple causes, including shifts in the labour market, social attitudes, and class structures and identities.¹⁴ It was worsened by protracted economic decline: by 1980-83, the UK was deep into a ‘deindustrializing depression’.¹⁵ These combined circumstances encouraged government to restrict the growth – or ‘suppress the supply’ – of higher education, in order to limit the financial strain it created.¹⁶ Moreover, Margaret Thatcher’s Tory administration, elected in 1979, had a mandate – and, arguably, an ideological imperative – to slash state expenditure, including public funding for universities.¹⁷ As Mandler suggests, historical accounts of post-war UK higher education, particularly the 1980s, have tended to focus on *supply* at government level – including policy, party-political and ideological factors. As a result, demographic and economic trends, which affected *demand* for higher education from below, have been neglected.¹⁸ Interestingly, these deeper trends were not wholly detrimental to demand for part-time and mature university courses specifically: higher education offered limited sanctuary from a desperate job market in the early 1980s.¹⁹ Indeed, this alternative source of students drew attention from government policy makers keen to compensate for the general drop in university demand.²⁰ Yet what counted ultimately in the first years of the 1980s, at Birkbeck and beyond, was

¹³ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁷ Scott, ‘The “Nationalisation” of UK Universities 1963-2007’, p. 61.

¹⁸ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

government cuts to higher education – the severity of these slashes, and the failure to spare even part-time and mature provision.

These severe government reductions in funding for UK higher education were administered via the UGC. By the early 1980s, this semi-autonomous body, first established in 1919, had acted as a ‘buffer’ between the state and universities for over six decades.²¹ It was far from a static or stable entity, however: the UGC underwent several significant shifts during this long period, and indeed, was abolished altogether in 1989.²² The relationship between the state and universities had been transformed between the ends of the First and Second World Wars: by 1946, two thirds of higher education funding came from the Treasury – effectively making universities public, and national, institutions.²³ Due to the UGC’s intermediary role, however, state intrusion into academic affairs was largely limited. As Scott observes, ‘The UGC itself was seen as an ingenious institution which, uniquely, allowed British universities to be both publicly funded and insulated from political pressure.’²⁴ In the immediate post-war period, then, and roughly up until the 1963 Robbins Report, the UGC oversaw a ‘golden age’ for UK university governance.²⁵ During this time, the universities’ ‘donnish dominion’ – in A. H. Halsey’s phrase – was protected – including sections, such as Birkbeck and HCA, devoted to part-time higher education.²⁶

The equilibrium was broken post-Robbins by a national transition towards mass higher education – driven by demand – and the inevitable strain this put on the UGC’s remit. The UGC successfully, and semi-independently, developed UK higher education between

²¹ The semi-autonomous body was born out of an ad-hoc *University Colleges Committee*, established by R. B. Haldane (later a President of Birkbeck) in 1906 – a first attempt to formalise administrative links between universities and government. Until even the late nineteenth century, the state’s involvement in developing higher education had been extremely limited; many UK universities – and mechanics’ institutes – had been run as private institutions on a voluntarist basis. Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 14.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁶ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*.

1946 and 1963.²⁷ An unforeseen consequence of this administrative achievement, however, was to promote within government the idea of a new national university system – rather than ‘an assembly of autonomous institutions’.²⁸ The Robbins Report was itself highly significant in this way, as it involved government bypassing the UGC to plan the future of UK universities.²⁹ The Report’s vision was one of major expansion – something that could only be funded by the state, thereby putting the UGC’s semi-autonomy at further risk.³⁰ Also, the government’s creation of a new Department of Education and Science (DES), to which the UGC was made newly accountable, ended the body’s ‘privileged access’ to the Treasury – and the structural separation of universities from the rest of the national education system.³¹ University accounts were for the first time opened to parliamentary scrutiny, although the practical effects of this shift were limited.³² More significantly, the government’s introduction of a Public Expenditure Survey (PES) system, together with the rapidly increasing costs of higher education funding, inevitably ended the ‘old arms-length relationship’ between the government and the UGC – and the universities it represented.³³ Seen in this longer context, the 1981 cuts to higher education were, as Scott suggests, a ‘pyrrhic victory’ for the UGC: the committee was given exclusive responsibility by government for administering the reductions – a reprieve in its declining control; but the cost was a permanent, detrimental alteration in its relationship with the institutions it claimed to

²⁷ This included plans for the seven new ‘plate-glass’ universities – Sussex, East Anglia, York, Lancaster, Essex, Kent and Warwick – opened between 1961 and 1965. Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 79.

²⁸ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 16.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 17. The DES was formed in 1964 following recommendations in the 1963 Robbins Report, which led to the merging of the Ministry of Education and the office of the Minister of Science. The DES was later renamed the Department for Education in 1992, following the transfer of science responsibilities to the Office of Science and Technology. ‘Records created or inherited by the Department of Education and Science, and of related bodies’, The National Archives website, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C101> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

³² Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 17.

³³ Ibid.

represent.³⁴ As Scott writes, the UGC's 'waning influence as an advocate for the universities was cruelly exposed by severity of the cuts'.³⁵

For Birkbeck and HCA, the severe government cuts to UK higher education in the early 1980s forced 'drastic measures'.³⁶ This urgent action, including a recruitment freeze, echoed steps taken by the college during tight times in the 1970s. New academic appointments had been blocked in 1972-73, including plans for a lectureship in Classics;³⁷ the Department of History narrowly escaped a similar staffing stop in 1975-76, albeit with compromised terms;³⁸ and in 1977-78 Professor Roderick Floud, as Head of History, was told by the Master, Tony J. Chandler, that a new departmental secretary could not be afforded because Birkbeck was 'presently living beyond its means'.³⁹ Such was the harshness of government cuts at the start of the new decade, however, that there was a greater sense of institutional emergency. Indeed, in 1980-81, the college set up an Emergency Planning Committee (EPC) to oversee cost-saving.⁴⁰ In October 1981, the EPC approved a series of 'non-pay economies' aimed at saving up to £376,000.⁴¹ This included significant reductions in departmental maintenance budgets – hitting HCA.⁴² On 17th November, Birkbeck's Secretary, R. E. Swainson, told Professor Michael Wilks, then Head of the Department of History, that the EPC 'accepted the immediate need for drastic measures'.⁴³ Swainson

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 002, p. 1.

³⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 27; File 9-D/2 041. On 19th July 1972, Birkbeck's Master, R. C. Tress, wrote to the Principal of King's College, London, Sir John Hackett, copying in the Head of Birkbeck's Department of Classics, Robert Browning, to report that plans for a joint lectureship in Byzantine and Modern Greek (also to involve the University of London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies) could not go ahead in 1972-73, due to 'financial circumstances'.

³⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 055. On 13th January 1976, Birkbeck's Master, Tress, wrote to the Head of History, Michael Wilks, to confirm approval of a replacement for Reader Alwyn Ruddock – set to retire on 30th September that year – but only at the lower grade of Lecturer.

³⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 070. Birkbeck's then Master, Tony J. Chandler, also more optimistically told Floud that the situation would change 'once we move out of deficit'.

⁴⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 130.

⁴¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 002, p. 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

informed Wilks that the maintenance budget for History in 1981-82 would be £750, adding: 'I do not need to stress the gravity of the College's financial situation and I know that your co-operation in ensuring that budgets are not exceeded will be given readily.'⁴⁴

By 1982, emergency cost-cutting at Birkbeck, administered via the EPC, had extended to salaries and appointments. In March 1982, Wilks appealed directly to the Master to fill a secretarial post in History, left vacant by recent departee Seana Cahill.⁴⁵ Wilks claimed that his department 'simply [couldn't] cope' with just one remaining permanent secretary, Ann Myles, insisting, 'It is quite wrong that she should be placed under this continuous and overwhelming strain.'⁴⁶ Wilks claimed that History had more students than any other department in the college, and that 'every student creates some administrative work'.⁴⁷ Despite the strength of his plea, Wilks was told by Heather Harris, Birkbeck's Assistant Secretary for Personnel, that the Master and Vice-Master had decided that a permanent secretary in History was too costly, 'in view of the continuing uncertainty of the College's financial position.'⁴⁸ Instead, part-time staff would be recruited on a temporary basis.⁴⁹ A similar level of financial struggle continued for HCA over the next few years, with institutional funding reductions proposed by the EPC mitigated where possible through negotiation. The departmental maintenance grant budget for 1984-85 was cut by a further 10 per cent, with the knock-on effect of significant reductions in research trip, or 'field course', funding for HCA.⁵⁰ Appeals were raised by the Department of History, which partly depended on its field course budget for an annual off-campus symposium: in November 1984, Floud, as Head of History, contacted Swainson seeking additional funds to off-set

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2. The Department of History's equivalent budget for 1980-81 had been £1,000. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 001, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 134, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 135.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 007, pp. 1-2.

student costs for the ‘Rogate House’ research event.⁵¹ By the mid-1980s, then, HCA academics were both hardened to the realities of institutional funding freezes – resulting from national government and UGC actions – and alert to the possibilities of putting up a fight.

Crisis, 1986

Acute crisis in 1986 for Birkbeck and HCA did not come out of the blue. Universities across the UK had a turbulent time in the early 1980s, as severe government cuts began to bite. By the mid-decade, higher education as a whole was still subject to significant instability. The nation was not yet free of its ‘deindustrializing depression’;⁵² and a long-term trend of increasing demand for university places – disrupted in the 1970s – was expected to kick back in.⁵³ These two critical factors of continuing economic depression and an anticipated resurgence in demand for higher education contributed to a third: increased government scrutiny of universities. This new focus of political attention, caused by the anticipated increase in demand for higher education – and its predictable strain on public expenditure – manifested partly in the introduction of the first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) audit in 1985-86.⁵⁴ The RAE was administered by the UGC, under the chairmanship of Peter Swinnerton-Dyer.⁵⁵ Its ostensible purpose was to ensure transparency, as reduced government funds were shared out to universities.⁵⁶ Swinnerton-Dyer was convinced that institutions needed to be reassured that diminished higher education funding was being

⁵¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 011. These annual ‘Rogate House’ events are discussed further in Chapter 7, *Students*.

⁵² Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 125.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ The RAE was initially called the ‘Research Selectivity Exercise’. Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Paul Jump, ‘Evolution of Evaluation’, *Times Higher Education*, 2123 (2013), pp. 34-39 (p. 34).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

distributed fairly.⁵⁷ The UGC's solution was a 'research selectivity exercise', under which all universities could submit comparable evidence of research 'output'.⁵⁸ As such, at a national, governmental level, the period immediately preceding the 1986 crisis for Birkbeck and HCA presents important context: a predicted resurgence in demand for UK higher education, posing public financial strain; the resulting politicisation of the university system, with further government scrutiny; and the predicament of the UGC, as a semi-autonomous body caught between government and universities during these significant shifts.

At an institutional and departmental level, the 1986 crisis came as Birkbeck and HCA were continuing to struggle with government funding restrictions. The college's Secretary, Swainson, had told the departments of History and Classics that the financial forecast for the academic year 1985-86 was 'extremely depressing'.⁵⁹ More specifically, Michael Wilks, outgoing Head of History, had been arguing with senior Birkbeck figures over fair pay arrangements for his part-time teaching staff.⁶⁰ News of the UGC's shock proposal to slash funding for all part-time higher education was, therefore, a particularly painful blow. Scott, in his analyses of post-war shifts to UK higher education, suggests that the severity of government funding reductions in the early 1980s turned popular opinion within universities against the UGC: for its part in the cuts, the authority was no longer considered a reliable defender of academic interests – instead, it was seen as an 'enemy within'.⁶¹ Strikingly, however, beyond any shock over the UGC's 1986 decision, perceptions of the committee's motives among Birkbeck and HCA academics remained relatively optimistic. According to

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid. For the first RAE, in 1985-86, university departments were invited to submit just five 'outputs' (books, papers or patents) from the previous five years. By 2014, the quota had increased to four such submissions *per academic*. The introduction of the RAE is also discussed further in Chapter 4, *Expansion*.

⁵⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 013, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 192. Wilks wrote to Birkbeck's Assistant Secretary (Resources), Helen Mortimer, on 7th October 1986, to argue that the History department's part-time research assistants should be paid for teaching (a Birkbeck Working Party had ruled in the mid-1980s that research staff should expect to do some teaching as part of their jobs).

⁶¹ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 18.

Floud, then Head of the Department of History, the drastic cut to funding for part-time students was always considered a miscalculation – rather than an intentional, political move. As Floud still insists, ‘I’m sure it wasn’t deliberate.’⁶²

Within Birkbeck and HCA, a clear sense of collective purpose based on the provision of university tuition for part-time and mature students ran deep, down to individual departments and academics.⁶³ Externally, Birkbeck and HCA were also recognised as important parts of a larger University of London system. In 1986, the college’s Department of History was invited by the University’s Institute of Historical Research (IHR) to collaborate on a new joint Centre for Metropolitan History.⁶⁴ Similar institutional recognition had been demonstrated four years previously, in 1982, when the University’s Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS) formally acknowledged the particular value of Birkbeck and HCA for working students. Professor W. H. Morris-Jones, Director of the ICS, told Birkbeck’s Master, W. G. Overend, on 20th October that HCA was, ‘the place where Imperial and Commonwealth History (ICH) has been nourished with care, skill and continuity for a long time.’⁶⁵ The Director, who was writing to voice concerns over possible plans to cut ICH courses at Birkbeck, added, ‘by its specialisation on the teaching of part-time students it is central to a growing point in terms of student demand.’⁶⁶ Such recognition was not always shown by the University of London as a whole, however. In the year of the UGC crisis, a review of Arts teaching and research by the University was heavily criticised by Birkbeck

⁶² Floud, 2018-19.

⁶³ Attitudes towards part-time and mature higher education within HCA and Birkbeck are explored fully in Chapter 1, *Tradition and Political Identity*.

⁶⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/24 000. The invitation was sent to Birkbeck’s Master, W. G. Overend, by the Director of the IHR, Professor F. M. L. (Michael) Thompson on 23rd October 1986; Overend told Thompson that staff in History were supportive of the venture.

⁶⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 145.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

academics for its failure to acknowledge the college's unique part-time provision.⁶⁷ Similarly, wider recognition of Birkbeck in national and international academic circles – including selection by the Swedish Academy in 1980 to administer a Nobel Prize in Literature – didn't necessarily require awareness of its institutional mission.⁶⁸

Recognition of Birkbeck and HCA – and their exceptional part-time higher education provision – was also inconsistent at UGC and government levels. Around the time of the 1986 crisis, government actions and reports, administered by the UGC, consistently failed to recognise Birkbeck and HCA as having any unique character or purpose. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the UGC conducted several official visits to Birkbeck and HCA as part of its routine university auditing processes.⁶⁹ It is quite improbable, therefore, that the authority was unaware of a particular institutional and departmental mission for part-time and mature students. From the mid-1980s, however, several major UGC reports – audits backed by, and of significant interest to, government – failed to acknowledge any sense of distinct activity within Birkbeck or HCA. In September 1986, the UGC announced a nationwide review of Classics in universities: its conclusions, including the recommended closure of Birkbeck's Department of Classics and Ancient History, made no mention of tuition for part-time or mature students at the college.⁷⁰ In 1987, a separate UGC review of Economic and Social History across UK higher education again failed to recognise HCA's unique part-time

⁶⁷ According to senior Birkbeck academics, the so-called 'Greenbaum Report', 'show[ed] no sensitivity to the fact that a College concerned with part-time students has special problems and requirements, and indeed a special character.' Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/24 112A, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/24 075, p. 2. The Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Birkbeck, Professor A. I. Watson, was contacted by the Swedish Academy in October 1980 with news that the college had been elected to help administer nominations for the 1981 Nobel Prize in Literature. No mention was made of Birkbeck's particular provision for part-time or mature students.

⁶⁹ The UGC administered reviews and funding on a five-yearly or 'quinquennial' basis until the mid-1970s, when this system collapsed under inflationary pressures and was subsequently replaced with three-yearly, 'triennial' planning. Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 17.

⁷⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 142, p. 9. This controversy is examined in depth in Chapter 3, *Classics*.

provision.⁷¹ Similar omissions were also made in another national UGC review that same year, this time on the History and Philosophy of Science.⁷² In short, circa 1986 it seemed that part-time and mature university education, including Birkbeck and HCA, simply was not of strategic importance for the UGC.

That part-time and mature higher education was not a priority for the UGC in 1986, leading to its critical funding miscalculation, is to some extent unsurprising. The major error came at a time when the UGC was under significant strain. The long-term expansion of UK higher education from the 1960s had, by the mid- to late-1980s, stretched the remit of the UGC far beyond that of its ‘golden age’.⁷³ As briefly outlined above, all universities, and the UGC itself – as a result of resurgent higher education demand, and continued economic depression – came under increasing government scrutiny during the decade. By 1986, the UGC was stuck in a precarious position between these twin pressures – a vastly expanded remit and the deepening ingress of direct political interference. Its response was to significantly shift its approach to university governance. As Scott observes, ‘The UGC took on an increasingly executive role in its dealings with universities – determining (and policing) student number targets, carrying out subject reviews, embarking on research assessment.’⁷⁴ Within all of this, the relatively anomalous area of part-time and mature higher education – as championed at Birkbeck, and within HCA – was not a chief concern for the beleaguered authority. The mounting pressures of expansion and government control,

⁷¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 65; File 3-D/7 030. According to Floud, then a senior academic in Birkbeck’s Department of History, the UGC’s review also covered only undergraduate provision of single-subject degrees in Economic and Social History – thus excluding the college’s teaching and research on these sub-disciplines more broadly, including at MA level. Floud added that, in his opinion, the true purpose of the report was ‘to put pressure on a number of universities to fill chairs in economic history’.

⁷² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/24 108, pp. 1-13.

⁷³ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 16. The growth and development of UK higher education over this period is examined further in Chapter 4, *Expansion*.

⁷⁴ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 19.

themselves driven by demand and economy, pushed the UGC to a point where a severe error on funding for a small sub-sector of its increased remit was quite possible.

Was the UGC's 1986 mistake, and its grave consequences for Birkbeck and HCA, therefore ultimately more a result of higher education demand and underlying economic problems than government policy, party-politics or ideology? While deeper demand and economic factors were highly significant, it is vital to consider three related aspects. Firstly, these forces 'from below' were still met by particular government policies in the 1980s. A key example is the cuts to higher education in the early part of the decade – and in particular, the *severity* of the reductions. These permanently altered the UGC's relationship with universities, and consequently the future path of UK university governance. Secondly, as Scott argues, the UGC's 'claim to stand outside politics' collapsed during the course of the 1980s, and 'university development now had to conform to the strategic direction set by the government'.⁷⁵ In this way, while the underlying context of UK higher education in the mid-to late decade was based on deeper trends, the UGC's responses and decisions within the period were inextricably linked to government – and the party-political system. Thirdly, and most importantly, that part-time and mature higher education was not a priority for the UGC circa 1986 can be considered as more than just a contemporary issue. As Scott observes, longer-term, 'The UGC in its classic form was designed to channel state grants to a limited number of elite, homogenous, self-referential and autonomous institutions.'⁷⁶ As such, the UGC's disregard for part-time and mature higher education at the time of its major funding miscalculation was not just a result of recent university expansion and government interference, driven by deeper trends of demand and economy. It was also the product of a prevailing belief within the UGC, and government, in a fixed concept of conventional,

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

homogenous, *straight-from-school* higher education. What made the 1986 crisis so critical for Birkbeck and HCA was the combination of political pressures, and deeper trends, with this long-held ideology in UK university governance.

‘The Battle for Birkbeck’

The UGC’s drastic 1986 decision seemed to reflect a disregard for part-time and mature higher education at government level. But for individual academics on the ground, in institutions like Birkbeck, providing university tuition for working students was a vital cause. Few at the college, as ‘drastic measures’ hit in the 1980s, embodied this belief better than HCA scholar Professor Roderick Floud. Floud’s own early education had been disrupted by family relocation – although he still excelled at grammar school and university, reading Economic History at Oxford. As noted in Chapter 1, *Tradition and Political Identity*, he was the son of Labour politician Bernard Floud,⁷⁷ and a nephew of Jean Floud – a leading, left-leaning educational sociologist and academic.⁷⁸ Prior to joining HCA, Floud worked at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he had been actively involved in a long, heated debate over the admission of female students (which he supported).⁷⁹ He arrived at Birkbeck in 1974 as someone grounded in left-wing politics and went on to have a good professional relationship with Hobsbawm.⁸⁰ He was not prominently affiliated with any political movement or ideology while at the college, later describing himself as a ‘middle-of-the-road’ Labour Party supporter.⁸¹ But he was highly astute politically, and considered part-time and mature university education to have wider significance. As he later recalled: ‘I think we were

⁷⁷ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 430.

⁷⁸ Robert Skidelsky, ‘Jean Floud Obituary’, *The Guardian* website, 3rd April 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/apr/03/jean-floud> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

⁷⁹ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:07:01.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 00:08:42.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 00:09:09.

all, if we weren't convinced of the good that Birkbeck was doing, if I can put it that way, before we got there, we soon realised what it was.'⁸²

Floud was headhunted by Hobsbawm for the Head of History job at Birkbeck, because of his reputation as a talented academic. This standing was based on two traits – both highly attractive for the college, HCA and Hobsbawm. Firstly, Floud was a rising star in a relatively new sub-field of Economic and Social History: the application of statistical methods, or *econometrics*, using computers.⁸³ Secondly, the then 32-year-old had a growing reputation as a skilled university administrator.⁸⁴ Indeed, Evans, himself a later Head of History at Birkbeck, suggests that Floud's potential to manage institutional politics and processes was particularly appealing for Hobsbawm, who wished to be free of departmental responsibilities so that he could focus on academic work.⁸⁵ Floud, for his part, was drawn to Birkbeck partly because of Hobsbawm's presence in HCA, as a pre-eminent and prolific scholar. Critically, both these aspects of Floud's academic capability, combined with his subsequent commitment to the college's mission, made him a crucial part of its campaign against the UGC's decision. Floud, as a Birkbeck faculty member and Head of the Department of History, could do two things particularly well: he could read the shifting political situations and processes of higher education, both internally and externally; and he could respond to complex institutional and national policy proposals with highly competent data analyses. This made Floud a very effective defender of departmental interests generally for History, as demonstrated several times in direct correspondence with senior Birkbeck

⁸² Ibid., 00:15:19. Floud, who later became President of Universities UK (2001-2003), formerly known as the Committee for Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), described the defence of part-time higher education as 'a constant battle throughout my career'. Ibid., 00:23:38.

⁸³ In 1973 Floud published a pioneering book on statistical and computational methods for historians. Roderick Floud, *An Introduction to Quantitative Methods for Historians* (London: Methuen & Co., 1973).

⁸⁴ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:02:59.

⁸⁵ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, pp. 430-431.

figures.⁸⁶ And this same set of abilities made him a formidable campaigner for the college as it crashed into crisis in 1986.

Academics in HCA and Birkbeck were not despondent in response to the UGC's dramatic 1986 announcement on part-time higher education funding. As Floud maintains, 'I think I've always thought that the decision that the UGC made, which we were protesting against [...] was a mistake.'⁸⁷ What caused the Head of History and his colleagues acute concern, however, was the lack of institutional response to the UGC proposal – both by Birkbeck, and the University of London. For Floud, the problem with the college's response stemmed from the top – the Master, W. G. Overend. When Floud first came to the college the Master had been an economist, Ronald C. Tress, whom he considered 'an effective head'.⁸⁸ According to Floud, 'things began to go wrong' when Tress was succeeded by geography professor Tony Chandler in 1977;⁸⁹ the latter not being 'up to the job, essentially' and retiring prematurely.⁹⁰ Subsequently, Birkbeck appointed Overend – first as Acting Master, then as Master in 1979.⁹¹ Floud claims that Overend, a chemist, was, 'clearly devoted to the college, but really not suited to the job.'⁹² He was 'rather a shy person' and 'wasn't easy to talk to'.⁹³ As Master, he was

⁸⁶ For example, on 6th February 1986, Floud wrote to Birkbeck's Secretary, R. E. Swainson, to say that he was 'very puzzled and distressed' by the level of a proposed cut in the Department of History's maintenance grant; he provided a detailed breakdown, with calculations, to explain his position. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 014.

⁸⁷ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:22:21.

⁸⁸ Floud, 2018-19. Notably, Tress oversaw the launch of a Department of Economics at Birkbeck in 1971-72. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1971-72* (London: [publisher unknown], 1971), p. 20.

⁸⁹ Floud, 2018-19; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1977-78* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1977), p. 2.

⁹⁰ Floud, 2018-19. Chandler resigned from the post of Master at Birkbeck in January 1979, aged 50, on medical grounds. He died in 2008. 'Obituary: Professor Tony Chandler', Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/obituaries/obituary-professor-tony-chandler> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

⁹¹ Floud, 2018-19.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

very unwilling to be a spokesman for the college – very unwilling to do any kind of publicity or PR or anything, and one of these people who likes working behind the scenes, in the corridors of power, without actually putting his head above the parapet.⁹⁴

According to Floud, the lack of a strong figurehead for Birkbeck had already been a problem under Chandler. When crisis hit in 1986, Overend's own failure to actively engage with public life outside the college became critical. As Floud explains, 'He certainly didn't want to make a fuss about it. He was, he alleged [...] working behind the scenes at the University of London.'⁹⁵ For Floud and other Birkbeck academics, however, the University's own response to the UGC's decision was a further source of concern. Floud recalled that, 'we weren't very happy with the attitudes of the University of London at that point. We didn't really think they were supporting us sufficiently – making a sufficient fuss with the [UGC].'⁹⁶

The solution for Floud and fellow Birkbeck scholars, who felt strongly that the college needed to do more in face of major higher education shifts, was to take matters into their own hands. Floud and senior colleagues, including the recent Head of Classics, David Hamlyn, began to meet regularly outside the college, at the main café in London Zoo, to discuss urgent inter-departmental and institutional concerns.⁹⁷ It was this breakout collective, subsequently known as the 'Zoo Group' – also including Richard Portes from Economics, and Ben Pimlott and Bernard Crick from Politics and Sociology – that became the nerve centre of Birkbeck's response to the 1986 UGC crisis.⁹⁸ As Floud explains:

⁹⁴ Ibid. Floud was not alone in his concerns over the Master's suitability for the post. He recalled that, 'some of the other professors got even more angry about it than I did. There's a famous occasion when Bernard Crick [of the Department of Politics and Sociology] stormed out of the Academic Board after saying that he was never going to attend the place anymore while George Overend was Master.' Ibid.

⁹⁵ Floud, 2018-19.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ The location of the London Zoo café was chosen because it was within walking distance of Birkbeck, but far enough from it to provide privacy.

⁹⁸ As Bourke observes, Crick was a particularly strong advocate of part-time and mature higher education. He believed that 'real world' experience was critical to the effective study of politics and sociology at university

The Zoo Group was about what we felt was a general lack of direction in the college at the time. And that really came to a head over the decision by the University Grants Committee to change the funding methodology for students, in a way which would have essentially bankrupted the college.⁹⁹

The Zoo Group decided that, ‘in default of the college leadership [...] taking any proactive action’, it would mount a public campaign in defence of Birkbeck.¹⁰⁰ Floud, already Head of History, became a leading spokesperson of the protesters – seeking, alongside other Zoo Group members, to be a defiant public voice for the college, in lieu of the Master.

The public campaign for Birkbeck mounted by Floud and the Zoo Group was in part dependent on media support for its success. Fortunately, the college was particularly well placed in this regard. Birkbeck academics were, prior to the 1986 crisis, already regular contributors to national press, radio and television. Primarily, this was because HCA and other departments contained many leading experts in different fields – intellectuals who could offer the media highly credible opinions, explanations and reflections on a wide variety of subjects. Also, Birkbeck’s star scholars were more available than other academics: they were based in Bloomsbury, in the centre of the capital – within walking distance of many major media offices and studios; and, as staff committed to evening tuition for part-time students, they were often free during daytime production hours. Moreover, it might be that the experience of leading evening lectures and seminars to tired workers – Hobsbawm’s ‘acid test’ for new research ideas and material – made Birkbeck’s academics more stimulating as

level. Indeed, in 1971 he told *The Times* that, in respect of applications to Birkbeck’s Department of Politics and Sociology, ‘candidates from a first degree into which they came straight from school will not usually be considered.’ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, pp. 388-9.

⁹⁹ Floud, 2018-19.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

media voices.¹⁰¹ Certainly, appearances by the college's staff on major networks, channels and programmes were frequent. As Professor Roy Foster, a dynamic figure in the Department of History, and a regular contributor to the press, recalled:

you'd quite often hear a colleague's voice on [BBC Radio 4] – partly because they were free to run down to Broadcasting House – which is, you know, a walk away – at odd hours of the day, but partly also because the Cricks, the Pimlotts, the [Barbara] Hardies, the Hobsbawms [...] were good pundits.¹⁰²

Foster, a Reader in History by the time of the 1986 crisis, suggests that the high profile of some Birkbeck academics, boosted by media appearances, created a sense of institutional 'glamour'.¹⁰³ Reflecting on his first years at the college, from 1974, Foster recalled that, 'it was a more glamorous place than I expected.'¹⁰⁴ Foster also remembered that some academics outside Birkbeck, in the wider University of London community, viewed participation by the college's leading scholars in press, radio and television as frivolous activity. He said that, 'old-school, London University reactionaries in places like King's and Royal Holloway might be slightly sniffy about it [...] but this never really washed, because there were so many hot-shot people [at Birkbeck].'¹⁰⁵ In this University context, and within higher education more widely, media appearances by Birkbeck academics helped to develop a stronger institutional profile. This in part enabled the college to retain and recruit more

¹⁰¹ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 299. Hobsbawm argued that keeping 'a bunch of people interested in what is being said to them between eight and nine p.m.' was a severe challenge.

¹⁰² Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:06:52.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 00:07:22.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Foster jokingly added: 'Mind you, I'm a provincial Irish boy, so I was easily impressed.'

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Foster claimed that he was also 'galvanised' around the time of 'the Battle for Birkbeck' after comments put to him about the limited future potential of the college by Noel Annan, then Provost of UCL, at a formal dinner. Foster said that he had made his anger at Annan's words clear – to which the Provost had responded, 'Oh, my dear fellow, I'm so sorry – I thought you were at King's!' Ibid., 00:09:06.

leading scholars, contributing to a positive cycle for intellectual and academic standards. And, vitally, it provided Birkbeck with a direct line to influential media contacts when crisis struck in 1986. As Foster explained:

many of us had lots of journalist friends, and when Birkbeck was threatened with closure [...] a friend of mine happened to be the editor of *The Times*, Charlie Wilson, and I got hold of him and he had a lead editorial [...] And so that was the kind of thing you could do, and that's where the Birkbeck profile helped a great deal.¹⁰⁶

Public support for Birkbeck's campaign, via the press and in Parliament, was considerable. *The Times* first reported Birkbeck's plight with a page-two story on 6th June 1986, under the headline, 'College in Peril From Cash Curbs'.¹⁰⁷ The newspaper told readers that Birkbeck faced a 'fight for survival' due to a £2 million funding cut proposed by the UGC.¹⁰⁸ Floud was quoted, as 'head of the history department', arguing that, 'The UGC took its decision without any consultation with us, and without any computation of the true costs of part-time students at a place like Birkbeck.'¹⁰⁹ Such press critiques of the UGC's action were backed by questions in Parliament. Lord Fletcher, in a letter to *The Times* on 19th June, stated, 'may I support the fears expressed in the House of Lords on [13th June] that bureaucratic incompetence and muddle pose a grotesque threat to the closure of Birkbeck.'¹¹⁰ Fletcher, who also blamed the government, and the Court of the University of London, for errors over the UGC funding issue, wrote 'as a Fellow of Birkbeck and a former Governor'.¹¹¹ He was not the only figure in Parliament with personal experience of part-time

¹⁰⁶ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:08:32.

¹⁰⁷ Lucy Hodges, 'College in Peril from Cash Curbs', *The Times*, 6th June 1986, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Lord Fletcher, 'Threat to the Future of Birkbeck', *The Times*, 19th June 1986, Letters to the Editor, p. 13.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

and mature higher education. Floud recalled that, ‘there were a reasonable number of people in the House of Lords who’d been to [...] places like Ruskin College and so on, from the Labour side.’¹¹² Such support in high places, stirred by the Birkbeck campaign, provided a powerful antidote to the prevailing disregard of part-time and mature university education within the UGC, and government. As Floud explained, ‘it was clear that we had such strong political support, that the UGC would have to find a compromise, and that’s really what they did.’¹¹³ The UGC agreed on 11th July to fund part-time higher education at three-quarters (0.75) the full-time rate: still a reduction from the previous level (0.8), but a significant improvement on the drastic drop proposed in May (0.5).¹¹⁴

While the Birkbeck campaign owed some of its public support to left-leaning Lords, arguments in defence of the college also drew on right-wing values. In the press, critics claimed that the Thatcher government, ultimately responsible for the UGC funding cut, was failing Birkbeck by its own standards of self-betterment. In a polemical piece on 20th June 1986, *Times* opinion piece writer David Walker declared that, ‘The fate of Birkbeck College in the University of London is a shame and a political embarrassment.’¹¹⁵ Walker went on: ‘It is in the context of talk by education ministers in favour of continuing and part-time education and second chances for adults that Birkbeck’s cut looks so bad.’¹¹⁶ A similar tack was taken in a lead editorial in *The Times* on 27th June 1986, which argued that Birkbeck students were

¹¹² Floud, 2018-19. Ruskin College, named after the radical socialist thinker John Ruskin, was founded in Oxford in 1899. A residential institution separate to the University of Oxford, it aimed to provide higher education for working-class students, with support from trade unions. In 2021 Ruskin became part of the University of West London. ‘Our History’, Ruskin College website, <https://www.ruskin.ac.uk/about-us/history> [accessed on 8th May 2023]

¹¹³ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:35:15.

¹¹⁴ Our Education Correspondent, ‘Adult College Will Fight On’, *The Times*, 12th July 1986, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ David Walker, ‘Writing Off a Second Chance’, *The Times*, 20th June 1986, p. 12.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the very model of modern Thatcherites (devoutly though many of them would reject that description), the unconscious bearers of Victorian values, adherents (despite themselves) of Samuel Smiles [sic] *Self-Help*. Mrs Thatcher's father would have been proud of them.¹¹⁷

The call for action, published just under two weeks before the UGC was set to make a final decision on its funding cut, on 10th July, continued: 'To close such an institution would be a plain contradiction of this government's rhetoric of self-improvement.'¹¹⁸ These appeals, if only for the pragmatic purpose of piling pressure on the Education Secretary to intervene in the UGC's decision, clearly called on contemporary Conservative values.¹¹⁹ As such, they directly link the Birkbeck campaign with party-politics and political ideology.

What really mattered in 'the Battle for Birkbeck', however, was not political party or ideology, but a deeper belief in a particular model of part-time and mature higher education. Arguments in support of the college, as printed in the press, and voiced in Parliament, were mounted from both left and right. But what ultimately counted in the campaign against the UGC's funding cut was Birkbeck's academic strength – and a passionate faith in its value for working students. Floud, a key figure in the college's campaign, had been recruited to HCA because of his own academic standing. He had been attracted to the Head of History job in part because of Hobsbawm, as a pre-eminent scholar; Hobsbawm meanwhile headhunted Floud partly in bid to focus on his own world-class research. The deep commitment of Floud and fellow senior scholars at Birkbeck to the college's special provision of higher education

¹¹⁷ [Author unknown], 'A SPECIAL CASE', *The Times*, 27th June 1986, Editorial, p. 17.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ In May 1986, the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had replaced Education Secretary Keith Joseph with Kenneth Baker – who, unlike his predecessor, was known to favour a resumption of mass university expansion. Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 122.

for working students led to the vital creation of the Zoo Group. This collective, containing several leading intellectuals, became the brain of the college's campaign against the UGC's 1986 funding decision. The campaign depended on media support, made possible in part due to the unique, pre-existing relationship many Birkbeck academics had with the press, radio and television – links themselves resulting from the unique situation of high-flying academics, based in the centre of the metropolis, who were engaged in evening lectures and seminars.

Conclusion

The unique provision of part-time university education for working students at Birkbeck and HCA came under increasing strain during the 1980s – and at no point more than in 1986, when the UGC's major miscalculation pushed the college into existential crisis. Severe government cuts to UK higher education in the early 1980s forced 'drastic measures' for Birkbeck and HCA, and by the mid-decade the financial situation at institutional and departmental level was 'extremely depressing'. The ensuing 'Battle for Birkbeck' in 1986 broadly marked a watershed between a constrictive 1980s and an expansive 1990s. This reflected a national trend for universities, which started the 1980s as a prime target for public spending cuts under the new Thatcher government and left the decade with promise of funding boosts under Major's more moderate Tory administration. Significant shifts for higher education in the 1980s have been the subject of extensive critical and historical analyses. This fresh investigation of the decade as a pivotal period for UK universities, including Birkbeck and HCA, aimed to present novel perspectives through a *microhistorical* approach – by combining the national picture with close examination of the 1986 UGC crisis at institutional and departmental level.

Government higher education cuts in the early 1980s were rooted in deeper *demand* factors of economy and society. The new Thatcher administration sought to suppress supply; it had a political mandate – and ideological imperative – to cut public expenditure, including university funding. The harsh government reductions in higher education funding from 1981 marked a key juncture in the decline of ‘donnish dominion’, and the UGC’s long history as a ‘buffer’ between the state and universities. The cuts in the early 1980s were a ‘pyrrhic victory’ for the UGC: the semi-autonomous body was given exclusive responsibility by government for administering the reductions – a reprieve in the ongoing weakening of its control; but, as Scott suggests, the UGC’s ‘waning influence as an advocate for the universities was cruelly exposed’.¹²⁰ What mattered for Birkbeck and HCA was the severity of cuts from 1981, and their pervasion to part-time and mature higher education. There was a sense of institutional emergency: in 1980-81 the college set up an EPC to oversee saving; by 1982 cost-cutting had extended to salaries and appointments, restricting key staff recruitment in HCA. Financial restrictions were still in force at Birkbeck in 1984-85, hitting HCA’s departmental budget, including ‘field courses’. Reductions in college funding for HCA were successfully contested by its senior academics, who sought to mitigate the impact of cuts. As a result, by the mid-1980s, HCA scholars were both accustomed to institutional finance freezes – caused by government and UGC actions – and aware of their ability to push back.

Acute crisis for Birkbeck and HCA in 1986 did not come out of nowhere. At a national level, the period immediately preceding the UGC’s drastic funding decision provides significant context: a predicted resurgence of demand for higher education; a resulting increase in government scrutiny of universities; and the predicament of the UGC, as a fading force between these pressures. At an institutional and departmental level, the 1986 episode came as Birkbeck and HCA were still reeling from the severe cuts of the early 1980s, and

¹²⁰ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 18.

ongoing financial restrictions. Scott suggests that the severity of funding reductions from the start of the decade turned academics against the UGC – no longer considered a reliable advocate of university interests, but an ‘enemy within’.¹²¹ Notably, Birkbeck scholars – despite their experiences so far in the decade – identified the UGC’s 1986 decision as a non-deliberate miscalculation.¹²² The mistake was made because the UGC failed to fully account for part-time higher education in its funding plans; Birkbeck and HCA had suffered from a similar lack of recognition within the University of London. Around the time of its drastic error, the UGC was under significant strain from government – itself reacting to economic and demographic *demand* pressures on higher education: part-time and mature university tuition, as promoted by Birkbeck and HCA, simply wasn’t a priority for the semi-autonomous body. Significantly, however, the UGC’s 1986 decision was not just the result of such short-term factors – it was a combination of political pressure, deeper demand trends, and a long-held attachment to conventional, *straight-from-school* higher education within university governance.

The 1986 crisis can be considered as a clash between this prevailing belief in a conventional university model within the UGC and government, and a passionate commitment at Birkbeck and HCA to a particular form of part-time and mature higher education. During ‘the Battle for Birkbeck’ public defences of the college were mounted from the left and right of politics – in the press, and in Parliament. But at its core, the campaign depended on Birkbeck’s academic and intellectual strength – and a belief in its value for working students. Floud embodied this spirit: he was both attracted to and recruited by HCA due to academic reputation; he became a key figure in the ‘Battle’ because of his ability – and commitment to the college’s cause (rather than affiliation to any political party or ideology).

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Floud, 2018-19.

Similar institutional loyalty and intellectualism created the Zoo Group, subsequently a major part of the successful protest against the UGC. The campaign also depended on the media, with which Birkbeck had vital, pre-existing links due to the particular talents and availability – through commitment to evening lectures and seminars – of its star scholars. All of this not only powered the successful protests against the UGC, but championed the fundamental purpose of the college – to provide university education of the highest intellectual standard to students with daytime jobs.

Classics

‘It is sometimes said that in universities knowledge is pursued “for its own sake”, but that may mis-describe the variety of purposes for which different kinds of understanding may be sought. A better way to characterize the intellectual life of universities may be to say that the drive towards understanding can never accept an arbitrary stopping-point, and critique may always in principle reveal that any currently accepted stopping-point *is* ultimately arbitrary.’¹

Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (2012)

‘It felt to me almost like a secret operation, that the classics degrees were still running.’²

Professor Emma Dench (appointed to lead classics in HCA at Birkbeck in 1991-92)

Introduction

Classics today occupies a much smaller place in British universities than 150 years ago.³ As Collini observes, the discipline has diminished – from being a pre-requisite for political or clerical office, to being the hallmark of a gentleman, and, finally, to its ‘current standing as favoured example of a “useless” subject’.⁴ Indeed, just as there are ‘intelligible social reasons’ for shifts in the status of classics, there is also contemporary political significance. While the development of the discipline in Britain since the first half of the nineteenth century is perhaps reflective of deeper changes, in recent decades it has found itself at the

¹ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 55.

² Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:35:48.

³ Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, p. 83.

⁴ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 53.

centre of conflicts over the purpose of higher education. Collini is clear that classics should not be considered capable of resisting long-term societal trends.⁵ Similarly, the discipline's recent subjection to claims of 'uselessness' must be considered in historical context: the tension between priorities of liberal education and practical application for universities is not new.⁶ Critically, however, the fate of classics in UK universities since the start of the 1960s is something different. As Collini suggests, a major shift occurred in the period 1963 to 2003, concerning political ideology: before the late 1970s universities had expanded, 'based on what might be called the "welfare-state model of cultural diffusion";⁷ from at least the 1980s, however, 'other values have been more dominant and are in the process of reshaping universities in their own image.'⁸ The values in question are, of course, closely linked to the policies of successive governments from 1979 – most notably, severe reductions in university funding and the introduction of novel methods of surveying academic work. For classics, this political change manifested most extremely in nationwide cuts in the late 1980s – including the closure of Birkbeck's Department of Classics and Ancient History (Classics).

Classics as a standalone discipline at Birkbeck dates from the start of the twentieth century.⁹ Its development as a degree subject was perhaps a conspicuous move to ensure that the college was on a par with more established, full-time institutions.¹⁰ Between 1963 and 2003, the discipline took three forms: an independent academic department (albeit at one stage attached to the Department of Philosophy); a reduced, teaching and research branch of

⁵ Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, p. 229.

⁶ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, p. 230.

⁹ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1901-1902* (London: Witherby, 1901), pp. 58-59. The earliest record of Classics as a standalone subject (BA) at Birkbeck is found in the college's 1901-02 *Calendar*; no *Calendar* for 1900-01 is available, however, so it is possible that the subject was introduced in the first academic year of the twentieth century. As Bourke notes, Latin and Greek tuition existed at Birkbeck prior to the start of the twentieth century – completion of courses in these ancient languages being compulsory for all arts degree students within the University of London. Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 125.

¹⁰ Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, p. 236. According to Collini, 'a kind of cultural snobbery' encouraged universities and colleges such as Birkbeck to establish classics departments – along with those for mathematics, astronomy and philosophy – in a bid to boost institutional standing.

the University of London – administered via King’s College, London; and, one section of a joint School of History, Classics and Archaeology.¹¹ At the start of the 1960s, separate departments of History and Classics existed within Birkbeck’s Faculty of Arts. The second of these units was relatively small throughout the period: in 1960-61 it had a total of four staff; by 1970-71 this had increased only to five; a decade later the total was six; by 1990-91 the department had effectively been dissolved, with just one academic and one administrator left in post. The discipline was revitalised during the 1990s via the Department of History, and in 1999-2000 became part of a joint School of History, Classics and Archaeology.¹² Notable Birkbeck classics staff during the period included: Eric H. Warmington, later Acting Master; Robert Browning, the internationally-renowned Byzantinist; Giuseppe Giangrande – and his long-term research assistant, Heather White; David W. Hamlyn, also a member of the Department of Philosophy; Roland G. Mayer; Jane Rowlandson; and Emma Dench. Significantly, key events for the department reflect those concerning the recent history of UK universities more broadly: funding freezes and cutbacks in the 1960s and 1970s, escalating to crisis by 1980-81 (also the year of Browning’s retirement); and, subjection to a national audit of classics by the UGC in 1985-86 – concurrent with the semi-autonomous body’s introduction of wider Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs), and ending ultimately in a decision to close Classics at Birkbeck by 1989-90.¹³

This contemporary history of classics at Birkbeck relates principally to two bodies of existing research. First, as with Collini’s *What Are Universities For?* and *Speaking of Universities*, are those works concerned with critical analyses of recent higher education policy.¹⁴ Other notable texts in this group include an investigation by Roger Brown and

¹¹ Classics was incorporated into a *School* of History, Classics and Archaeology in 1999-2000; this was later renamed the *Department* of History, Classics and Archaeology.

¹² Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 1999-2000* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 1999), p. 21.

¹³ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 34. The UGC was itself effectively abolished in 1988, as part of the Conservative government’s Education Reform Act of that year.

¹⁴ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*; Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities*.

Helen Carasso into the marketisation of British universities.¹⁵ Brown and Carasso also chart a transition ‘from an overwhelmingly public service model of higher education in the 1980s, to a system in which market considerations had become the dominating feature a quarter of a century later’.¹⁶ Michael Shattock provides an insightful account of the UGC’s development, and ultimate decline in the late 1980s.¹⁷ Shattock, together with Aniko Horvath, has also more recently sought to update understandings of institutional autonomy and national governance in higher education – including assessments of key shifts in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ Second, in terms of research relevant to classics at Birkbeck, is literature on links between the wider discipline and working-class education. This includes important work by Edith Hall and Henry Stead, which aims to disrupt popular ideas on the historic exclusivity of Latin and Greek learning.¹⁹

Collini suggests that prevailing arguments on the purpose of higher education – including ideas on the ‘uselessness’ of classics – are so hackneyed as to be rendered abstract. Similarly, attempts to critique far-reaching shifts in universities often result in ‘rhetorical overkill’.²⁰ This chapter seeks to introduce novel historical understandings of recent changes to classics – and UK higher education more broadly – by moving away from abstraction, to a close examination of the discipline’s development at one institution, Birkbeck, from 1963 to 2003. Its findings are presented in four sections. Section one, *Community*, surveys in detail the staffing, funding and structure of classics at the college during the period. Section two, *Conflict*, investigates individual relations between classics academics and senior college staff,

¹⁵ Roger Brown with Helen Carasso, *Everything for Sale?: The Marketisation of UK Higher Education* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

¹⁷ Shattock, *The UGC and the Management of British Universities*.

¹⁸ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*.

¹⁹ *Greek and Roman Classics in the British Struggle for Social Reform*, ed. by Henry Stead and Edith Hall (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). Although Stead and Hall do not cover the period 1963 to 2003 – and while classics students at Birkbeck during this time were far from exclusively working class – their research still provides useful historical context concerning part-time teaching and access to the discipline for mature students.

²⁰ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 52.

with a particular focus on Giangrande – exploring what university historian Sheldon Rothblatt refers to as ‘the play of personalities too intricate for summary’.²¹ Section three, *Crises*, analyses how the department responded to a series of funding cuts and freezes in the 1960s and 1970s. And section four, *Crisis*, examines in depth the existential crisis and closure faced by classics at Birkbeck in the 1980s and, vitally, the responses of its staff and students – ending in the discipline’s reincorporation within a joint *School* of History, Classics and Archaeology.

Community

In 1963-64 Birkbeck’s Department of Classics consisted of four staff: Warmington (Head of Department), Giangrande (newly appointed), A. Geoffrey Way, and Brian M. Caven.²² Warmington retired in 1965-66 and was replaced by Browning;²³ the following year, the department gained its own secretary, Susan Archer.²⁴ This new, five-person team remained intact until almost the end of the 1970s. Way retired in 1977-78 and was replaced by Roland Mayer. In 1980-81, the department’s long-standing secretary Archer left – a loss only overshadowed by the retirement of Browning soon after. Four new appointments were made: a replacement secretary, Judith Higgens; a first researcher, Angelou Athanasios; a new Lecturer, Ruth S. Padel; and, a new Head of Department, David W. Hamlyn. Hamlyn was already Head of Philosophy at Birkbeck; his appointment to a joint headship marked a college decision to attach the two departments – at least physically, with a shared base in

²¹ Rothblatt, ‘The Writing of University History at the End of Another Century’, p. 153.

²² Warmington was also Vice-Master of Birkbeck in 1963-64. Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 7. Way taught Latin; Caven was an ancient historian; Giangrande was a Hellenistic Greek scholar. Professor Roland Mayer, interviewed by the author on 14th January 2020, 00:02:30; 00:02:53; 00:03:05.

²³ Warmington subsequently took the role of Acting Master at Birkbeck for one year in 1965-66. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1965-66* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1964), p. 7.

²⁴ Both Archer and Browning were to remain in post until the start of the 1980s, retiring in 1980 and 1981 respectively.

Gower Street.²⁵ The new total of seven Classics staff including Hamlyn marked a peak in departmental size, to be followed by slow decline. By the mid-1980s, Athanasios, Padel and Higgens had left – the latter two replaced by Michael B. Trapp and Elizabeth C. Dove, respectively; Caven went part-time and had retired fully, after twenty-five years at Birkbeck, by 1986-87. In the same academic year, Hamlyn retired as Head – succeeded by Mayer – and Jane Rowlandson was hired. By 1989-90, through imposed merger with King’s College, London, Classics and Ancient History at Birkbeck was diminished, leaving just Rowlandson and Dove in post.²⁶ This skeletal staff maintained a classics programme at the college – partly on an unofficial basis – until 1991-92, when Rowlandson was succeeded by Emma Dench.²⁷ Dench, an ancient historian, subsequently oversaw part-time teaching of the discipline until its incorporation into a new School of History, Classics and Archaeology in 1999-2000.

At the start of the same forty-year period, Classics and Ancient History at Birkbeck provided teaching and supervision at BA (Greek, Latin and Ancient History), MA (Classics) and PhD (Classics); an elementary course was offered in Greek.²⁸ The appointment of Giangrande as Reader in 1963-64 added expertise in research, specifically classical philology; the arrival of Browning, an eminent Byzantinist, provided some disciplinary balance. At the start of the 1970s the department’s courses remained unaltered, except for an additional option of MPhil Classics.²⁹ By the 1980s, the only changes were the amendment of MPhil and PhD degree titles to *Classics and Ancient History*,³⁰ and, the introduction of a subsidiary course in Classical Studies.³¹ These moves reflected deeper, national shifts in

²⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1981-82*, p. 176. The Department of Philosophy was based at 14 Gower Street, Bloomsbury; the Department of Classics and Ancient History was housed next door at number 12.

²⁶ Jane Rowlandson became a member of King’s College staff, seconded to Birkbeck. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p 18.

²⁷ Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:02:14. Dench was appointed to Birkbeck in July 1992.

²⁸ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-64*, pp. 49-50.

²⁹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1970-71*, p. 82.

³⁰ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1980-81*, p.65.

³¹ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Prospectus, 1980-81* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 1980), p.40.

classics education, with cuts to Greek and Latin in schools, proposed from 1977, expected to reduce proficiency in both languages among new university entrants.³² Significantly, classics teaching at the college for much of the period benefited not just students within the department, but others across the institution seeking Latin or Greek tuition; until 1987-88, Classics academics were also engaged in additional ‘service’ teaching for the departments of History and French. Classics at Birkbeck was also part of a wider disciplinary network at the University of London, including a close connection with its Institute of Classical Studies (ICS).³³ Indeed, such federal connections provided a basis for the department’s most notable event in the period – its merger with King’s College in 1989-90.³⁴ Furthermore, there were professional links to external bodies, including the British Academy³⁵ and the Goldsmiths’ Company.³⁶ As such, Classics at Birkbeck during the period was a complex entity, relatively small in size, with a shifting form – and active ties to other bodies, both inside and outside of the college.

The department’s nature can be illustrated further by looking at its financial situation. Classics was funded centrally by Birkbeck through an annual departmental grant, with an additional sum provided for its service teaching.³⁷ The level of grant received each year varied, depending on the college’s overall financial situation; between 1963 and 2003, institutional funding for Classics was frequently subject to scrutiny, freezes and cuts. In February 1969, Birkbeck’s Master, Ronald C. Tress, warned the heads of all departments that, ‘there will be little or no recurrent income available to the College for *additional*

³² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 074. Browning and the Master were both aware by late October 1977 that the Schools Council was predicting cuts to pre-university classics education; Browning suggested that this could impact Birkbeck ‘in a few years [sic] time’ – with a rise in applications for Classics courses, along with a reduction in preparedness.

³³ According to Mayer, Birkbeck’s Classics staff contributed to ICS seminars and were on hand as examiners for classics students across the University of London. Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:08:50.

³⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 142, p. 12.

³⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 020.

³⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 031.

³⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 9; File 9-D 001.

activities within the next two years; the anxiety is whether we shall have sufficient resources to meet *existing commitments* without an embarrassing incursion into reserves.³⁸ Responding to the bleak forecast, Browning, as Head of Classics, suggested to the Master that in return for parsimony, a possible option of funding for additional Classics staff should be retained until viable, ‘in view of [the department’s] increasing postgraduate commitment.’³⁹ Browning made a similar plea in January 1980, faced with the resignation of departmental secretary Archer after more than fifteen years in post – at a time when college recruitment was suspended for financial reasons. He told the Master, by then W. G. Overend, ‘I am sorry that I seem to always be the first Head of Department to challenge a general freeze on replacements but this is what I propose to do.’⁴⁰ The cause for a permanent replacement secretary was subsequently taken up by Browning’s successor, Hamlyn, in 1981-82.⁴¹ Such examples are typical of the financial challenges faced by Classics in the period – and the will of its senior academics to act in defence of departmental interests.

These instances of intervention went beyond efforts to secure the department’s finances and staffing, however; actions were also taken on behalf of individual academics. In January 1984, Hamlyn wrote to the Master, Overend, asking for assistance with replacement teaching costs to cover Mayer, so that he might go on research leave abroad. Hamlyn argued that it was, ‘unfair that an individual’s chance of having study leave should depend on the size of the Department in which he works.’⁴² Furthermore, efforts were made by Classics academics to help individual students. In June 1967, Browning wrote to Birkbeck’s Clerk, A.

³⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 007A.

³⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 008.

⁴⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 090/1. Browning’s case for a replacement secretary was based on two claims: a large academic publishing output, ‘for a small Department’; and heavy involvement of Classics staff in editorial boards and ‘learned societies’ – both creating extra administration. A similar case was also made ahead of Archer’s retirement by Giangrande. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 091.

⁴¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 109. Hamlyn was careful in his appeals not to blur the recruitment cases of Classics and his other concern – the Department of Philosophy (the dual head was opposed to joint departmental administration).

⁴² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 125.

J. Caraffi, to request research travel funds for an MPhil student, Dimitrios Dedes. Browning disclosed, ‘Mr. Dedes is a part-time teacher in the Greek community schools in London and has very little money to spare.’⁴³ As mentioned in Chapter 1, *Tradition and Political Identity*, further lengths were taken by Browning in support of H. S. Marlow, a part-time student also employed by the University of London at Senate House. In March 1969, Browning asked the Master for help in arranging unpaid leave for Marlow, so that he might pursue the final phase of his degree full-time. The Head explained, ‘He is very anxious to get a degree, both I think to prove his own ability to do it, and because it would enable him to qualify as a Chartered Accountant.’⁴⁴ Moreover, in some cases a sense of care was applied to individuals outside the department – and the college. In June 1970, Browning provided advice to the recently widowed wife of a non-Birkbeck scholar on how best to dispose of her late husband’s classical library.⁴⁵ In March 1977, the professor asked Swainson, then Deputy Secretary, to help source a glass case for a sculpture gifted to Classics as a memento – lest the giver should visit and be upset that it was on display without one.⁴⁶ The impression here, therefore, is deeper than that of a university unit simply seeking financial security; it is perhaps closer to that of a community – one with concern for academic and personal welfare.

Conflict

While a sense of community might have existed in Classics, there was also conflict. Nowhere was this more evident than in departmental and college relations with Giangrande. Appointed as Reader in 1963, this prominent classical philologist served at Birkbeck for more than a

⁴³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 004.

⁴⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 010. As Browning explained, a university degree would enable Marlow to qualify as a Chartered Accountant in ‘a much shorter period’.

⁴⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 016.

⁴⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; 3-D/1 062.

quarter of a century, until 1988-89.⁴⁷ In that time, and particularly from the mid-1970s, he frequently clashed with colleagues and authorities inside and outside of Classics, on a range of issues. In December 1975, Giangrande submitted the first of many requests for a research assistant to the college Registrar.⁴⁸ On being told that his request had been passed to the College Joint Committee (CJC), Giangrande directly contacted its secretary, R. E. Swainson, arguing, ‘I am told by my colleagues that I personally have more postgraduate research students working under me than all the Professors of Classics in the University of London put together.’⁴⁹ In response, Swainson insisted in January 1976 that financial restrictions at Birkbeck made any new appointment highly unlikely.⁵⁰ At the end of the same year, Giangrande appealed to the Master, claiming, ‘The requirements of training my postgraduates [...] keep me occupied on a seven day week basis, with no holidays at all: I very badly need one research assistant.’⁵¹ This apparent preparedness to escalate issues through direct correspondence to senior staff and academics was typical of Giangrande. The Master, Ronald C. Tress, told Browning that Giangrande’s request for an assistant should have been sent via him as Head of Department.⁵²

Giangrande eventually secured research support in July 1977 through a Leverhulme Trust grant; he was assisted long-term by a former postgraduate student, Heather White.⁵³

⁴⁷ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1963-64*, p.60. According to Giangrande’s Research Officer, Dr Heather White (who worked with Giangrande for much of his time at Birkbeck), the professor developed a close bond with the college, and on his departure donated a set of antiquities to its Library. White, 23rd January 2020, 00:35:39.

⁴⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 016. This request was sent by Giangrande to Registrar J. Snaith on 3rd December 1975, following a conversation with the Head of Classics, Browning.

⁴⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; 1-1-1/1 018. References to the scale of postgraduate research supervision were a consistent theme in Giangrande’s correspondence to colleagues, seniors and funders. Giangrande sent a reminder on the research assistant issue to Swainson in January 1976. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 019.

⁵⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 020. Swainson did suggest that Giangrande might be able to compete for one of five potential research posts included in the college’s development policy for 1977-82, if the financial situation improved.

⁵¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 048.

⁵² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 049.

⁵³ White transferred to Birkbeck from University College London as a PhD student in 1975-76, to complete her thesis under Giangrande’s supervision; she was subsequently hired as Giangrande’s Research Officer in 1977-

The subject of his appeals to departmental and college seniors subsequently shifted to recognition of the postgraduate research and supervision work he shared with White. In January 1979, Giangrande wrote to Birkbeck's Secretary, Swainson, asking, 'Would you agree with me that Dr White and I are by far the hardest working members of the academic staff?'⁵⁴ This rhetoric related to a memo from Giangrande to Classics postgraduates – also attached to the Swainson letter – confirming that study space and supervision were to be provided by him and White over the Christmas period, with the exception of Christmas Day only.⁵⁵ While seeking to put such commitment to postgraduate tuition in Classics on record, however, Giangrande's reputation was less certain on undergraduate teaching. Minutes from a departmental meeting on 20th October 1983 (one which Giangrande sent apologies for) included an extra item – a 'unanimous statement':

As a Department we consider that *all* members of the Department should be prepared to teach undergraduates [...] We also consider that the level of the class should be realistically geared to undergraduate standards. We strongly regret that Professor Giangrande appears not to subscribe to this opinion.⁵⁶

Similarly, Hamlyn, as Head of Department, told the Master in January 1984, that Giangrande:

78 and remained as his assistant even after his transfer to King's College in 1989-90. White, 23rd January 2020, 00:01:22; 00:01:37.

⁵⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 089. The words 'by far' and 'hardest' in Giangrande's letter were highlighted in red type.

⁵⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 089A.

⁵⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 117A.

is asked annually to give a course of lectures, but for one reason or other that is always a ritual act; students will not now come to his lectures, and his teaching is therefore confined to his own research students.⁵⁷

In Giangrande's defence, his recruitment in 1962-63 by Warmington, then Head of Classics, had been an attempt to bolster the department's research profile.⁵⁸ As such, an expectation that Giangrande should focus on research – including postgraduate tuition – had formed the basis of his college career.⁵⁹ The subsequent separation of undergraduate and postgraduate priorities remained a source of departmental tension.⁶⁰

In particular, Giangrande had a troubled relationship with two heads of Classics: Hamlyn and Mayer. For Hamlyn, also Head of Philosophy, managing Giangrande was a strain from the start; he alluded to friction in a message to the Master within weeks of his first academic year in the joint role.⁶¹ While Hamlyn had studied classics at Oxford, Giangrande was apparently unhappy with his appointment. Hamlyn informed the Master in October 1981 that Giangrande, 'is still maintaining that the position is subject to appeal and he is refusing to recognise my status as head of the department. He says that he will not attend departmental meetings etc.'⁶² Relations between Hamlyn and Giangrande remained tense. The Head

⁵⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 126, p. 1. According to White, undergraduates disliked Giangrande's teaching 'because he kept dragging research into everything'. White, 23rd January 2020, 01:11:07.

⁵⁸ According to Mayer, Warmington realised in the early 1960s that Classics could not develop if focused only on undergraduate degrees; Giangrande was appointed on the basis of his research record. Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:31:55.

⁵⁹ According to White, Giangrande maintained that under Browning it had been informally agreed that he would focus on research and postgraduate tuition, leaving most undergraduate work for colleagues in Classics. White, 23rd January 2020, 01:11:07.

⁶⁰ This situation was further complicated by the intersection of the categories of undergraduate and postgraduate with those of part- and full-time, plus home (UK) and international.

⁶¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 112. In a letter to Overend on 9th October 1981, Hamlyn suggested that, in terms of administrative planning, Giangrande held exceptional views and 'would like a full-time secretary all to himself!'

⁶² *Ibid.* According to Mayer, Giangrande was 'not prepared to talk to David [Hamlyn]'. Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:47:12.

expressed exasperation in a letter to the Master in January 1984, suggesting, ‘If (mirabile dictum) Professor Giangrande were to take early retirement.’⁶³ Furthermore, in October 1985, Hamlyn told the Master that while Mayer might make a suitable successor as Head, such a move was likely to cause trouble with Giangrande. Hamlyn warned:

some definite decision should be made concerning the position of Professor Giangrande. It would be quite unfair to Roland Mayer to ask someone of his [relatively young] age and experience to take on all the problems that issue from that source.⁶⁴

Indeed, relations between Mayer and Giangrande were already problematic: in November 1978, Browning, as Head of Classics, had told the Master, Overend, that a potential plan to make Mayer’s position permanent ‘would almost certainly provoke a first-class row’.⁶⁵ In February 1984, Giangrande wrote to Hamlyn, then Head, to complain that Mayer had vandalised cuttings displayed in the department, claiming, ‘Unfortunately, Dr Mayer is in the habit [...] of defacing what I put on my notice board.’⁶⁶ Plainly, such examples point to the complexity of personal-professional relations at a departmental level.

Giangrande’s prioritisation of research, and related difficulties with departmental and college authorities, manifested through his attempted development of a new academic structure within Classics. This began in part with the foundation of a research periodical,

⁶³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 126, p. 1. This Latin phrase translates as ‘wonderful to relate’; it was typical for senior colleagues to discuss Giangrande in such indirect terms.

⁶⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 139.

⁶⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 066. According to White, this strife stemmed from Mayer having been recruited to Classics in place of Giangrande’s preferred candidate – one of his former postgraduate students. White, 23rd January 2020, 00:42:33.

⁶⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 119, p. 1. According to one piece of evidence submitted by Giangrande to Hamlyn, Mayer had written ‘Escamotage’ (meaning *trickery* or *sleight of hand*) on a cutting of a positive academic review of Giangrande’s research: the implication being that the favourable report had in fact been written by a friend of the philologist and was therefore more an example of nepotism.

Museum Philologum Londiniense, with Browning, in 1972-73.⁶⁷ In the following academic year, Giangrande directly contacted a college funder, the Goldsmiths' Company, to ask for financial help with publication costs.⁶⁸ He was subsequently admonished by the Master, R. C. Tress:

Had you consulted me before approaching the Company I would have advised you that an approach for substantial sums for a single purpose within a single Department would be embarrassing to the College's interests.⁶⁹

In August 1975, Giangrande sent a confidential letter to Birkbeck's Registrar, H. L. Snaith, presenting his case for the establishment of a Research Centre in Classics. Indeed, Giangrande claimed that such a Centre was effectively in existence, announcing that, 'We are, *de facto*, already a Research Centre in Classics: we have the largest number of Classics postgraduates that any College can boast of in this country.'⁷⁰ The proposal was rejected by Snaith on grounds of scale and cost – and a potential conflict of interests with the University of London's ICS.⁷¹ Giangrande's terminology was subsequently more tempered – albeit temporarily – when he told the Master in December 1976 that, 'I have now developed, single-handed, what is the largest research school in Classics in the United Kingdom.'⁷² This testing of academic terminology by Giangrande can be understood as an attempt to develop personal

⁶⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 024.

⁶⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 032A. Giangrande wrote to the Deputy Clerk of the Goldsmiths' Company, C. P. de B. Jenkins, on 19th August 1974. Aside from the trouble caused by the letter in terms of college etiquette on approaching external funders, Giangrande's reference to 'our Birkbeck research school in Classics' was an early example of his blurring of departmental terminology.

⁶⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 033.

⁷⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 039, p. 1. In addition, Giangrande claimed to have 'personal friends' in both the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the UGC, who were in support of such a Centre. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 040.

⁷² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 048, p. 1.

research priorities into a departmental, or *sub*-departmental structure; as such, it also raises issues of authority.⁷³

In January 1977, Giangrande wrote to Browning claiming that a formal title – if not an actual entity within Classics – was necessary in order to secure funding for his research. He ventured:

Since I have in fact created [...] a very good Classics Research Centre, and since *nomina sunt consequentia rerum*, I hereby apply to you and to the Master for permission to use the term Research Centre.⁷⁴

Browning replied with reference to examples of similar structures within other universities, explaining, ‘the real point about these centres is that they are set up not by the unilateral decision of the people teaching in them but by a resolution of the competent University.’⁷⁵ The issue came to a head when Giangrande made further approaches to external parties. In January 1977, Browning sent a confidential note to the Master reporting that Giangrande had written to the Labour government’s Secretary of State for Education, Shirley Williams ‘setting out his case and asking for money’.⁷⁶ In the same month, the Master received a letter from the Chairman of the UGC, Sir Frederick Dainton, with a copy of correspondence he had received from Giangrande seeking financial support.⁷⁷ Giangrande’s letter began, ‘I am

⁷³ This aspect is perhaps similar to the theatrical concept of ‘the play within the play’ – a structural device that also raises questions of authority and control.

⁷⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 050A. This Latin phrase translates as ‘names are the consequences of things’.

⁷⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 050B. In this letter of 7th January 1977, Browning added, ‘So I am sure that it would be better if in public documents as opposed to private correspondence students speak either of the Department of Classics or simply as being a pupil of yourself.’

⁷⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 052. Browning also told the Master that he had heard Giangrande was planning on speaking to the Italian Minister of Education. He added, ‘My mind boggles.’

⁷⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 053, p. 1. In his letter to the Master, R. C. Tress, Dainton stressed that the UGC, ‘[dealt] with institutions, not individuals or departments.’

writing to you in my capacity as head of one of the largest and most productive research schools in Classics in Great Britain.’⁷⁸ The Master’s response to Giangrande was blunt, stating, ‘As far as the College is concerned in its dealings with the University Grants Committee, there is a single Department of Classics, of which Professor Browning is the Head.’⁷⁹ Giangrande sent an apology to the Master, in which he attempted to frame his claim to Dainton as an attempt to distinguish between ‘Classics’ and ‘Byzantinology’ research within the department. Again, the Master was clear:

I cannot accept your statements about research schools in Classics and Byzantinology. These are inventions of your own. They have no standing in the College, where there is one Department of Classics, with Professor Browning as the Head and yourself a member.⁸⁰

While such conflict within Classics involving Giangrande was obviously personal, or personal-professional, it was also perhaps cultural. Certainly, on one level, the tensions between Giangrande and his departmental colleagues, as well as senior academics and staff outside Classics, were caused by his distinction as a research specialist. Or, more accurately, by a combination of this distinction, a subsequent prioritisation of postgraduate teaching and research (at the expense of undergraduate work), and fairly idiosyncratic – to say the least – behaviour in pursuit of his aims. As Mayer puts it, ‘He was a law – as he thought – unto himself.’⁸¹ On another level, however, Giangrande’s efforts to establish a sub-departmental unit, a ‘Research Centre’, in Classics can be seen as an attempt to introduce a continental

⁷⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 053A, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 054, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 060, p. 2.

⁸¹ Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:47:12.

academic culture. This notion is confirmed by his former close colleague, White, who reflected that

it was just his idea; I think because he was Italian – they [were] always talking about research schools. In England people didn't really talk about research schools – they might do nowadays, but they didn't really in those days.⁸²

Mayer also recognises Giangrande's bid to establish his own teaching and research entity as an attempt to import a different mode of academic practice:

he wanted to create an Italian-style school of a particular study. In the Italian academy there are these bigwigs, they have research students, they give them their topics, they see them through.⁸³

This additional, cultural aspect to tensions in Classics involving Giangrande suggests an even greater level of complexity in personal relations within the department. Furthermore, Giangrande's actions are significant because they help to circumscribe different levels of authority at Birkbeck in the period: the professor's anomalous behaviours, and the resistances shown to them, help to define limits of individual, departmental and institutional agency.

⁸² White, 23rd January 2020, 00:57:09. Interestingly, White also noted that most English academics 'didn't really have assistants'.

⁸³ Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:34:22. As Mayer observes, Giangrande's ideas on the promotion of postgraduate research in Classics were outlined as early as 1968, in his contribution to the edited collection *Fifty Years (and Twelve) of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968). *Ibid.*, 00:32:47.

Crises

Power relations between these different levels – individual, department, institution – were further revealed during times of crisis. Classics at Birkbeck between 1963 and 2003 frequently faced funding scrutiny, freezes and cuts. In most cases, however, at least until the early 1980s, the department expected to – and indeed, with college support was able to – cope with such challenges. Browning’s response to the Master’s dismal financial report of February 1969 was not despondency; rather, the Head thought an increase to his staff should not be ruled out ‘just in case the economic climate should change slightly’.⁸⁴ Such a steady proposal implies that, in the late 1960s at least, Classics academics facing freezes believed their department’s funding situation could improve (and perhaps, that such an improvement might require only a small change in the college’s ‘economic climate’). Similarly, Browning’s plea to the Master in January 1980 for a replacement departmental secretary – despite an institution-wide stop on recruitment – ended on a relatively informal and optimistic note, suggesting, ‘Perhaps we could have a talk about the possibilities and the best way to tackle this in the near future.’⁸⁵ Again, and even allowing for requisite politeness between senior academics, Browning’s correspondence shows faith in the Master’s ability to help resolve a staffing issue despite financial hardship. More widely, such examples perhaps indicate a belief held by Classics staff that, at least until the 1980s, the college could help mitigate some impacts of institutional cutbacks.

The strength of this departmental-institutional relationship had been tested more acutely in the years leading up to 1980-81. On 4th October 1976, Browning contacted the Master, Tress, to voice fears of an apparent plan to reduce Classics academics by a quarter,

⁸⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 008.

⁸⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 090/1.

from four to three. The Head's concern, based on a rumour reported by Giangrande, was that Birkbeck planned to not replace soon-to-retire lecturer A. Geoffrey Way.⁸⁶ Browning warned the Master, Tress, that, a 'reduction in staff would not be merely a temporary measure of economy; it would be the end of the Department in anything like its present form and function.'⁸⁷ Browning's argument was based on a 'minimum size for a viable department', with Classics said to already be 'near the margin of viability'.⁸⁸ He also stressed that any pending decision by the CJC on whether to replace Way should not be based on staff-student ratios, claiming that, 'Ours is certainly on the low side at present. But it is not the lowest in the College.'⁸⁹ He continued, insisting that if the argument for staff-student ratios was pursued to its logical end, it would lead:

to a University in which nothing much else is studied but Law, Sociology and English
[...] Such a pattern of study would be unworthy of the name of University, and society
would hardly be willing to pay for it for long.⁹⁰

The Head added, 'May I suggest that since we are obliged to look at numbers we might consider the ratio of degrees obtained to teaching staff involved.'⁹¹ Arguments were also presented on the department's volume of published research and, critically, the exceptionality of its part-time, evening courses – relative to full-time, day teaching of classics elsewhere in the

⁸⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 046.

⁸⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 024, p. 1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2. According to Giangrande, a figure of four full-time staff had already been established as a viable departmental minimum by the Board of Studies in Classics, University of London. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* According to Collini, the average staff-student ratio in the 1960s was around 1:8; in 2017 it was approximately 1:19. Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, p. 168.

⁹¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 024, p. 2.

University of London.⁹² Clearly, this more pugilistic approach by Browning is suggestive of a more acute sense of threat to the department.

Browning's letter to the Master over Way's possible 'non-replacement' referenced a note the Head had received from Giangrande.⁹³ In it, Giangrande declared, 'Our position is already untenable as it is [...] My two colleagues and I look up to you as our leader and the champion of our demonstrably legitimate interests.'⁹⁴ Giangrande also wrote directly to the Master, outlining his fears for the future of Classics at Birkbeck, should the rumour regarding post-Way planning prove true. The professor claimed that the discipline, as an undergraduate degree subject, was 'unanimously regarded as the most vast and complex in the whole of the Faculty of Arts'.⁹⁵ Despite this, he contended, the department had for years been operating below 'minimum critical size'.⁹⁶ Giangrande also asked that the department be recognised as exceptional for its evening teaching, insisting, 'we cannot be involved to any extent at all in [any] process of "rationalisation" of Classics Departments in London University [sic]'.⁹⁷ These passionate pleas confirm that Browning's fears over the Way issue were shared more widely by Classics staff. Significantly, however, the appeals of neither Browning nor Giangrande go so far as to suggest a loss of faith in the college's ability to alleviate institutional measures that might harm the department.

The Master sought to allay concerns in Classics on 5th October 1976 with a letter to Browning, copied to Giangrande. In it, Tress stated that, 'There is no *proposal* before the [CJC]

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Notably, Browning advocated a solution of shared teaching with another University of London college should Way not be replaced, as opposed to winding down undergraduate teaching or recruiting part-time staff in Classics. Giangrande, by contrast, argued that collaboration with another college was 'a pie in the sky': he claimed that other University classics tutors were tired from daytime classes, and therefore only able to offer 'second-class' evening tuition. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box: 23 1-1-1/1 025, p. 3.

⁹⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 024, pp. 6-7.

⁹⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 025, p. 1.

⁹⁶ Ibid. This was a slight blurring of the previously established 'viable minimum' of four full-time staff.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

at the present time of the kind you quote as rumoured.’⁹⁸ Certainly, the issue of future staff levels was not settled entirely, with the Master also cautioning that the college would ‘have to take a close look at its staffing through all Departments sooner or later’.⁹⁹ But there was perhaps a de-escalation to the more consistent situation of a small department frequently forced to ask for allowances in face of institutional belt-tightening. Such a position was reconfirmed by Browning, as the issue over Way’s replacement continued ahead of the lecturer’s scheduled retirement.¹⁰⁰ In a letter on 9th November 1977 to Giangrande, the Master (now Tony J. Chandler) and the Vice Chancellor of the University of London, Browning argued:

It would be harmful to the Arts Faculty and to the College as a whole if small departments were made to suffer so disproportionately by a mechanical application of general rules in the present harsh financial climate.¹⁰¹

The point here, prior to the turmoil of the 1980s, is not the absence of institutional funding issues, nor even that of potential threats to Classics, but rather the continued presence of the department’s faith in the possibility of exceptional treatment by the college.

Indeed, the exceptionality of Classics at Birkbeck was formally recognised by the college in February 1980, following a top-level review of the department. The sub-committee survey was commissioned by Birkbeck’s Professoriate Committee on 29th May 1979, in anticipation of Browning’s own scheduled retirement in 1980-81.¹⁰² The review’s findings

⁹⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 026. It is possible that this emphasis in the Master’s letter should have applied to the word ‘no’. The Master added that any CJC proposal would have to be presented to Birkbeck’s Governors and would also be assessed by the college’s Academic Board.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 024, p. 1 Way was set to retire in 1978; he was subsequently replaced by Mayer, who was appointed initially on a temporary basis. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 066, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 046.

¹⁰² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 092/1, p. 1. The sub-committee, including the Master and Professor J. F. Healy, Chairman of the Board of Studies in Classics, University of London, convened three

were published following a Professoriate Committee meeting and an Academic Board meeting, on 12th and 26th of February 1980, respectively.¹⁰³ In its report, the sub-committee recorded that its work had been conducted ‘at a time of financial crisis’.¹⁰⁴ It also conceded that, ‘The Department is at the lower limit of viability. Only one other Department of Classics in the country has fewer than five members of staff.’¹⁰⁵ Its key conclusions were clear, however:

There are two strong reasons for continuing to maintain a Department of Classics in the College. Firstly, it holds a unique position in the country as providing the only opportunity for part-time students in employment to read for a [BA] honours Degree in the classical languages and literatures. Secondly, a flourishing Classics Department is an essential component of a Faculty of Arts.¹⁰⁶

It continued: ‘Hence, we *recommend* that the College should maintain a viable Department of Classics, staffed and funded to work effectively at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.’¹⁰⁷ The report recommended that the Chair of Classics (and Head of Department role) soon to be vacated by Browning be filled ‘by advertisement’.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, it confirmed that the minimum viable size of the department was four staff, and subsequently recommended that, ‘the lectureship now occupied temporarily by Dr Mayer be filled on a normal tenured basis.’¹⁰⁹ At the start of the 1980s, then, Classics academics could still believe

times between 12th October and 10th December, 1979; it held discussions with Giangrande, Caven, Mayer, White, and a representative group of six Classics students.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 092/1, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. The report also noted that, ‘For a Classics department of its size, the Birkbeck Department has an unusually high number of research students.’ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

that the college, even under acute financial strain, would continue to offer institutional support for their unique teaching and research.

Crisis

What perhaps could not have been foreseen, however, was the severity and extent of change for Classics over the next decade as a result of political shifts beyond Birkbeck. A hint of such external pressure came in the late 1970s when the college – directed by the University of London, itself responding to new government policy – looked to limit its intake of full-time students. Critically, for Classics, a subsequent college-wide moratorium on full-time admissions effectively meant departmental cuts to international, postgraduate students: while in Birkbeck as a whole, full-time students represented a minority, the department had a relatively high number of full-time postgraduates, mostly from abroad. As Browning, then Head of Classics, explained in a letter to his staff on 17th May 1979:

You will be aware, I am sure, of the recent cuts in full-time Arts based students imposed upon the Universities by the DES and distributed roughly in proportion to FTE [full-time equivalent] numbers. You will have realised also the unfortunate, but probably unintended, effect of this on Birkbeck where full-time students form a very small proportion of our FTE numbers. The net result, of course, is that the whole of our cut will have to be made from our full-time postgraduate students who are mainly of overseas origin.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 100, p. 1.

Browning added that the college was arguing its case as ‘forcibly’ as it could with the University, but in the meantime an effective freeze on international recruitment had to be respected.¹¹¹ Similarly, the Master, Overend, maintained that while discussions with the University were ongoing, Birkbeck had to prioritise *home* (UK) full-time students, in line with ‘constraints imposed ultimately by the [UGC]’.¹¹² The Master added, ‘There is no intention to restrict admissions in particular Departments; only to apply a brake on all until we know exactly where we stand.’¹¹³

But again, for Classics, the restriction – a consequence of top-down pressure from the UGC, administered via the University – *was* particular. The freeze on admissions not only effectively targeted the department’s full-time, foreign postgraduates, in so doing it cut to the core of debate over the department’s future direction. While traditionally Classics had – in line with Birkbeck’s institutional mission – prioritised part-time, undergraduate education, since the 1960s Giangrande had helped to promote postgraduate, increasingly full-time, and international, teaching and research. Unsurprisingly, Giangrande expressed alarm to the Master in response to news of the moratorium, claiming that:

it would be suicidal for our Department of Classics to artificially inflict any limit on the intake of suitably qualified postgraduates from abroad, all the more so as these postgraduates are prepared to pay full-time fees for the privilege of studying under Dr White and me.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 097.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 094. Giangrande also sent the Master copies of letters he had received from eligible full-time foreign postgraduate applicants, expressing their willingness to pay substantial fees to study at Birkbeck. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 094B.

Giangrande also wrote to Snaith, insisting that, ‘it can be demonstrated mathematically that the survival of our Department of Classics depends on the admission of foreign [PhD] candidates.’¹¹⁵ Certainly, Giangrande had developed an effective international research network, with links to continental universities including Athens, Bologna and Ghent; these academic connections provided a consistent stream of postgraduate applications, and potential fees.¹¹⁶ In turn, this system helped to bolster Giangrande’s attempts to establish his own teaching and research structure within Classics. This idea was perhaps never viable, in view of the departmental and college opposition it attracted. As Mayer suggests, ‘This attempt to transplant an Italian model to English soil wasn’t going to work [...] and certainly not in a very small department like the Birkbeck one.’¹¹⁷ Yet it is important to consider the impact of the admissions moratorium in undermining Giangrande’s position; as such, it was likely a factor in determining the department’s future course.

A strategic plan for Classics, with specific focus on the balance between undergraduate (plus service teaching) and postgraduate priorities, was outlined in Birkbeck’s February 1980 sub-committee report on the department. The review of Classics, ‘conducted at a time of financial crisis’, established that:

The central academic issue [...] is the balance between undergraduate and postgraduate work [...] The future effectiveness of the Department depends upon the satisfactory resolution of this problem.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 095, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ According to White, Giangrande also had links with Milan, Urbino and Salerno in Italy; Thessalonica in Greece; and, Oviedo and Seville in Spain. White, 23rd January 2020, 01:17:49.

¹¹⁷ Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:42:25.

¹¹⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 092/1, pp. 3-4.

After considering arguments for both levels of teaching and research, the sub-committee's report concluded:

To justify a high priority, the Department must ensure that its objectives are fully in accord with the purpose of the College 'to provide teaching and research facilities primarily for those engaged in earning their livelihood in the day-time', and it must make a substantial contribution to the work of the Faculty as a whole.¹¹⁹

It added that Classics would fail to meet these two tests if it were 'to devote its principal effort to meeting a demand for concentrated research training from full-time students, in large part from overseas'.¹²⁰ The recommended departmental plan for the 1980s was therefore to concentrate on the more traditional purpose of part-time teaching and research (plus service teaching). In view of Giangrande's many full-time, international postgraduate students, this effectively also meant a shift in priorities towards home undergraduates. The move away from Giangrande's postgraduate research model was further confirmed with an end to funding for White's position as the professor's Research Officer in 1981.¹²¹ As suggested by the review, these strategic decisions on the future of Classics were taken as government reductions to higher education funding began to bite. The idea for Classics to focus on Birkbeck's institutional priorities of part-time teaching and research, with a focus on domestic students, might therefore be viewed as a pragmatic, defensive approach. Such a sense of conservatism in face of cuts is perhaps also confirmed by the college's decision to appoint an existing member of senior academic staff, Hamlyn, as Head of Classics on Browning's retirement – and, indeed, to attach the department to Philosophy.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ White, 23rd January 2020, 00:01:37.

¹²² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 109.

The situation became more critical from July 1985, when the UGC established a nationwide Working Party on Classics.¹²³ This major audit, chaired for the UGC by Professor J. P. Barron, of the ICS, claimed to be an exercise in support of classics and other disciplines.¹²⁴ In a letter to the Master, Overend, on 10th September 1986, Barron said the Working Party had:

the dual purpose of protecting ‘smaller’ subjects through concentration into centres of strength and of enabling universities to make more effective use of their block grant by avoiding its dissipation on a multitude of more or less uneconomic activities.¹²⁵

The Working Party was advised by a national disciplinary body, the Council of University Classical Departments.¹²⁶ In addition, it sought information directly from Birkbeck regarding its Classics department, covering the period 1981-1986. This included: applications totals; figures on single honours, joint honours, postgraduate and service teaching; staff-student ratios; evidence on employment prospects of graduates; staff losses; staff aged over 55 by name; and departmental research records.¹²⁷ The Master forwarded the Working Party’s information request to Mayer, as Head of Classics.¹²⁸ Departmental data was subsequently provided, ready for submission to the UGC.

The verdict returned by the UGC Working Party on 5th November 1987 was a hammer blow. Its recommendations, confirmed by UGC Chairman, Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, included the closure of Classics at Birkbeck, with a transfer of its staff to King’s College.¹²⁹

¹²³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 142, p. 2. The full title of the UGC’s audit was ‘Working Party on Classics and Byzantine Studies’.

¹²⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 147, p. 3. The other members of the Working Party were Professor E. G. Stanley (University of Oxford) and Professor Lewis Warren (Queen’s University Belfast).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2. The information request was also sent to Birkbeck’s Registrar and Heather Harris, Assistant Secretary for Personnel.

¹²⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 142, p. 9.

According to the report, Birkbeck's department fell under a category of, 'too small to offer an acceptable range of single and joint honours degrees in Classical subjects, or did not enjoy an adequate or foreseeable level of student demand such as to justify [its] present staffing.'¹³⁰ The report also reiterated the Working Party's purpose:

To make recommendations for safeguarding an adequate level of national provision for the teaching of Classics and Byzantine Studies at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and for research, in the context of an actual and expected reduction in the funding available to universities up to 1990 by approximately 10 per cent.

In view of this financial reality, the logic of the Working Party was to group classics teaching and research into larger departments. Critically, however, the UGC's report made no mention of *part-time* teaching and research; nor did it in any way highlight Birkbeck's special status in this regard. While the exceptionality of evening courses and supervision within Classics had been recognised at an institutional level in the college's 1980 report, the UGC's national review failed to recognise it. Instead, the government body recommended closure and merger by the end of 1989-90.¹³¹

It was left to Birkbeck's Master, Baroness Tessa Blackstone, to make a plea in defence of Classics – and its unique, part-time provision. On 25th January 1988 the Master sent a three-page statement to Peter Griffiths, Clerk of the Court at the University of London (charged with collating institutional responses to the UGC's report).¹³² The document began with a joint appeal that the recommended closure and merger 'should not be implemented'.¹³³ It continued:

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹³² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 145, pp. 1-3.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 1. The Master's statement was also signed by the Provost of University College London (UCL), James Lighthill – a show of UCL's support for the continuation of Classics at Birkbeck. Ibid., p. 3.

The primary reason for the retention of the Birkbeck Classics department is to maintain, and if possible increase, the provision for the part-time study of the classics and classical civilisation by evening instruction. Birkbeck is the only institution in the British isles [sic] which provides such an opportunity.¹³⁴

Furthermore, the Master's statement argued:

At a time when the study of classics in schools is threatened, but when interest in the ancient world in society at large is undiminished, it is particularly important to retain a unique opportunity for those following unconventional routes into the subject.¹³⁵

The alternative proposed by the Master was a formalisation of teaching and research links between classics departments at different colleges within the University, namely Birkbeck and UCL. According to the Master's statement, such an idea – based on existing cooperation between the colleges on classics and ancient history – would 'retain the integrity of the departments and their separate roles while providing for the efficient sharing of resources'.¹³⁶ In addition, the statement suggested an advertising drive to recruit more classics students, concluding that: 'The College and the Department recognise that it is essential to increase student numbers attributable to the Department and are confident that this can be done within the framework which has just been described.'¹³⁷

Similar arguments in defence of Classics at Birkbeck, in light of the UGC's

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

recommendations, were mounted publicly, in the national press. An editorial in *The Times* on 27th July 1988 made a strong case in support of the college's part-time classics degrees. The broadsheet opinion piece warned that:

Until now, anyone in Britain who late in life wanted to make a serious study of the classics but, for professional, family or other reasons needed to study at night, would have been able to apply to take a degree at Birkbeck College, London. But soon this opportunity, the only one of its kind, will have gone.¹³⁸

Three days later, on 30th July, a letter to *The Times* was published under the title 'Defence of classics', signed by seven professors from Oxford, Cambridge and UCL. The group, representing The Triennial Conference of the Hellenic and Roman Societies, called the UGC plan a 'retrograde development'. Their letter stated that the Birkbeck Classics department:

provides a facility unique in this country for a small but constant number of highly motivated students to benefit from the study of the classics. To deprive them of their chance, or to make its realization more difficult for them, seems both shortsighted and unjust.¹³⁹

The professors urged the University and UGC to reconsider, and to 'make a more satisfactory provision for part-time and second-chance education in classics'.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ 'Adult Literature', *The Times*, Wednesday, 27th July 1988, p. 11. The editorial also argued that part-time classics students tended to pay their own fees and, as such, 'cost the tax-payer little'.

¹³⁹ 'Defence of Classics', *The Times*, Saturday, 30th July 1988, p. 11.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Further letters were published in *The Times* from the President of Birkbeck's Students' Union, John Allan, on 2nd August – citing the 'critical financial position of higher education in general' – and from faculty and department heads connected to Classics at the college, on 4th August.¹⁴¹ The latter, from Francis Ames-Lewis (Head of Humanities Resource Centre), Mayer (Head of Classics) and Hamlyn (Head of Philosophy), insisted:

if the closure goes ahead, we intend none the less to continue to offer part-time classics degree courses by other means. Classicists from all other colleges at the University of London have been invited to collaborate with us in providing teaching in the classics for part-time students based at Birkbeck.¹⁴²

Such correspondence, published to a wide, national readership, reflects the strength of feeling provoked by the UGC plan not just among Birkbeck staff and students, but members of a wider academic community. Furthermore, the last letter, in particular, was prescient both on the subsequent fate of Classics, and the response of classicists across the University.

The closure of Classics at Birkbeck did go ahead, but with a compromise for the UGC planners: while the department's staff were officially transferred to King's College, Jane Rowlandson was seconded back to Birkbeck by King's, to run a reduced classics programme.¹⁴³ Rowlandson thus remained at the college, along with secretary Elizabeth Dove, to provide evening tuition for BA and MA students.¹⁴⁴ In part, this was a

¹⁴¹ 'Classical Values in Adult Studies', *The Times*, Tuesday, 2nd August 1988, p. 11; 'Birkbeck Closure', *The Times*, Thursday, 4th August 1988, p. 11.

¹⁴² 'Birkbeck Closure', *The Times*, Thursday, 4th August 1988, p. 11.

¹⁴³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 000, p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

continuation measure for existing Classics students.¹⁴⁵ Under the terms of the merger, new student numbers for the diminished department were to be capped;¹⁴⁶ recruitment to the programme was also to be subject to a ‘continuous review process’ after autumn 1989.¹⁴⁷ The situation regarding postgraduate teaching and research, meanwhile, was not confirmed.¹⁴⁸ That the merger was ad-hoc is also suggested by the way staff were transferred to King’s: according to Mayer, Head of Classics at the time, the move was flawed because the department’s academics were contracted to Birkbeck, not the University. Mayer maintains that:

I look on this notion of a transfer as bogus – it was. I threatened to sue Birkbeck for breaking my contract and making me redundant, and in the end, they paid out. King’s gave me a new contract – so there was no transfer.¹⁴⁹

In addition to the merger’s limited and ad-hoc nature, was perhaps a sense of phasing out. For Giangrande, in particular, the mandatory transfer meant an official end to future postgraduate teaching and research.¹⁵⁰ According to White, who went with Giangrande, the professor was restricted to his own work. She recalled that, ‘He was told at King’s College that he wasn’t allowed to take any new students.’¹⁵¹ Similarly, Mayer suggested

¹⁴⁵ Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:13:10.

¹⁴⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 000, p. 2. New admissions for Classics were limited to forty per year (sixteen BA students; twenty-four MA students).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-7.

¹⁴⁹ Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:15:00.

¹⁵⁰ According to Mayer, poor personal-professional relations between Giangrande and Blackstone, as Master, might have contributed to the final decision to transfer Classics to King’s College. Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:15:22.

¹⁵¹ White, 23rd January 2020, 01:00:58.

Giangrande may have had to agree to early retirement, and that, ‘It was a matter of winding down.’¹⁵²

Considering all the reductions, disruptions and restrictions imposed as part of the transfer to King’s, the response of Birkbeck’s Classics staff was remarkable. Notably, Rowlandson, despite inauspicious circumstances and strict conditions, managed to maintain a BA and MA Classics degree programme at the college beyond the immediate short-term, and into the 1990s. According to Mayer, the University had seen the de facto head’s role as simply one of oversight for existing students. Mayer suggested that, ‘Jane was taken on in theory just to see those students who were already registered for classics degrees of various kinds through to the end of their degrees.’¹⁵³ Rowlandson, however, went beyond this duty, securing new admissions. As Mayer recalled, ‘the strange thing was [...] they started [...] registering first-year students in classics programmes.’¹⁵⁴ He added that Rowlandson, who died in 2018, was ‘a very dogged woman’ who ‘looked after her students in Birkbeck extremely well’.¹⁵⁵ This recruitment of new students, and the consequent continuation of part-time classics degrees at the college into the 1990s, was perhaps more against institutional expectations than rules.¹⁵⁶ Transgressions were made by Giangrande, meanwhile, who continued to accept new postgraduates unofficially at King’s, despite strict instruction not to do so. White recalled that, ‘They said he couldn’t take any new students [...] they came anyway, sort of thing.’¹⁵⁷ She added that, ‘two or three came from Oviedo, Spain [...] he supervised them in his room at King’s.’¹⁵⁸ Moreover, White herself, who had worked with Giangrande without

¹⁵² Mayer, 14th January 2020, 00:43:48.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 00:53:33.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 00:54:25.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 00:58:16.

¹⁵⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 000, p. 2. As noted above, a limited number of new BA and MA admissions were permitted under the terms of the merger.

¹⁵⁷ White, 23rd January 2020, 01:00:58.

¹⁵⁸ White, 23rd January 2020, 01:01:31.

institutional funding since 1981, continued as a Research Officer alongside the professor even after the transfer; she was well-known at Birkbeck, but not contracted to the college or King's, and as such was unofficial.¹⁵⁹

Similarly, Emma Dench, who succeeded Rowlandson as de facto head of the ongoing classics programme at Birkbeck in 1991-92, recalled a furtive atmosphere, stating that, 'It felt to me almost like a secret operation, that the classics degrees were still running.'¹⁶⁰ This sense was perhaps a result of classics degrees continuing at the college, even as the Classics department came to an end: Dench, an ancient historian, was hired by the Department of History, and from there took over responsibility for running the classics programme.¹⁶¹ The new recruit was only 29 years old and still to receive her DPhil from Oxford on taking up her post.¹⁶² She remembered entering a 'really difficult situation',¹⁶³ one with 'very, very complicated politics'.¹⁶⁴ Soon after starting she received a file with press cuttings on the UGC's verdict and the transfer to King's.¹⁶⁵ Dench said she 'realised what was at stake' in her position, and that it was 'terrifying'.¹⁶⁶ She reflected that, 'When you first start an academic job you think it's your fault; but when I look back on it, it was an unbelievable position to be put in.'¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, Dench, now a professor with administrative powers at Harvard, suggested that the decision to recruit a junior academic to run the classics programme perhaps reflected a low level of institutional belief in the future of the discipline at Birkbeck. She explained

¹⁵⁹ Indeed, White continued to research and publish in collaboration with Giangrande even after his retirement from King's, and until the professor's death in 2013. White, 23rd January 2020, 00:02:12; 00:02:22; 00:02:41.

¹⁶⁰ Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:35:48.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 00:10:14.

¹⁶² Ibid., 00:09:56.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 00:08:40.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 00:06:29.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 00:22:04. It is likely that the file was given to Dench by Francis Ames-Lewis, Head of Humanities, and one of the Birkbeck staff responsible for a campaigning letter in *The Times*.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 00:22:04; 00:24:11.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 00:14:58.

that, ‘I could be thrown under the bus I suppose [...] and it would just be a very mundane story – that you got in somebody very inexperienced, and she made a pig’s ear of it.’¹⁶⁸ She added that, ‘I honestly don’t know if anybody knew whether the classics degrees were viable at that point.’¹⁶⁹ Such testimony clearly illustrates the continued precariousness of classics at Birkbeck in the early 1990s – and the personal and professional challenges presented as a consequence.

Again, however, action in support of classics at the college was as effective as it was perhaps unexpected. For Dench, help provided by ‘unbelievably generous’ academic colleagues was critical in enabling the maintenance of a part-time classics programme.¹⁷⁰ In one way this was individual, with Rowlandson offering one-to-one guidance on the new classics setup, even after her official departure.¹⁷¹ But it was also collective, with ex-Birkbeck Classics staff now at King’s, plus other colleagues from across the University, rescheduling daytime classes to help provide evening tuition for part-time students. Dench recalled that:

they used to call it the ‘Classics Consortium’ [...] there was a small panel of faculty, largely the people who had formerly been at Birkbeck, and one or two others, who essentially volunteered to help run the classics programme.¹⁷²

She added that while the participating classicists were paid by their home colleges for evening teaching, they still had to persuade their own full-time undergraduates to attend

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 00:24:11.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 00:26:37.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 00:14:58.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 00:10:41.

¹⁷² Ibid., 00:12:47. The idea of a ‘consortium’ to share classics teaching across the University had been proposed as part of the Master’s pre-merger plea to the University; the collective solution was also outlined by Ames-Lewis, Hamlyn and Mayer in their letter to *The Times*. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 145, pp. 1-3; ‘Birkbeck Closure’, *The Times*, Thursday, 4th August 1988, p. 11.

classes as late as six o'clock.¹⁷³ In addition to this staff support, Dench found a source of strength in her Birkbeck students, the majority of whom were mature and part-time. She recalled that despite the early difficulties of her job, 'The idea of teaching adults who were really committed to learning [...] was really appealing.'¹⁷⁴ Dench claimed that students on the continuing classics programme 'came from all walks of life';¹⁷⁵ and, that they included, for example, 'older women who'd brought up kids [...] and always wanted something for themselves'.¹⁷⁶ She also cited the particular difficulty for her students of learning an inflected language part-time and remembered one individual, based in Peterborough, who taught himself Greek during regular rail commutes to London (for daytime work, and evening classes at the college).¹⁷⁷

Such commitment among classics students at Birkbeck, particularly those facing the challenges of part-time learning, had historically in many cases reflected a will to progress professionally. White cites numerous examples of postgraduates who studied part-time under Giangrande in the 1970s and went on to secure positions at universities and other organisations.¹⁷⁸ But as suggested above, even during the continued precariousness of classics at the college in the early 1990s, this student spirit also perhaps reflected something deeper, relating to the pursuit of knowledge. While Dench can be personally credited for the overall continuation of classics degrees at Birkbeck following Rowlandson's departure, she is particularly proud of having secured the reinstatement of beginners' Latin and Greek at the college by the mid-1990s.¹⁷⁹ Dench said that she

¹⁷³ Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:42:46. As Dench points out, in some cases those who volunteered to teach in evenings also had to make arrangements with their families for late finishes to working days. *Ibid.*, 01:01:34.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 00:15:50.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 01:06:15.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 01:04:33.

¹⁷⁸ White, 23rd January 2020, 01:07:46.

¹⁷⁹ Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:46:48. According to Dench, Birkbeck Registrar Brian Harwood also played a vital part in the reintroduction of the beginners' classes.

considered the achievement ‘a coup’ and a ‘no-brainer’.¹⁸⁰ She explained that it ‘meant we could completely open up the classics’ to students who wished to learn about the ancient world, but had not studied its languages in school.¹⁸¹ The move also meant that the classics programme, via the Department of History, could recruit more students – and thus increase the likelihood of its own survival.¹⁸² Indeed, one might view the relationship between student commitment, staff commitment and changes to the programme’s structure as a positive cycle that enabled the continuation of classics at Birkbeck through the 1990s. Such progress resulted in the recruitment of a new classics academic, albeit by the Department of History, by the late 1990s – the first appointment in the discipline at Birkbeck since Dench herself.¹⁸³ Furthermore, the success of the programme under Dench culminated in the reincorporation of the discipline within a joint School of History, Classics and Archaeology by 1999-2000. As Dench explained, ‘That didn’t precipitate change, it more reflected classics is here to stay.’¹⁸⁴ She added: ‘It was like the experimental period was over.’¹⁸⁵

Conclusion

As Collini suggests, prevailing arguments over the purpose of higher education – including ideas on the ‘uselessness’ of classics – are so hackneyed as to be made abstract. Similarly, efforts to critique pervasive changes to universities nationwide, particularly since the late

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Emmanuele Curti, an ancient historian, was hired by the Department of History in 1996. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 22. Catharine Edwards, a classicist, was recruited in 2001. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 2001-02* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 2001), p. 23. Dench formally left Birkbeck to take up a post at Harvard in 2006-07, having been a Visiting Professor at the US institution in 2005-06. Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:03:13.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 00:51:03.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 00:53:46.

1970s, often lead only to ‘rhetorical overkill’.¹⁸⁶ This chapter has purposefully steered away from abstraction: instead, it has introduced novel historical perspectives on recent shifts in classics – and UK higher education more broadly – through the close examination of the discipline’s development at one institution, Birkbeck, from 1963 to 2003. Its findings were presented in four sections. Section one, *Community*, surveyed in detail the staffing, funding and structure of classics at the college during the period. Section two, *Conflict*, investigated individual relations between classics academics and senior college staff, with a particular focus on Giangrande – exploring what Rothblatt calls ‘the play of personalities too intricate for summary’.¹⁸⁷ Section three, *Crises*, analysed how the department responded to a series of funding cuts and freezes in the 1960s and 1970s. And section four, *Crisis*, examined in depth the existential crisis and closure faced by classics at Birkbeck in the 1980s and – vitally – the reactions of its staff and students, ending in the discipline’s reincorporation within a joint School of History, Classics and Archaeology.

Subsequently, this chapter presents a number of conclusions. Firstly, that classics at Birkbeck, 1963 to 2003, can be most usefully understood not simply as a teaching and research unit, but as an academic *community* – with its own concerns and links, inside and outside of the college. Secondly, that classics comprised complex interpersonal relationships, sometimes resulting in conflict – and that such clashes can help to circumscribe limits of authority, and agency, at different levels: individual, department, faculty, college, and so on. Thirdly, that with institutional support this community was able to withstand a number of challenges in the 1960s and 1970s, prior to a pivotal year of 1980-81. Fourthly, and finally, that a most vital aspect in the recent history of classics at Birkbeck was the determination of academics and students to continue their work – significantly, including part-time – even in

¹⁸⁶ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 52.

¹⁸⁷ Rothblatt, ‘The Writing of University History’, p. 153.

the face of departmental dissolution. Ultimately, it is this continued, communal pursuit of knowledge that defined classics at the college during the period. And it is this sustained intellectual endeavour, despite shifts in policy and circumstances, that might most effectively help us to understand the purpose of a classics department and institution specialising in part-time and mature teaching and research. While some might consider classics, and in particular part-time classics, as a prime example of university knowledge pursued ‘for its own sake’, in reality such provision only confirms that ‘the drive towards understanding can never accept an arbitrary stopping-point’.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 55.

Expansion

‘Expansion, we should emphasize, was not a simple linear progression.’¹

A. H. Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion* (1995)

‘Mass, unlike elite, higher education cannot be summed up in a single totalising idea. Instead, it has plural meanings.’²

Peter Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education* (1995)

‘This was a game that we had to play – it was either play the game or go under.’³

Professor David Feldman, faculty member, HCA, Birkbeck (1994 - present)

Introduction

In the four decades following the 1963 Robbins Report the higher education landscape surrounding Birkbeck and HCA underwent a seismic shift. For Peter Mandler, the period from Robbins to the early 2000s can be considered ‘a single arc of massifying educational provision’.⁴ Indeed, by 1990, nationwide expansion of universities, with student numbers rising every year, had smashed targets set by the 1963 Report;⁵ by 2000, a further forecast,

¹ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 103.

² Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 168.

³ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:29:50; 00:07:25.

⁴ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 154.

⁵ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 91.

contained in a 1991 White Paper, had been exceeded by almost a third.⁶ This dramatic growth in higher education resulted both from ‘demand’ (public hunger for more university places) and ‘supply’ (government policies, across political parties, feeding this popular appetite). As A. H. Halsey suggests, however, mass expansion was not in fact ‘a simple linear progression’: a slump in the 1970s due to demographic and economic factors effectively divided the ‘massification’ of UK higher education into two sub-periods – limited growth from 1963 to the early 1970s, and a resumption of expansion, with much greater force, starting from the mid- to late 1980s. Critically, mass expansion of universities, particularly from 1979, following the election of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, was also entangled with drastic changes to external funding and scrutiny. These shifts in-turn reflected deeper tensions over whether university learning should be considered as ‘investment’ or ‘consumption’;⁷ and what status it should have in a deindustrialised, ‘knowledge economy’.⁸ Meanwhile, although the most significant growth over the period was in part-time and mature study, government policies consistently conceived of university as a system primarily for full-time school leavers.

The departments of HCA at Birkbeck were transformed as a result of the vast move towards mass higher education. HCA’s academic staff more than doubled in size – from a combined total of twelve academics in 1963-64, shared between separate departments of History (eight) and Classics (four), to a total of *thirty* in 2003-04, working in a joint unit of History, Classics and Archaeology.⁹ Broadly, this faculty expansion was in line with university trends nationwide: initial growth in the 1960s; slower increases leading to stagnation – and even decline – during the 1970s and 1980s; and, a resumed expansion, at the

⁶ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 25.

⁷ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-64*, p. 60 and p. 87; Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-2004*, pp. 25-26. This total figure for 2003-04 includes Hobsbawm and Mason as Emeritus Professors, and one member of ‘Research’ staff – Angela Poulter. The joint HCA also had three administrators: Ann Brennan, Leoncia Flynn and David Jones.

highest rate in the period, by the 1990s.¹⁰ Similarly, HCA also had to navigate new obstacles facing all higher education institutions en route to mass participation – most notably, severe changes to external scrutiny and funding, including a first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1985-86 and the introduction of student fees after 1997. Furthermore, there were particular institutional shifts within Birkbeck, in response to outside pressures, including the replacement of its Faculties with ‘Resource Centres’ in 1987-88¹¹ and the creation of the joint entity of HCA in 1999-2000.¹² For academics within HCA, then, the transition to mass higher education was not simply a matter of scale – but of structure, too. Crucially, these new pressures on teaching and research routines also disrupted HCA’s fundamental, departmental purpose: university provision for part-time and mature students.

Changes to the working lives of academics in UK universities are a key concern in many critical analyses of the national move to mass higher education since Robbins. Halsey charted a decline of academic autonomy, or ‘donnish dominion’, as he memorably labelled it, arguing that such impact was limited – and could be considered ‘worse’ by traditionalists, or ‘different’ by reformists.¹³ More recently, Mandler has claimed that ‘left-wing critics have fixated too much on the *means* apparently used to bring about mass education’;¹⁴ that is, the politics and policies that shape the ‘supply’ of mass university provision.¹⁵ For Mandler, greater attention should be paid to public ‘demand’, as a driving force behind ‘massification’.¹⁶ Accordingly, the post-Robbins transition might be seen as a triumph for democracy – and one associated as much, if not more, with the political right.¹⁷ Yet, as Collini suggests, higher education politics and policies, which have also led to changes in the

¹⁰ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 221.

¹¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 000, p. 2.

¹² Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 21.

¹³ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 100.

¹⁴ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 144.

¹⁵ Stefan Collini, ‘Snakes and Ladders’, *London Review of Books*, 43:7 (2021), pp. 15-22 (p. 16).

¹⁶ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 169.

¹⁷ Collini, ‘Snakes and Ladders’, p. 16.

character of institutions at the receiving end of this triumph, can be further critiqued.¹⁸ For Collini, Mandler's more positive assessment is problematic in part because it fails to adequately challenge a prevalent conception of higher education 'exclusively in terms of preparation for the labour market'.¹⁹ Notably, the analyses of both Mandler and Collini are overwhelmingly focused on higher education for 18- to 25-year-olds. Meanwhile, as Scott observes, university departments have been key sites of contestation between deep, external pressures of mass expansion, and the internal maintenance of academic values and practices.²⁰

HCA at Birkbeck provides a particularly useful focus for research on the transition to mass higher education, due to its unique relation to the many contentions outlined above. Birkbeck and HCA within it were long-standing forerunners of the revolutionary, post-Robbins push towards higher education for all – the college's 1823 mission of university provision for workers made it somewhat traditional *and* reformist by 1963. Similarly, the exceptional standard of its tuition for part-time and mature students made it both democratic *and* elite; its offer of degrees to careerists and 'leisure learners' alike made them both investment *and* consumption goods. Perhaps most significantly, its academics, situated in an institution devoted to the democratisation of higher education, still had to navigate the politics and policies, managerialism and marketisation, that underlay the national shift to mass university participation. As such, HCA provides a special lens through which to examine what Scott terms the 'plural meanings' of mass higher education.²¹ This chapter therefore asks: How and why did HCA's faculty expand between 1963 and 2003? What impact did expansion have on the character and ethos of its departments? To what extent was the overall identity and purpose of HCA – and Birkbeck – altered? And how might changes

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁰ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 160.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

within HCA as a result of mass expansion relate to shifts in UK higher education more broadly? These questions are approached through four sections: section one, *Limited Expansion*, looks at the immediate post-Robbins era, including the 1970s slump (1963-1979); section two, *Scrutinised Expansion*, analyses expansion in relation to increased government scrutiny (1979-1989); section three, *Major Expansion*, examines the resumption of mass expansion under the Conservatives (1990-1997); and section four, *Playing the Game*, considers the gains and costs of expansion in a new, New Labour era (1997-2003).

Limited Expansion

For Birkbeck and HCA, the 1963 Robbins Report raised a number of tensions. The major paper powerfully promoted the principle of university education for all qualified applicants.²² Similarly, Birkbeck had since the 1820s been a champion of democratic university admissions. Yet, the primary aim of Robbins was to increase the proportion of 18-year-olds continuing full-time study, from 8.5 per cent to 17 per cent by 1980.²³ As such, its meaning for Birkbeck and HCA – both devoted to university courses for *mature* and *part-time* students – was unclear. This uncertainty surrounding the new Report prompted urgent, top-level talks at the college.²⁴ There was ‘intense argument’ on senior committees convened to discuss Birkbeck’s development, in response to the paper’s plea for a rapid increase in university places.²⁵ ‘Direct confrontation’ was sparked between those who still wished to prioritise part-time teaching, and others who backed a post-Robbins move to more full-time courses.²⁶ Full-time undergraduate admissions were subsequently considered, albeit with a focus on

²² Burke, *The Right to Higher Education*, p. 13.

²³ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 97.

²⁴ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

sciences, where practical lab work stood to benefit most from consecutive teaching hours.²⁷ HCA was therefore less affected by this early reaction to Robbins. Significantly, however, the Report's meritocratic message also reflected a deeper shift in government thinking, towards higher education as 'investment in human social capital necessary for a modern society'.²⁸ In this way, the government paper represented an initial attempt by the state to align university teaching and research with economic aims – a move that *was* to have major consequences for HCA in the decades to follow.

A sign of future trouble for HCA due to closer links between government higher education policy and national economic priorities came in the early 1970s, as the Robbins wave subsided. Several factors had combined in the decade following the 1963 Report to cause a slump in the trajectory and funding of mass university participation. Memorably, the student troubles of the late 1960s had been followed by the oil crisis of 1973.²⁹ There was also state disillusionment with the returns of 'human-capital investments' in higher education,³⁰ and, most significantly, an evident over-estimation of the number of school leavers seeking university places, as originally predicted by Robbins.³¹ This last aspect represented an acute problem for Birkbeck and HCA. In the college's 1973-74 annual report, the Master, Ronald C. Tress, had raised doubts over whether the government understood Birkbeck's unique part-time and mature provision. According to Tress, the college's commitment to 'recurrent education' lay outside a prevailing, linear concept of university solely for students starting at age 18 or 19.³² This lack of understanding became critical when the government reacted to the Robbins school-leavers shortfall by introducing 'cutbacks of

²⁷ Ibid. Birkbeck already offered full-time postgraduate tuition. Ibid., p. 80.

²⁸ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 104.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

³⁰ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 139.

³¹ Ibid., p. 96.

³² Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 10.

some severity'.³³ These crude reductions hit Birkbeck harder than most institutions, due to its high proportion of mature learners – a demographic not considered in the Robbins readjustment.³⁴

For HCA, these government cuts caused detrimental impacts on staff recruitment and promotions. The Head of Birkbeck's Department of History, Michael Wilks, was informed by the Master on 13th January 1976 to expect a general freeze on academic appointments.³⁵ On 29th January 1976, Giangrande, of the Department of Classics, was firmly told by Birkbeck's Deputy Secretary, R. E. Swainson, that his request for a Research Assistant could not be approved because 'no finance is being provided for increases in establishment'.³⁶ Giangrande was also reminded that, 'even promotions and regradings amongst existing staff have been frozen for the past two years.'³⁷ These disruptions contributed to an overall decline in the expansion of academic staff in HCA: between 1963 and 1973, the combined total number of academics in the departments of History and Classics increased by a third; between 1973 and 1983, this joint increase in faculty fell to less than a fifth.³⁸ Shattock and Horvath observe that, 'Higher education was never at the forefront of British government

³³ Peter G. Moore, 'University Financing 1979-86', in *The Creation of a University System*, ed. by Michael Shattock (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 187-201 (p. 187).

³⁴ In 1973-74, Birkbeck had a total of 2,387 students, with the vast majority over the age of 22 (almost 88 per cent) and part-time (more than 87 per cent). Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 11.

³⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 055. The Master, Ronald C. Tress, did allow one exception for the Department of History, to enable the replacement of a recent retiree, Alwyn Ruddock.

³⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 020. Swainson also confirmed that potential funding for five new research posts was included in Birkbeck's quinquennial plan for 1977-82, but added that 'no action is possible until the financial situation becomes clearer'.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ These figures are based on a like-for-like comparison of total full-time academic staff numbers in the departments of History and Classics in the academic years 1962-63, 1972-73 and 1982-83. They do not include figures for the Department of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology, which was briefly established as an adjunct of the Department of English at Birkbeck from 1979-80 to 1982-83, with a total of two full-time academic staff, including Head of Department Professor Vera Evison. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-64*, p. 60 and p. 87; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1973-74* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1973), p. 21 and 23; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1983-84*, p. 24 and pp. 26-27.

thinking after 1963 [...] There were too many other, bigger issues around.’³⁹ Indeed, part-time and mature higher education was perhaps even less of a concern.

While there might have been a lack of government recognition, however, there was also an absence of outside interference. Later phases of the national transition to mass higher education were punctuated by political drives towards managerialism, marketisation and metrics – all with consequent increases in external scrutiny, and internal paperwork. Indeed, already by the 1970s, the UK’s Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) was warning against an ingress of non-academic governance.⁴⁰ Similarly, the University Grants Committee (UGC) was starting to lose its power as a protective ‘buffer’ between the state and institutions.⁴¹ Yet, even in the mid- to late part of the decade, scholars in HCA at Birkbeck still enjoyed a considerable amount of time and flexibility. Emma Mason, first recruited by the Department of History in 1962-63 as a secretary, recalled being able to focus instead on research work because ‘there was practically no administration in those days’.⁴² This situation remained much the same in the 1970s, despite the early expansion of HCA in the immediate post-Robbins period, and its more limited growth during the subsequent slump. Notwithstanding the pressures of cuts and freezes, the working lives of academics in the departments of History and Classics were still largely clear of administrative tasks related to external oversight – or in fact, much paperwork at all. Indeed, Birkbeck was particular in that its academics, committed to evening teaching, had daytimes mostly free for research – leading some to label the college ‘the poor man’s All Souls’.⁴³

³⁹ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ In 1970, Lord Annan, then Provost of University College London (UCL), produced a paper on university governance for the CVCP, in which he proclaimed, ‘We prefer self government [sic] by the academic staff.’ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴¹ As Moore identifies, the university funding cuts of 1973-74 significantly damaged the UGC’s status as a defender of university interests: ‘The turning off of the capital tap removed one of the UGC’s most powerful weapons.’ Moore, ‘University Financing 1979-86’, p. 188.

⁴² Dr Edith ‘Emma’ Mason, interviewed by the author on 10th October 2019, 00:01:20.

⁴³ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 269. Again, Hobsbawm used this term – a light-hearted reference to All Souls College (University of Oxford), which had no students and did no teaching.

Professor Roy Foster, who first joined the Department of History at Birkbeck in 1974-75, recalled the liberty enjoyed by faculty members during the decade:

In the '70s it was heaven because the British Museum, as it then was – the British Library wasn't built, you know, it was another era – you just crossed the road, went in the back entrance to the British Museum and worked during the day, or had long boozy lunches with friends, or wrote journalism, or did whatever you wanted.⁴⁴

Foster remembered that

You began teaching at six, but you saw undergraduates usually from about five, I guess. Heavyweight teaching three nights a week was sort of average – but you could pretty well be sure of having Fridays to yourself.⁴⁵

This freedom enjoyed by HCA academics – and others at Birkbeck – was not simply an indulgence, however; it served a vital institutional purpose in attracting and retaining leading scholars. These in turn, helped to raise and maintain uniquely high standards of teaching and research for part-time and mature students. As Foster explained:

That's why people wrote books. And that's why, of course, people like Barbara Hardy [the literary scholar] and Bernard Crick [the political theorist] and Eric Hobsbawm, who could have gone anywhere in the world, stayed – because they had this terrific latitude.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:01:56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 00:02:15.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 00:02:31.

It didn't last, however. By the late 1970s, as Moore observes, 'modest expansion' of higher education was 'still in the air';⁴⁷ by the 1980s, pent-up popular demand for more degrees attracted renewed political attention.⁴⁸ Between these factors came the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government – and with it, a radical new scrutiny of university time and money.

Scrutinised Expansion

As Halsey observes, in response to economic crisis and decline, the 1970s in Britain saw a 'dramatic shift' in attitudes towards 'idleness'.⁴⁹ A political parallel was drawn between the relaxed regime, or 'constructive research creativity', of academia, and 'overmanning, the perpetual tea-break, sleeping bags on the night-shift' across industry.⁵⁰ With the 1979 election of Thatcher's market-oriented government came 'strident challenges' to higher education's promise of a 'paying investment for the nation'.⁵¹ As Halsey states:

Clearly, then, for the 1980s, either retrenchment or a sombrely revised programme of education expansion with very different assumptions about the funding and working conditions of intellectual labour had to come.⁵²

Reduced university expansion subsequently turned to retreat, with the introduction of severe cuts to government higher education funding in 1981.⁵³ At Birkbeck, the Emergency

⁴⁷ Moore, 'University Financing 1979-86', p. 188.

⁴⁸ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 124.

⁴⁹ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 107.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Planning Committee (EPC) was established in response to the reductions. This new body promptly announced ‘drastic measures’, including cutting almost a quarter from departmental budgets.⁵⁴ On 17th November 1981, the Head of History, Wilks, was notified by the college’s Deputy Secretary, Swainson, that his department’s non-salary budget for the year, to cover everything from stationery to hospitality, had been cut by a quarter to only £750.⁵⁵ No supplementary funding was to be considered. As cited in Chapter 2, *The Battle for Birkbeck*, Wilks was advised by the Assistant Secretary for Personnel, Heather Harris, on 29th October, that ‘regretfully’ and ‘in light of the [EPC]’s decisions’, a replacement departmental secretary for a recent resignee, Seana Cahill, could not be funded.⁵⁶ Similarly, the Head of Classics, David Hamlyn, had been flatly told by Birkbeck’s Master, W. G. Overend, on 30th September, that a permanent secretary could not be replaced in his department.⁵⁷ These were obviously not academic posts, but such vacancies had an indirect impact on teaching and research in HCA.⁵⁸

The ‘marked change of approach’ in government towards higher education expansion under Thatcher targeted not just how universities were financed, but how they were administered.⁵⁹ As Scott notes, one ‘short-term response’ by the new Conservative administration was to ‘tighten up the management of institutions’.⁶⁰ This managerialist push was marked by the publication of the 1985 Jarratt Report, on ‘Efficiency Studies in

⁵⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 002, p. 1. On 16th October 1981, Birkbeck’s EPC approved a ‘package of non-pay economies’ for 1981-82, aimed at saving a combined £376,600; these included a reduction in the college’s total budget for departmental maintenance grants, from £261,000 to £200,000.

⁵⁵ Ibid. The Department of History’s equivalent budget for 1980-81 had been £1,000; already by that year, a revised system for calculating departmental budgets had been introduced at Birkbeck. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 001, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 130. Wilks was informed some months later, on 1st June 1982, that Birkbeck was prepared to fund a part-time secretary ‘on a temporary hourly basis’. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 135.

⁵⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 110.

⁵⁸ HCA was further hit by shifts to national university finances in August 1984, when changes to UGC funding criteria prompted a cut in Birkbeck’s ‘field course’ budgets – money used by History to fund its annual, off-campus symposium. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09 File 9-D 008.

⁵⁹ Moore, ‘University Financing 1979-86’, p. 188.

⁶⁰ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 170.

Universities’.⁶¹ The Report called on university councils – that is, non-academic, or ‘lay’ bodies – to ‘assert themselves’; it also encouraged vice chancellors to act more like CEOs.⁶² Academics in HCA were sent a copy of the Jarratt Report by Birkbeck’s Master, Overend, on 24th April 1985.⁶³ The college subsequently set up a working group in May, to prepare an official response.⁶⁴ On 27th June, this group accepted a recommendation in the Report that every Head of Department at Birkbeck, including those in HCA, engage more actively in ‘staff development, appraisal and accountability’.⁶⁵ On 12th May 1986, Overend also wrote to the heads of all departments urging immediate adoption of an ‘Operational Plan’, to pool purchasing of goods and services.⁶⁶ Significantly, a separate Birkbeck review of the Jarratt Report also highlighted the external inquiry’s failure to appreciate the unique financial management challenges of smaller higher education institutions.⁶⁷ Moreover, this additional college report noted that, ‘for part-time students there are problems about fee collection which are not fully examined.’⁶⁸

The reception of the Jarratt Report at Birkbeck also led in 1986 to an internal enquiry, a ‘Committee on Restructuring’, chaired by Sir Barney Hayhoe MP.⁶⁹ One practical implication of this development for HCA was the appointment of Roderick Floud, Head of

⁶¹ Moore, ‘University Financing 1979-86’, p. 194. The Jarratt Report was jointly commissioned by the UGC and CVCP in 1984-85; it was chaired by Sir Alex Jarratt, with eleven other members from universities and industry.

⁶² Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 5. The Jarratt Report also contained the first use of the term ‘chief executive’ in relation to universities. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁶³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 001. HCA scholars were sent a ‘photo-reduced’ version of the Report’s ‘essential part’; the full report was too expensive to purchase multiple copies.

⁶⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 002.

⁶⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 003, p. 1. The working group, chaired by the Master, W. G. Overend, conceded that some decision-making structures at the college were ‘cumbersome’; but it also expressed doubts over the introduction of external ‘performance indicators’, and criticised the Jarratt Report for failing to appreciate ‘the university ethos’. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 004, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 005, pp. 1-5. A formal response to Jarratt on behalf of Birkbeck, including this extra college report’s conclusions, was sent by the Vice Chancellor of the University of London, Lord Flowers, to Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, Chair of the UGC, on 27th November 1986. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 006, pp. 1-14. Birkbeck, under the University, was also obliged to report annual data on ‘efficiency gains’ in subsequent years. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 008.

⁶⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J 006, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J Jarratt Report 009, p. 2.

Department in History, to the new panel for two terms.⁷⁰ The Hayhoe Committee reported in early 1987, and its recommendations were approved by the college's Governors, for implementation from 1st August that year.⁷¹ HCA was subsequently affected by the Committee's most radical recommendation – the replacement of Birkbeck's traditional faculty structure with several new 'Resource Centres'.⁷² As a follow-up report by Birkbeck's Deputy Secretary, Swainson, to senior colleagues at the University of London explained:

The twenty-two departments of the College have been grouped into seven Resource (Cost) Centres, each under a Head with executive support. The Head of each Centre has wide administrative and financial powers and has taken over most of the functions formerly exercised by Heads of Departments: the latter have been replaced by Convenors with limited responsibilities.⁷³

Swainson's summary report also confirmed that Birkbeck's Heads of Department Committee, which met once a term and reported to the Academic Board, had been 'abolished'.⁷⁴ Here then, were clear transfers of authority, in direct response to the external pressures of the Jarratt Report, away from the departments of HCA. Notably, Floud, seconded from History, also confessed that it was difficult to remember involvement with the Hayhoe Committee, because his long university career had been subject to 'constant management reorganisation'.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File1-1-7/1 196. The Department of History had to buy in additional part-time teaching to cover Floud's absence – with backing from the Master, Overend.

⁷¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J Jarratt Report 009, p. 2.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 4. The Heads of Department Committee's responsibility for academic staff promotions was transferred to a central Staffing Committee at Birkbeck, which also had responsibilities for non-academic staff.

⁷⁵ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:32:58.

Further external pressure on the way higher education institutions including Birkbeck were run was applied through the introduction of the RAE in 1985-86.⁷⁶ As Shattock and Horvath observe, ‘the original rationale of the first [RAE] was primarily to redistribute funding from the least to the most research-active areas in universities.’⁷⁷ As such, the RAE represented a further attempt by the Thatcher government to increase the ‘efficiency’ of higher education. The new measure was also responsible for promoting the marketisation of universities: RAE league table positions, first published in the press after the 1985-86 Exercise, stimulated a market for new students; the institutional incentives – that is, research funding – attached to positive RAE results also stimulated a market in ‘RAE-able’ staff.⁷⁸ In this way, the RAE encouraged a shift of institutional focus away from teaching and towards research – a particularly risky trend for Birkbeck and HCA, with their long-standing commitment to a unique model of university tuition for part-time and mature students. In the 1988-89 RAE, HCA – then consisting of separate departments of History and Classics – failed to make Birkbeck’s list of top-performing units for research;⁷⁹ but this had changed dramatically by the 1992 Exercise (a development examined further in section three, *Major Expansion*, below). Engagement with the new RAE process for HCA also involved an inevitable increase in departmental administration – a further pressure on academics already juggling teaching and research.

The introduction of this new external scrutiny was not wholly unwelcome within HCA, however. Floud recalled that research across universities in the period of the first RAE was ‘disorganised in the extreme’.⁸⁰ He explained that

⁷⁶ The RAE ran in 1986, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008; it was replaced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) for 2014. Jump, ‘Evolution of Evaluation’, pp. 34-40.

⁷⁷ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 22.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁹ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Annual Report, 1988-89* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1989), p. 7.

⁸⁰ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:41:28.

There was essentially no research supervision of academic staff [...] it was expected that they would do research, but nothing really happened if they didn't – other than it made it more difficult to get themselves promoted. There was absolutely no sense of any kind of research strategy of the department, or for individuals.⁸¹

Floud continued:

It wasn't specific to Birkbeck at all. And although you can argue that [the RAE] has put lots of pressure on, administrative burdens and so on [...] I think that the situation, as I remember it, was essentially inexcusable.⁸²

Richard Evans, who joined History in 1989-90, and was put in charge of the department's PhD programme, also remembered being shocked at a prevailing lack of research oversight:

Foster got me to be in charge of the PhD students – all of them part-time, of course, that's the point. I found out there had not been a mail shot to all the PhD students for five years, so I sent one out. I got two letters returned marked 'recipient deceased'; I had dead students on the books – it was like Gogol's *Dead Souls*.⁸³

According to Floud, a similar lack of organisation in HCA at Birkbeck – and universities more broadly – existed in relation to teaching around the time of the first RAEs.

As he recalled:

⁸¹ Ibid., 00:38:51; 00:39:13.

⁸² Ibid., 00:41:28; 00:41:54.

⁸³ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:39:19.

Individuals were appointed to a particular post and then allowed to just get on with it. And there was no form of supervision, no form of mentoring. There was very little help with teaching.⁸⁴

Floud added that after joining HCA, he identified a specific issue, regarding a failure by many of its academic staff to apply specialised methods for teaching part-time and mature students:

Quite a lot of the staff, perhaps naturally – because they were repeating in a sense, what they’d done themselves as undergraduates – were treating the, particularly the undergraduate students, as if they were 18-year-olds.⁸⁵

He continued:

And therefore, the shape of the courses and so on, and the teaching style, were really rather traditional lecture-based, seminar-based courses, which I came to think weren’t really taking full advantage of all the skills and aptitudes of the Birkbeck students.⁸⁶

Floud was made Head of one of Birkbeck’s new Resource Centres from 1987-88. He subsequently sought to rectify the failure he had identified by enlisting experts in adult teaching, ‘to talk to the members of [HCA] and other departments about what the differences

⁸⁴ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:39:43. Floud added that during his first academic job, at University College London, in the 1960s, ‘there were a number of members of staff who’d negotiated a situation in which they only taught in every alternate year – and then not very much.’ Ibid., 00:41:54.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 00:01:01.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 00:01:28.

were between teaching adults and teaching 18-year-olds.’⁸⁷ Notably, this initiative by Floud came around a decade before the 1997 Dearing Report on higher education, which called for the professionalisation of academic teaching in universities nationwide.⁸⁸

Similarly, Evans acted internally to reorganise HCA’s PhD supervision in the early 1990s. Having discovered poor oversight of doctoral students on his arrival at Birkbeck, Evans set about installing an updated system. As he recounted, however, this change was not without complication:

We got all the PhD students on a sort of ‘active’ or ‘not’. Eric Hobsbawm was very worried. He came and explained to me that this and that out of his students would never finish, but they needed it as a psychological prop, and so could I please not strike them from the record. It was his softer side.⁸⁹

Evans was forced to dismiss one student who had been working on a PhD for sixteen years, because the research showed no hope of completion.⁹⁰ Remarkably, another student who had been working on a thesis for *thirty-five* years, but at a more acceptable level, was helped to pass.⁹¹ The interventions by both Floud and Evans in HCA and Birkbeck during the transition to mass higher education point to the existence of not just external pressures, but *internal* shifts. This supports Scott’s suggestion that changes to universities after Robbins arose ‘from within the academic culture’, as well as being imposed.⁹² Significantly, the particular

⁸⁷ Ibid., 00:40:12. In 1987-88, Floud was made Head of Humane Sciences, comprising Classics, History, History of Art, Philosophy, and Politics and Sociology. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1987-88*, p. 18.

⁸⁸ The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *The Dearing Report: Higher Education in the Learning Society* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1997), p. 126. The Dearing Report also called for the creation of a new national body – an ‘Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education’ – to oversee training, standards and innovation for university teachers.

⁸⁹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:40:49.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 00:39:55.

⁹¹ Ibid., 00:39:55; 00:40:24.

⁹² Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 167.

improvements to teaching and supervision outlined above depended on the actions of individual academics. More specifically, they relied on two perceptive scholars – Floud and Evans – with clear understandings of the unique challenges facing staff and students in departments and an institution focused on part-time and mature provision.

Major Expansion

Economic recovery and new political confidence saw a turn in government thinking by the late 1980s, back to support for mass higher education expansion. As Mandler summarises, “More” could now be better, so long as it was more efficient.’⁹³ With increased scrutiny of university funding and management, Conservative Education Secretary Kenneth Baker promoted a more ‘expansive and populist’ approach by 1987;⁹⁴ part of government plans to promote a ‘knowledge economy’.⁹⁵ As Mandler also argues, however, the underlying force of change was still public demand for more higher education.⁹⁶ This popular pressure saw the late switch towards more positive university policy under Thatcher give way to a full-force resumption of mass higher education expansion under John Major’s new Tory administration from 1990.⁹⁷ Halsey maintains that, ‘On [20th] May 1991 the Conservatives, following the other political parties, announced the beginning of the new educational era.’⁹⁸ According to Mandler, they had little choice: the May White Paper announcement was rushed out because student targets set in 1987 had ‘already been so comprehensively exceeded’.⁹⁹ The scale of demand also forced a change in government rhetoric, towards expansion of higher education

⁹³ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 126.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁹⁸ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 109.

⁹⁹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 130.

‘essentially for its own sake’.¹⁰⁰ A growth in student numbers of around 50 per cent was expected by 2000.¹⁰¹ Significantly, for Birkbeck and HCA, this fresh flood also included more arts and humanities applicants, as well as an increase in mature learners.¹⁰²

Birkbeck and HCA had themselves experienced major changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to the post-Jarratt introduction of ‘Resource Centres’, there was also a partial dissolution of the University of London’s federal structure in the early 1990s, giving greater autonomy to constituent colleges, including Birkbeck.¹⁰³ One consequence of this was to remove obligations on HCA staff to teach students from across the University – something which at times had led to ‘huge numbers’ in lecture theatres and seminar rooms.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, despite shifts in government rhetoric and approaches towards higher education, HCA was still subject to the rigours of the recently-introduced RAE. Positively, the 1992 Exercise, under the stewardship of Evans, was a triumph. Evans, working with the modern historian Marianne Elliott, realised that, under the terms of the RAE, the research of both present and *past* HCA academics could be submitted for assessment.¹⁰⁵ As Evans explained, the 1992 Exercise, ‘allowed you to count people who’d left, because they did their research at Birkbeck [...] so you could count in their publications.’¹⁰⁶ By including research from both current scholars and recent departees, including Foster and the colonial historian David M.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Master Tessa Blackstone reported in 1991-92 that at the end of that academic year Birkbeck, along with the University of London’s six other colleges, was to be granted direct and independent access to state university funding. Blackstone added that, ‘This marks an important step towards greater autonomy for Birkbeck and the other [colleges] in what is a changing relationship with the University of London.’ Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1991-92* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1991), p. 3. Further changes came in 1995, with a new academic framework agreed by the University, under which its constituent colleges, including Birkbeck, were now authorised to confer University degrees and to directly appoint and promote academic staff. Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1994-95* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1995), p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:06:08.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 00:31:29.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Anderson, Birkbeck gained a vital advantage.¹⁰⁷ It subsequently beat the University of Oxford in RAE league tables for history, achieving a highest rating of ‘5’, alongside the University of Cambridge (compared to Oxford’s ‘4’).¹⁰⁸ The result was presented by *The Times* as evidence of a more equal higher education system in action.¹⁰⁹ An editorial in the newspaper on 18th December 1992 commented that

Harsh as [the RAE] system is, it is better than the prejudices that have tended to govern perception of university performance. Few laymen would have expected, for example, that Birmingham and Birkbeck College, London, would be judged to have a stronger history department than Oxford.¹¹⁰

For HCA, then, the RAE success was a significant boost for renewed expansion – an ideal advertisement for prospective academic staff and students.

Evans was similarly astute following HCA’s RAE success, as the wave of higher education expansion backed by the Major government reached Birkbeck in the early 1990s. As Head of History from 1991-92, Evans said that he spotted an increase in demand for master’s courses in the capital:

¹⁰⁷ David Anderson was appointed to Birkbeck from the University of Cambridge in 1984 as Lecturer in Imperial and Commonwealth History; he left in 1991 to take a Senior Lecturer post at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). At the time of writing, he was Professor of African History at the University of Warwick. ‘Professor David Anderson’, University of Warwick website, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/people/staff_index/anderson/ [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁰⁸ Birkbeck achieved the RAE’s joint highest rating of ‘5’ for history, alongside Cambridge, the University of Birmingham, King’s College London and London School of Economics. ‘1992 Research Assessment Exercise’, Higher Education Funding Council for England website, <https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/2e179114-259b-4e51-ad7d-11eb90b912b5/1992-research-assessment-exercise> [accessed on 21st February 2023]

¹⁰⁹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:31:29.

¹¹⁰ Editorial, ‘Ranking by Research’, *The Times*, 18th December 1992, p. 15.

The number of people in London in jobs with first degrees boomed – there was a huge boom, beginning about just after Thatcher, I think; and that meant there was a rapidly-growing market for second degrees. And so, there’s a huge market for part-time master’s courses – people who felt their jobs were boring and wanted to carry on with interesting things.¹¹¹

According to Evans, this trend shifted the attraction of HCA and Birkbeck, from ‘A second chance for a first degree’, to ‘A *first* chance for a *second* degree’.¹¹² In response to the booming master’s market, Evans also realised that money from a central Birkbeck part-time teaching fund could be used to finance new MA courses – and academic posts – in HCA. The new MA’s were initially established using part-time teachers; subsequent increases in student-staff ratios were then successfully used by HCA to secure college funds for permanent posts. Evans recalled that

All we had to do is put on a new MA – MA in Modern Europe, an MA in Historical Research – they piled the students in, we taught them for a couple of years – through a big mass lecture, and then [parallel] seminars taught by part-time teachers – and then we got the money from the college to turn that into a permanent lectureship.¹¹³

Through this MA mechanism, Evans helped to considerably expand the Department of History at Birkbeck, from a total of fourteen full-time academic staff in 1991-92, to nineteen by 1997-98.¹¹⁴ Crucially, this change in HCA was not just a matter of numbers – it

¹¹¹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:26:48.

¹¹² Ibid., 00:26:48; 00:27:46.

¹¹³ Ibid., 00:29:35.

¹¹⁴ These figures exclude Visiting and Emeritus staff; the totals including these categories were seventeen in 1991-92 and twenty-three in 1997-98. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p. 22 and p. 26; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1997-98*, p. 22.

also meant a shift in academic approaches. The expansion of the History faculty enabled the recruitment of many scholars representing a new generation of historians. Appointees such as Joanna Bourke and Marybeth Hamilton encouraged the department to embrace new directions in social and cultural history.¹¹⁵ They were also women – along with several other recruits under Evans – which helped to redress a historic gender imbalance within HCA.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, this broadening of departmental staff, subjects and methods helped to lay foundations for the establishment of a joint *School* of History, Classics and Archaeology by 1999-2000.¹¹⁷ Evans's individual role as a catalyst for these changes, and the internal nature of these departmental shifts in HCA, also point further to Scott's theory of academic cultures developing from within during the transition to mass expansion – as well as due to external political and socio-economic pressures.¹¹⁸ Or at least, as the examples of Evans's astuteness suggest, that individual and departmental actions were taken opportunistically, in reaction to the external pressures and opportunities created by mass higher education expansion. Meanwhile, the meaning of the shift to a joint entity of HCA is somewhat ambiguous: the late 1990s consolidation simultaneously represented further progress in departmental expansion, and a possible dilution of academic autonomy, as previously protected in smaller, separate disciplines.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ This development in HCA is considered further in Chapter 5, *Diversification*.

¹¹⁶ This shift in gender balance within HCA is examined fully in Chapter 6, *Gender, Race and Ethnicity*.

¹¹⁷ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 21. This aspect of HCA's academic development is also considered further in Chapter 5, *Diversification*.

¹¹⁸ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 167.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 159. Scott cites a shift from discipline-based departments to 'looser academic structures based on schools'.

‘Playing the Game’

The resumed mass expansion of UK higher education was punctuated by two key events in 1997. First, the election of Tony Blair’s New Labour government in May marked a significant political shift – one that raised hopes of continued government support for major increases in university provision.¹²⁰ Second, the publication of a new government paper on higher education in July, the Dearing Report, confirmed these hopes, while also revealing that further expansion was to be paid for in part through the introduction of student fees.¹²¹ While ostensibly marking a departure from the Conservative era, New Labour effectively embraced the university expansion policies of its predecessors, such as the shift from student grants to loans and fees.¹²² Indeed, for Shattock and Horvath, the ‘first real attempt to harness market forces’ in higher education came under New Labour – most notably with a subsequent move to ‘variable tuition fees’ in 2003.¹²³ At Birkbeck, and within HCA, this final phase of the research period, 1997 to 2003, involved an intensification of the pressures and processes of university expansion. For David Feldman, the first Head of the new joint School of HCA from 1999, this sub-period saw the emergence of a new ethos in higher education – now commonly identified as ‘neoliberalism’.¹²⁴ As Feldman recalled, ‘The whole ethos was being bureaucratised and monetised.’¹²⁵ Despite these changes, however, there were also opportunities to further expand the departments of HCA, through more new courses and academic posts. According to Feldman, HCA had no alternative but to try to exploit this situation: ‘I don’t think there was any choice: this was a game that we had to play – it was

¹²⁰ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 214. As Mandler notes, New Labour was rewarded in the polls for its promise to prioritise ‘education, education, education’.

¹²¹ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 26.

¹²² Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 103.

¹²³ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 29.

¹²⁴ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:07:25.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

either play the game or go under.’¹²⁶ Less clear, perhaps, were the longer-term gains and costs of such engagement for HCA.

The expansion of courses and faculty within HCA during the late 1990s was relatively ad hoc – encouraged by the institutional methods of a ‘slightly buccaneering’ college Master, Tim O’Shea.¹²⁷ As Feldman remembered:

The case for expansion was made very much in those days in a back of the envelope way. You’d make a case that, ‘Well, this degree will attract “x” number of people, and it’ll pay its way.’ I mean, I think it’s a more demanding case that has to be made now.¹²⁸

He continued:

It was guesswork – student demand was guesswork. And perhaps wishful thinking. We sort of thought that there’d be demand for a degree in contemporary history and politics, but we didn’t know.¹²⁹

Feldman added that different factions in HCA wanted new posts to promote their own research interests – ‘everyone wants to have a new friend’;¹³⁰ and that increased expansion was therefore advantageous in faculty terms, because it allowed such competing demands to co-exist. As he explained:

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 00:11:46. Feldman said of O’Shea: ‘His was sort of a slightly buccaneering approach in the college [...] he encouraged heads of department such as me to respond to that, in a similar vein.’

¹²⁸ Ibid., 00:11:00.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 00:24:03.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

That was another reason to go for growth, because it allowed more of the different interest groups to be satisfied. Departments sort of turn on each other in times of contraction – but when the cake is getting bigger, everything is easier.¹³¹

According to Feldman, distinctions existed between the priorities of classicists, medievalists and modernists within HCA. Modernists were in the majority, and believed their area to be the most promising in terms of potential demand and expansion. Yet Feldman insisted that, ‘the modernists never quite pushed their advantage to the point at which it would provoke a row, sort of bringing things to a breaking point – some sense of fairness persisted.’¹³² This departmental coherence was aided by the creation of new ‘early’ posts.¹³³ Moreover, Feldman suggested that colleagues working across different periods had developed a ‘commonality of approach’, through shared interests in progressive social history methods and the ‘cultural turn’.¹³⁴

There were also tensions caused within HCA, however, as a result of ‘playing the game’ of expansion. As Feldman explained:

Some of us had a bit more enthusiasm for the game than others, because we could see something to be gained from it. And I think for Barry [Coward] and Jim [Sturgis], they were much more sceptical, and they could see a loss – or a potential loss – and they weren’t necessarily wrong.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Ibid., 00:24:03; 00:25:23.

¹³² Ibid., 00:26:19.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 00:19:17. This aspect of HCA’s academic development is explored further in Chapter 5, *Diversification*.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 00:07:25.

This ‘potential loss’ identified by some sceptics in HCA related to the possible detrimental impact on teaching, particularly for undergraduates, of a departmental drive to secure higher research ratings and further growth. Feldman said that for long-standing HCA staff, including Coward, Sturgis and Mason, the strategy of embracing research-driven expansion, in view of its potential to distract from a traditional aim of part-time and mature tuition, was ‘not altogether congenial’.¹³⁶ As he further explained:

Because their focus was very much on the students. And it’s not that I and others like me didn’t care about the students, but the student experience, and the adult education experience, was not the only thing that we cared about.¹³⁷

And yet, according to Feldman, despite these intra-faculty tensions, HCA showed a remarkable capacity for departmental cohesion – itself perhaps a reflection of a collective commitment to Birkbeck’s fundamental mission. Feldman suggested that:

It’s important not to underestimate how potentially explosive that was. But it never exploded. And I think that it never exploded reflects very well on, particularly Barry and Jim. And also, there were friendships that crossed those lines as well, which were important. Someone like Vanessa [Harding], for example, and Dorothy [Porter]. There was also a great good heartedness.¹³⁸

The particular model of part-time and mature higher education provided by HCA was significantly altered in the final years of the research period, however, through the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 00:03:03.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 00:03:50.

introduction of student fees. Recommended in the 1997 Dearing Report, these were first introduced as ‘top-up fees’ by the New Labour government in 1999.¹³⁹ The new charges were subsequently increased through a further move to ‘variable fees’ after 2003.¹⁴⁰ This external government policy shift created new barriers at Birkbeck, including in HCA, for those who wished to study for intellectual gain alone – so-called ‘leisure learners’. As Feldman recalled:

The introduction of fees, and not supporting students who were not studying for a degree higher than the one that they had before, all took the stuffing out of the sort of face-to-face ‘leisure learner’ – for people just doing it for the sake of improving the quality of their lives.¹⁴¹

This situation again related to deeper tensions over whether university education should be considered as an ‘investment’ or ‘consumption’; and it ultimately led to a partial change in the character and purpose of Birkbeck and HCA within it. Scott suggests that university departments, ‘both embody academic disciplines, by instructing their cognitive codes and value hierarchies, and create the professional structures through which academic careers are realised.’¹⁴² Significantly, for HCA at Birkbeck, these internal processes were also related to a unique form of university tuition for part-time and mature students. Indeed, Scott’s idea can perhaps be adapted to include this institutional and departmental mission – that despite HCA’s increasingly managerial role, it also ‘institutionalised’ the values of higher education provision for part-time and mature learners. What made the introduction of student fees so critical, was that it revealed the limits of what could be controlled by HCA through ‘playing the game’. As Scott also suggests, one consequence of the transition to mass expansion was a

¹³⁹ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁴¹ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:08:47.

¹⁴² Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 157.

need for institutions to ‘develop their own distinctive missions’ – as universities homogenised, in response to market forces.¹⁴³ By the end of this research period, within a drastically altered landscape of UK higher education, HCA had gained much growth and research reputation, but lost a little of its distinctive identity.

Conclusion

In the four decades following the 1963 Robbins Report, UK higher education shifted seismically towards mass participation. It was ‘not a simple linear progression’, however,¹⁴⁴ and the historic change had ‘plural meanings’.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, while the academic staff of HCA at Birkbeck more than doubled between 1963 and 2003, the mechanisms and significance of this expansion were somewhat complex, and in many ways specific to a unit and college devoted to part-time and mature university provision. For Birkbeck, the immediate post-Robbins period was marked by uncertainty: the Report’s focus on school leavers was problematic for an institution with very different priorities. Similarly, a lack of government recognition concerning alternative models of higher education caused problems when severe cuts were introduced in the 1970s, to solve a shortfall in students entering university straight from school. Wider cutbacks and freezes also contributed to a decline in expansion within HCA between 1973 and 1983. Meanwhile, the government’s lack of awareness regarding Birkbeck and HCA also meant an absence of scrutiny: the 1970s were ‘heaven’ for its academics; and this freedom facilitated the attraction and retention of top scholars, who in turn helped to maintain uniquely high standards for part-time and mature students.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁴⁴ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 103.

¹⁴⁵ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 168.

The election of the Thatcher government in 1979 saw the start of a ‘sombrely revised programme of expansion’, marked by unprecedented university funding cuts from 1981.¹⁴⁶ Birkbeck responded with ‘drastic measures’, which had direct financial consequences for HCA. The dramatic shift in approach to higher education expansion under Thatcher was also reflected in the 1985 Jarratt Report on ‘Efficiency’. A subsequent inquiry within Birkbeck, the Hayhoe Committee, led to the replacement of traditional faculties with ‘Resource Centres’, and the abolition of a Heads of Department Committee. Both these changes transferred power away from HCA. Further external pressure followed with the RAE from 1985-86, which encouraged a shift of focus from teaching to research. This new scrutiny was not wholly unwelcome within HCA, however, where Floud and Evans identified failings in research management, teaching and supervision. Crucially, corrective actions by both scholars point to Scott’s suggestion that some changes during mass expansion came ‘from within the academic culture’.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, these internal shifts depended on individuals with clear understandings of HCA and Birkbeck’s exceptional part-time and mature mission. As such, the interventions by Floud and Evans not only contributed to change but were perhaps demonstrations of departmental and institutional character in their own right.

The transition to mass higher education resumed with force by the late 1980s, driven by public demand. A shrewd response to the 1992 RAE under Evans subsequently achieved a high point in HCA’s research standing. Evans showed similar astuteness in recognising a boom in demand for part-time master’s degrees; and exploiting Birkbeck’s funding system to expand HCA through new courses and posts, by 1997-98. These appointments represented a new wave of historians, including many women, which also expanded academic approaches in HCA. Indeed, this development helped to later establish a joint entity of History, Classics

¹⁴⁶ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁷ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 167.

and Archaeology – although the impact of this consolidation on disciplinary autonomy is perhaps ambiguous. Evans’s actions are early examples of what Feldman later termed ‘playing the game’ – the stakes of which were raised significantly after 1997, as New Labour embraced the marketisation of higher education, including the introduction of student fees. Feldman and others in HCA sought to survive this new, ‘neoliberal’ situation through expansion, with potential gains in recruitment and research reputation. Growth helped to foster a ‘commonality of approach’ between different sub-disciplines. Despite tensions with long-standing HCA staff sceptical of ‘the game’, a remarkable degree of departmental cohesion was maintained – further evidence, perhaps, of a collective sense of mission. The ‘adult education experience’ provided by HCA *was* altered, however, by the introduction of fees, which became a deterrent to those studying ‘for the sake of improving the quality of their lives’.¹⁴⁸

These multiple events between 1963 and 2003 help to confirm the university department as a key site of contestation during the historic shift to mass higher education in the UK. Significantly, the experiences of HCA at Birkbeck also support Scott’s argument that change resulted from shifts ‘within the academic culture’, as well as external pressures – both ‘supply’ and ‘demand’.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, Scott suggests that departments are responsible for ‘institutionalizing’ the codes, values and practices of academic disciplines;¹⁵⁰ and this concept might be expanded in the case of HCA at Birkbeck, to include the preservation of a unique model of part-time and mature university provision. Feldman conceded that, ‘We didn’t like a lot of what was going on, but HCA never died in a ditch fighting it.’¹⁵¹ The cost of this approach, that is, ‘playing the game’, was a limited change in the character of HCA – measured most acutely by the impact on ‘leisure learning’, following the introduction of

¹⁴⁸ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:08:47.

¹⁴⁹ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 167.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁵¹ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:29:50.

student fees. This small shift perhaps reflected a wider homogenisation of UK higher education, under market and managerial forces.¹⁵² Most importantly, however, HCA ‘never died’ – it didn’t ‘go under’; indeed, by ‘going for growth’, it flourished.¹⁵³ Moreover, if, as some critics fear, a future consequence of mass higher education expansion proves to be increasing polarisation, towards a two-tier system, the survival of such alternative access to elite university tuition might be considered all the more vital.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 169.

¹⁵³ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:29:50.

¹⁵⁴ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 102.

Diversification

Introduction

The 1963 Robbins Report resulted not only in a massive expansion of UK higher education, but in a major diversification of university teaching and research. As Scott suggests, while an ‘academic opening-up’ had already started to change many university disciplines before Robbins, this trend was ‘liberally extended’ after it.¹ In the four decades following the Report there was a notable proliferation in social science subjects and courses.² Significantly, there were also paradigm shifts within history as an academic discipline. Geoff Eley identifies ‘two massive waves of innovation’.³ The first, extending from the early 1960s into the 1980s, involved a ‘discovery of social history’;⁴ the second, cresting in the 1990s, produced a ‘new cultural history’.⁵ While social historians focused on ‘material life, class and society’, their ‘culturalist successors’ were concerned with ‘meaning’, or ‘forms of perception and understanding that people make and display’.⁶ By the turn of the millennium, these major movements had caused a ‘dramatic pluralization’ of the historical profession, notably including new approaches to women, gender, race and imperialism.⁷ Similar changes were seen across classics, which also underwent a ‘democratic turn’ towards more accessible

¹ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 2.

² Peter Mandler, ‘The Rise of the Social Sciences in British Education, 1960-2016’, in *The History of Sociology in Britain: New Research and Reevaluation*, ed. by Plamena Panayotova (Cham., Switzerland; Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 281-299.

³ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 10.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

degrees.⁸ In archaeology, meanwhile, a new scientific or ‘processual’ trend in the 1960s was followed by a cultural or ‘post-processual’ turn.⁹

These wider waves of diversification in academic disciplines from 1963 were reflected in structural and curricular changes at Birkbeck. Again, the expanding social sciences were noticeable, with new departments of Economics, and Politics and Sociology, established at the college by the 1970s.¹⁰ HCA consisted of just two departments in the immediate post-Robbins era: History and Classics. These were both small in size, with a total of eight academic staff in History and just four in Classics, in 1963-64.¹¹ They were also relatively conservative, offering conventional courses – from Medieval English to British Commonwealth in History;¹² from Latin to Greek and Roman Constitutional History in Classics.¹³ Archaeology existed only as a special subject run by the English department.¹⁴ Over the next forty years, however, the academic structure and curriculums of HCA changed considerably. By 2003-04, a new joint School of History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck boasted thirty academic staff.¹⁵ The difference was not just a matter of size. Archaeology, previously a peripheral discipline at the college, was now firmly established – in part reflecting a move towards material culture in academic history. So too, was a revived Classics, taking a much broader approach, with new staff specialisms including ethnic diversity in antiquity.¹⁶ History, meanwhile, now offered courses on a vast range of subjects,

⁸ See *Classics in the Modern World: A Democratic Turn?*, ed. by Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹ Guy Halsall, ‘Archaeology and Historiography’, in *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992-2009*, ed. by Guy Halsall (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), pp. 21-48 (p. 26 and p. 31).

¹⁰ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1971-72*, p. 20 and p. 23.

¹¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-64*, p. 60 and p. 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁵ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-2004*, p. 25. This total academic staff figure included Hobsbawm and Mason as Emeritus Professors and one member of ‘Research’ staff – Angela Poulter. History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck were combined into a joint School in 1999-2000. Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 21.

¹⁶ Dench was recruited via the Department of History to lead Classics teaching at Birkbeck in 1991-92, partly due to her research record on ethnic identity in antiquity. Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:26:37.

from Sexuality in America to Western Perceptions of Japan.¹⁷ And, in terms of periods, the new HCA stretched from the ancient to the contemporary.

How and why did these changes occur? Mandler, in his recent study of mass higher education expansion, observes that popular demand for more degrees changed not only how *many* people studied, but *what* they studied, ‘to an unusual degree’.¹⁸ Mandler cites a swing from science to arts subjects after 1963 as key to the development of new academic areas, with an ‘extraordinary surge of demand for “social studies”’.¹⁹ As Scott argues, this shift had a subsequent impact on more-established humanities subjects, which ‘abandoned their anti-intellectual gentility [...] and [began] powerfully to absorb the lessons of the new social sciences’.²⁰ Diversification of history as an academic discipline after Robbins is examined in a number of historiographical texts, articles and edited collections.²¹ Separate studies have been made in relation to classics²² and archaeology.²³ As mentioned above, Eley, in an analysis first published soon after the end of this research period, charts two major waves of change since the early 1960s – the rise of social history, and then a new cultural history. According to Eley, these massive shifts were closely related to ‘exciting and contentious interdisciplinary conversations’ and ‘the political debates of their respective times’.²⁴ Critically, they were also inextricably linked to the internal politics and dynamics of different higher education institutions – what Eley terms ‘the general dailiness of departmental life’.²⁵

¹⁷ Birkbeck, University of London, *Calendar, 2000-2001* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 2000), pp. 61-62.

¹⁸ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 155.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²⁰ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 2.

²¹ These include: *What is History Now?*, ed. by David Cannadine (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. by Peter Burke, 2nd edn (Cambridge; Polity Press, 2001); *Writing History: Theory & Practice*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (London; Hodder Arnold, 2003).

²² These include: *Classics in the Modern World*, ed. by Hardwick and Harrison; and Christopher Stray, ‘“Patriots and Professors”: A Century of Roman Studies, 1910-2010’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 100 (2010), pp. 1-31.

²³ These include: Halsall, ‘Archaeology and Historiography’; and, Matthew Johnson, *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2019).

²⁴ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

This chapter adopts such a *departmental* focus, to further investigate how the diversification of academic disciplines coalesced with wider shifts in universities, society and politics, post-Robbins. It asks: How and why did the separate disciplines of HCA at Birkbeck diversify between 1963 and 2003? How and why did these disciplines consolidate into a joint entity at the college by the end of this period? What, if anything, was particular about these developments, in relation to UK higher education more broadly? And to what extent might disciplinary and departmental changes within HCA be linked with deeper shifts to universities, society and politics? These questions are addressed through four chronological sections – the first two relating to the rise of social history, and the second two more closely concerned with the new cultural history. Section one, *1963-73*, considers limited changes to a conservative HCA in the first decade after Robbins; section two, *1974-89*, examines more significant diversification, including the rise of new social and economic approaches; section three, *1990-99*, analyses the impact of further shifts, including developments on women, gender and post-colonialism; and, finally, section four, *2000-03*, assesses a culmination of social and cultural waves, and the consolidation of disciplines within a new joint HCA.

1963-73

In the immediate period after Robbins, academic courses across HCA at Birkbeck were – by today’s standards – largely conservative and conventional. Students admitted to the Department of History in 1963-64 were taught mostly established, national subjects – Medieval English, the Age of Bede, Tudor Commercial and Maritime, and British Colonial History to 1783.²⁶ Some broader, more international perspectives were provided through

²⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-64*, pp. 87-88.

survey courses on Political Ideas, Diplomatic History and European History, 1200-1500.²⁷

There were also two further options, on Modern European and Economic History.²⁸ Classics at the college was even more traditional in the first post-Robbins years: its undergraduates could opt for Latin or Greek, or Ancient History, with modules ranging from Greek Drama to Greek and Roman Constitutional History.²⁹ Archaeology at Birkbeck in the early to mid-1960s was, meanwhile, offered only as a special subject via the Department of English. Specifically, students could choose to study Anglo-Saxon Archaeology, alongside options including Old Icelandic.³⁰

This broadly conservative and conventional curriculum within HCA at Birkbeck in the early 1960s was closely related to its academic staff. Most notably, teaching and research in History at the College was directed by Professor R. R. Darlington – a long-standing Head of Department, with a reputation as a staunch traditionalist.³¹ Darlington had trained at the University of Reading under the eminent medievalists Frank and Doris Stenton in the 1920s.³² This was still during what Darlington’s biographer, Brown, terms ‘the primacy of the Public Record Office and the Public Records, and of charters and cartularies’.³³ Darlington joined Birkbeck in 1945 and acted as Head of History for more than a quarter of a century.³⁴ He was known for old-fashioned dress and behaviour, and a ‘dry, single-minded and aloof formality’, as well as kindness to some.³⁵ Darlington was a ‘near life-long’ member of the Pipe Roll Society, dedicated to publishing Exchequer records from the twelfth century onwards; indeed, he was eventually appointed as Vice-President and Chairman of the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 60-62.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 70.

³¹ Brown, ‘Reginald Ralph Darlington, 1903-1977’, p. 427. According to Brown, Darlington ‘did not favour Christian-name familiarity’.

³² Ibid., p. 428.

³³ Ibid., p. 427.

³⁴ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1969-1970*, p. 47.

³⁵ Brown, ‘Reginald Ralph Darlington, 1903-1977’, p. 436.

organisation.³⁶ Darlington had an ‘almost monastic’ commitment to his work, and remained celibate all his life.³⁷ He also did not like going abroad.³⁸ As Head of History at Birkbeck, Darlington’s attitudes towards research remained ultra-empirical. According to Brown, some of the scholar’s work during this time belonged, ‘to that category of writing necessarily so closely based upon the sources which it analyses as scarcely to count as general history.’³⁹ Darlington also had a reputation for lecturing, ‘at length and with precision (though he disliked public speaking) in defence of practices proved by the test of time and academic worth, upright and unyielding on the ancient ways.’⁴⁰

Darlington’s academic traditionalism was reflected more widely among staff in the Department of History, a majority of whom were also engaged in conventional, empirical work. Mason, who was recruited and trained by Darlington from 1962-63, established her own research reputation in HCA through extensive investigations of medieval archives.⁴¹ Ruddock worked on fifteenth-century shipping records⁴² and Cumpston focused on nineteenth-century colonial papers.⁴³ Patrick McGurk took up work unfinished by Darlington on the twelfth-century chronicle of Florence of Worcester.⁴⁴ Douglas Dakin, meanwhile, was respected by Darlington because he was editor of the journal *Documents and Foreign Policy* – a relatively modern project, but one that promoted academic values and practices that the Head could understand.⁴⁵ These conservative approaches to research in History after Robbins were also mirrored in a majority of the department’s teaching. This included Darlington on Medieval English, and the Age of Bede; Ruddock on Tudor Commercial and Maritime, and

³⁶ Ibid., p. 435.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 431.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 434.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 428.

⁴¹ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:50:30.

⁴² Ibid., 00:01:20.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Brown, ‘Reginald Ralph Darlington, 1903-1977’, p. 434.

⁴⁵ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 427.

English History, 1400-1760; Cumpston on British Colonial History to 1783; and McGurk on English Economic History to 1600.⁴⁶

Darlington disliked ideas that were different to his own, however. Infamously, he once admonished a junior colleague in the department, Coward, for getting married – warning that it might affect the younger man’s academic productivity.⁴⁷ More significant was Darlington’s hostility towards Hobsbawm, who was different to him in so many ways – a Marxist, Communist, internationalist, methodological progressivist, and pioneering generalist. Darlington’s disapproval of Hobsbawm led to deliberate attempts to obstruct the latter’s work and career in the Department of History at Birkbeck. As Evans suggests, ‘Allegedly, because Eric did not use manuscript sources, Darlington blocked his promotion, though there may have been some political animus as well.’⁴⁸ Evans also cites Noel Annan, a senior associate of Darlington’s within the University of London, as stating that the Head had always ‘maintained that there were at least two others in the department superior to Hobsbawm – though research has failed to identify them’.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Evans reveals that Dakin had once tried to help secure promotion for Hobsbawm, to which Darlington was said to have responded, ‘Over my dead body!’⁵⁰

Critically, change in History came after Darlington’s retirement and death in 1969.⁵¹ In 1970, with Dakin now as Head of Department, Hobsbawm was promoted to Professor of Economic and Social History at Birkbeck.⁵² Furthermore, Dakin had already included a proposal for a new MA in Economic History, to be led by Hobsbawm, in departmental plans

⁴⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-64*, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁷ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:08:14; 00:09:02.

⁴⁸ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 427.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Annan was provost of University College London from 1966 to 1978. He subsequently became Vice-Chancellor of the University of London. Douglas Johnson, ‘Lord Annan’, *The Guardian* website, 23rd February 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/feb/23/guardianobituaries> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

⁵⁰ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 427.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

⁵² *Ibid.*

submitted to the college soon after taking up his headship. Dakin wrote, in his ‘quinquennial’ outline to senior Birkbeck staff, in December 1969, ‘It is hoped that [Hobsbawm] will launch this course, for which there is likely to be a great demand.’⁵³ Notably, Coward was also listed as a potential tutor for the proposed course.⁵⁴ Moreover, Dakin suggested that the new MA might also involve recruitment of a fresh lecturer, ‘*in very modern English History* with some bias towards twentieth century economic history.’⁵⁵ The launch of an MA in *Social and Economic History* followed by 1971-72, with options including Social Structure and Development, The Working Classes in England, 1815-1914, and Sources and Historiography of English Social and Economic History, 1815-1900.⁵⁶

More broadly in HCA in the first years after Robbins, teaching and research in the Department of Classics developed under the leadership of another long-serving scholar. Browning joined Classics at Birkbeck in 1965 and oversaw changes as Head of Department until his retirement in 1981.⁵⁷ Again, Classics at the college in the early to mid-1960s, as with the discipline elsewhere, was more traditional than History – a situation reflected in its exclusively conventional courses. Browning, as Head of Classics, was a very different character to Darlington, however. Like Hobsbawm, he was a committed communist – although this political passion was rarely made explicit in his academic work.⁵⁸ More significant perhaps, in academic terms, was the status Browning shared with Hobsbawm as an editor at the progressive journal *Past & Present*.⁵⁹ This was evidence of his engagement with new ideas on social historical research – even if such values were not immediately

⁵³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 27; File 9-D/2 019.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar 1971-72*, pp. 87-88.

⁵⁷ Angeliki E. Laiou and Alice-Mary Talbot, ‘Robert Browning, 1914-1997’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 51 (1997), pp. viii-xi (p. viii).

⁵⁸ Cameron, ‘Robert Browning, 1914-1997’, p. 298.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 297. Browning joined the editorial board of *Past & Present* in 1965 – the same year that he joined Birkbeck.

translated into curricular shifts within Classics at Birkbeck. Browning was more aware than Darlington of a need for innovation in his department: in April 1967, he told the college's then Clerk, A. J. Caraffi, that he wished to introduce 'a new voice and new opinions'.⁶⁰ In fact, early changes in Classics came from within Browning's existing staff. By 1970, Giangrande, recruited to Birkbeck in 1963-64, had introduced new modules including Latin Elegy and Hellenistic Poetry.⁶¹ There was also a new course on Society and Institutions, led by the long-standing Brian Caven.⁶² Archaeology at Birkbeck, meanwhile, was still an anomaly in the immediate post-Robbins period – a special subject run via the English department by Vera I. Evison, representing a niche sub-field – Anglo-Saxon Archaeology – within a still broadly-conservative discipline.⁶³

Academic diversification in HCA at Birkbeck in the decade after Robbins also reflected wider shifts to universities, and society, beyond the college. Eley, in his developmental analysis of history as an academic discipline from the 1960s, recalls the 'chronically unimaginative pedagogy' he encountered as a new undergraduate at the University of Oxford in 1967:

To my chagrin, the first term brought only Gibbon and Macaulay, de Tocqueville, Burckhardt, and – last but not least – the Venerable Bede [...] The inveterate archaism of this requirement beggared belief.⁶⁴

Eley credits extra-curricular influences, including the 1968 edition of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, with reigniting his enthusiasm for historical

⁶⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 002A.

⁶¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1969-70*, p. 95.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁶⁴ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 1.

study.⁶⁵ More broadly, Eley cites the ‘principal sources’ of a ‘dramatic new rise of social history’ in the late 1960s: the influence of the British Marxist historians; the impact of social sciences, from the late 1950s; and the inspiration of the French *Annales* school.⁶⁶ Eley also points to conflicts within universities more widely, as these new disciplinary approaches put pressure on institutions to make curricular changes.⁶⁷ Similarly, Evans observes that at the University of Cambridge, the ‘first tentative steps towards reform of the undergraduate history curriculum’, were taken during the late 1960s.⁶⁸ For Eley, disciplinary shifts towards a new social history were inseparable from the radical, international politics of the 1960s: students starting degrees in history at this time expected the discipline to be empirical – but they also wanted it to be socially and politically ‘relevant’.⁶⁹ Moreover, Mandler suggests that an increase in social and political consciousness among students, and the pressure this placed on university curriculums, was a feature of the first wave of mass higher education expansion after Robbins – demonstrated in a swing away from sciences, towards arts and ‘social studies’.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 4. Thompson’s famous work was first published in the year of the Robbins Report, 1963. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 9. The ‘Annales school’ is used here to refer to historians associated with the journal *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*, founded in 1929. This promoted a new kind of history, embracing long-term narrative, breadth of human experience and interdisciplinary methods. Leading members of the movement were Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch – succeeded by Fernand Braudel, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jacques Revel, amongst others. Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-2014* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 1-2.

⁶⁷ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 2 and pp. 205-206.

⁶⁸ Richard J. Evans, ‘Prologue: *What is History? – Now*’, in *What is History Now?*, ed. by David Cannadine (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 1-18 (p. 4).

⁶⁹ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, pp. 162-163.

1974-89

The new era under Dakin as Head of Department in History at Birkbeck was short, due to his planned retirement at the end of 1973-74. Significantly, Hobsbawm was to play a key role in selecting a successor. In part, this was a matter of self-interest. Evans explains that

Eric wanted if possible to avoid the tedium of university administration, and above all appointment as Head of Department, which would have reduced the time he needed for writing and made it difficult for him to travel, at least during term.⁷¹

According to Evans, Hobsbawm ‘cast about for a means of escape’.⁷² He landed on Floud, then a young economic historian at Cambridge. As established in Chapter 1, *Tradition and Political Identity*, Floud was already known to Hobsbawm: the potential candidate’s father, Bernard, had been a member of the Communist Party, and had worked in the civil service with Hobsbawm’s first wife.⁷³ Evans suggests that Hobsbawm was drawn to Floud largely because of his reputation as a ‘formidably efficient academic administrator’.⁷⁴ Hobsbawm subsequently approached Floud about the Head of Department job outside a lift at a meeting of the Economic History Society in 1973.⁷⁵ Floud, then in his early thirties, remembered being ‘taken aback’ because he thought himself unusually young for the ‘senior’ post.⁷⁶ Significantly, Floud, who also had a reputation for innovative economic history research, including the use of computers to process archival data, suggested that Hobsbawm was

⁷¹ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 430.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:08:42.

⁷⁴ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 430.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

equally concerned with the academic contribution he might make to HCA. Floud reflected that

Although it was certainly true that Eric wanted somebody to do the administration, I think that he also wanted a quantitative economic historian [...] that [the] emphasis on my administrative skills was at least equalled by Eric's view that the kind of history that I was doing would be an asset to Birkbeck.⁷⁷

Hobsbawm, the most senior figure in the Department of History aside from Dakin as outgoing Head, enlisted the help of Birkbeck's Master to try to secure the recruitment of his preferred candidate. Mason, a Lecturer in Medieval History at the college by 1973-74, remembered how she and her colleagues, led by Graham Gibbs, had initially supported the long-standing Michael Wilks as a suitable successor to Dakin. Mason explained that

Gibbs, who was Wilks's brother-in-law, was trying to rally the troops all in support of Michael. One way Dakin saved his time was to let a lot of the routine administration go to Wilks; and we just thought Wilks was being groomed for stardom – to take over. So, several of us went along with Graham on this.⁷⁸

Mason said that a majority of staff in History – herself, Gibbs, Ruddock, Coward, McGurk and Jim Sturgis – subsequently backed Wilks to be the next Head of Department.⁷⁹ Mason likened what happened next, however, to the plot of a C. P. Snow novel about college politics, *The Masters*.⁸⁰ According to Mason, members of the block in support of Wilks were

⁷⁷ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:04:57.

⁷⁸ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:14:53; 00:15:17; 00:15:24.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 00:15:24.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 00:16:09.

visited by Hobsbawm and the college's Master, R. C. Tress, and pressured into reconsidering their positions. As Mason recalled:

The Master and Eric came round the department [...] they went around saying that if people continued to support Michael as sole Head of Department, it would be a blight on their career. And as for the three young people – Jim, Barry and me – it would be a real, real blight, and we needn't look any further.⁸¹

Notwithstanding a possibility that Hobsbawm personally disliked Wilks, it is striking that he should go to such lengths to ensure Floud's appointment as Head of History at Birkbeck. Wilks, as Mason points out, was already established as a senior departmental administrator under Dakin. What perhaps mattered more to Hobsbawm and the Master was the future academic direction of the department and college. Floud, aged 32 in October 1974, was noticeably younger than Wilks, who was in his mid-forties at the time of Dakin's retirement.⁸² Mason recalled how Coward – at 33, himself relatively junior in History – had reacted to news of Floud's possible recruitment with the words, ““Oh, how amazing – a Head of Department younger than me!””⁸³ More significantly, Floud was also considered to be more academically progressive. He had been an original member of the innovative Social History Group at Oxford in the 1960s, along with Raphael Samuel; and he had become a

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Wilks was born in 1930. Brenda Bolton, 'Obituary: Professor Michael Wilks', *The Independent* website, 27th June 1998, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-professor-michael-wilks-1167739.html> [accessed on 31st January 2023]

⁸³ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:18:05. Coward was born on 22nd February 1941. [Author unknown], 'Professor Barry Coward', *The Telegraph* website, 20th April 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/8464287/Professor-Barry-Coward.html> [accessed on 31st January 2023] Coward's reaction to the news of Floud's potential appointment was perhaps also based on residual memories of departmental life under Darlington.

leader in the application of statistics and computing in economic history, notably in the study of human heights and proportions (anthropometry).⁸⁴ Mason remembered that

I think [Floud] probably seemed to be a very forward-looking scholar in the work he was doing, which was quite different from Michael's. I think [Hobsbawm and the Master] were looking at it from the point of view of the college. And that was their attitude. And then just looking at Wilks as someone rather, you know, sort of dated, I suppose. Wilks wasn't all that old, but I just think he just hadn't progressed very much.⁸⁵

Mason added that Wilks was known to have only produced one major monograph, and that he later expressed his objection to reform in the department by declaring, "I want to go on doing things the way we've always done them."⁸⁶ Mason continued: 'And of course, you just have to move with the times. But he didn't see that.'⁸⁷

Floud was successfully appointed to History at Birkbeck in 1974-75.⁸⁸ To ease any departmental tensions over his recruitment, however, Wilks was appointed as a first successor to Dakin.⁸⁹ The Head of Department job was subsequently shared by Wilks and Floud on a rotational basis, switching every two to three years, until the late 1980s.⁹⁰ In the year of his appointment to the college, Floud published an edited collection on economic research methods for historians, *Essays in Quantitative Economic History*.⁹¹ This came soon

⁸⁴ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 225. Other notable members of the Social History Group, established by Samuel at Nuffield College in 1965, included Gareth Stedman Jones, Gillian Sutherland and Peter Burke.

⁸⁵ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:19:43.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1974-75*, p. 23.

⁸⁹ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:02:33; 00:02:59.

⁹⁰ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1988-89* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1988), p. 23.

⁹¹ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 250.

after a textbook, *An Introduction to Quantitative Methods for Historians*, published in 1973.⁹² Significantly, there were also curricular shifts in the Department of History following Floud's arrival. Modules on quantitative methods were introduced to both BA and MA courses in 1975-76;⁹³ and a new option, *The Performance of the British Economy, 1870-1970*, was added to the MA Social and Economic History course in 1977-78.⁹⁴ These developments reflected a wider, disciplinary trend. As Eley observes, 'general advocacy' for quantitative methods in academic history – 'sometimes with evangelical zeal' – reached its peak in the mid-1970s.⁹⁵ The curricular changes in History at Birkbeck also came after the introduction of quantitative methods training via a new Faculty of Economics at the college in 1972-73.⁹⁶ This was an indication, perhaps, of both the expansion of social sciences post-Robbins, and their continued influence on academic history.⁹⁷

The Department of History at Birkbeck also diversified in other ways during the Wilks-Floud era. A number of notable appointments in addition to Floud were made during the 1970s: Roy Foster, historian of modern Ireland, in 1974-75;⁹⁸ Michael Hunter, historian of early modern science and ideas, in 1976-77;⁹⁹ and David Blackbourn, historian of modern Germany and Europe, in 1979-80.¹⁰⁰ This trio of relatively junior scholars helped to further develop teaching and research within the department, with a focus on new social, economic and political approaches. New BA and MA modules introduced by the turn of the decade included *The Sociology of Pre-capitalist Societies*, and *The Sociology of the Welfare*

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1975-76* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1975), p. 67 and p. 99.

⁹⁴ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1977-78*, p. 104.

⁹⁵ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 250.

⁹⁶ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1972-73* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1972), p. 104.

⁹⁷ According to Eley, the 'first phase of history's interdisciplinarity' in relation to social sciences came in the 1960s; intellectual exchanges between disciplines continued into the 1970s. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, pp. 190-1.

⁹⁸ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1974-75*, p. 23.

⁹⁹ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1976-77* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1976), p. 23.

¹⁰⁰ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1979-80* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1979), p. 24.

State;¹⁰¹ plus Modern British Historiography, and Continuity and Conflict in Imperial Germany, 1890-1914.¹⁰² In 1981-82, Foster helped to establish a new interdisciplinary master's course, MA Victorian Studies, in collaboration with Birkbeck's English department.¹⁰³ More interdisciplinary postgraduate degrees were to follow. In 1985-86, an MA was launched in Economic and Social Change in Britain, 1870 to the Present Day – led by academics from History and Economics, with further contributions from colleagues in Geography, and Politics and Sociology.¹⁰⁴ An MA in Renaissance Studies, taught by staff from History, English, History of Art, French, Italian and Philosophy, started in the same year.¹⁰⁵ In 1986-87, following the appointment to History of Vanessa Harding, an early modernist and London specialist, the department launched an MA and MSc in London Studies – in collaboration with academics from Geography.¹⁰⁶ Again, these departmental shifts reflected wider, disciplinary change. A longer-term trend of collaboration between university historians and social scientists had been marked as early as 1970 with the launch of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*.¹⁰⁷ Notably, meanwhile, by the late 1980s, history as a discipline was in part moving away from established social science methods, and towards new theories of culture and language.¹⁰⁸

Classics at Birkbeck experienced its own diversification in the 1980s, albeit to a lesser degree – not least due to its smaller size and lower level of recruitment. The department's long-standing Head, Browning, retired at the start of the decade.¹⁰⁹ He was succeeded in

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁰² Birkbeck College, *Prospectus, 1980-81*, p. 58.

¹⁰³ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:03:34; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Prospectus, 1981-82* (London; J. W. Ruddock, 1981), p. 89.

¹⁰⁴ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Prospectus, 1985-86* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1985), p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁰⁶ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Prospectus, 1986-87* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1986), p. 72.

¹⁰⁷ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁰⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 23; File 1-1-1/1 111. On retirement, Browning was awarded an Honorary Life Membership by Birkbeck's Governors; he also continued supervising two postgraduate students.

1981-82 by David Hamlyn, already Head of Philosophy at Birkbeck, in a new dual-department role.¹¹⁰ This appointment perhaps opened Classics more to perspectives from Philosophy – although Hamlyn, first recruited by the college more than a quarter of a century earlier, was far from a ‘new blood’ hire.¹¹¹ Development of the BA syllabus in Classics had started prior to Browning’s retirement;¹¹² but by 1981-82, options for undergraduates had still changed little since the 1960s.¹¹³ The most significant shift in the early 1980s was the start of a BA in Classical Studies – a course with less stringent Greek and Latin language requirements.¹¹⁴ This was followed in 1985-86 by an MA in Classical Civilisation, consisting of modules on Ancient History, Greek and Latin Literature, and Greek Thought and Philosophy.¹¹⁵ These departmental moves reflected a deeper trend of decline in Greek and Latin education in schools, leading to lower levels of classical language proficiency among university applicants.¹¹⁶ More critically still, by the end of the 1980s, the Department of Classics at Birkbeck was officially closed down, via merger with King’s College, London, as part of government-backed plans for the future development of the wider discipline.¹¹⁷

Archaeology, meanwhile, briefly emerged as an independent department at Birkbeck in the late 1970s, before also closing a few years later. Established as an academic unit separate to English in 1979-80, Anglo-Saxon Archaeology was led by Vera Evison as

¹¹⁰ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1981-82*, p. 24.

¹¹¹ Hamlyn first joined Philosophy at Birkbeck in 1954; he was appointed Head of the Department in 1964-65. ‘Obituary: Professor David Hamlyn’, Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/obituaries/obituary-professor-david-hamlyn> [accessed on 20th February 2023]; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1964-65* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1964), p. 95.

¹¹² Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1979-80*, p. 69.

¹¹³ Birkbeck College, *Prospectus, 1981-82*, pp. 41-42. Birkbeck’s BA Classics course still had Latin and Greek composition and translation at its core; perhaps the most notable additions were modules on the Athenian Empire and Roman Art.

¹¹⁴ Birkbeck College, *Prospectus, 1980-81*, p. 39.

¹¹⁵ Birkbeck College, *Prospectus, 1985-86*, p. 45.

¹¹⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 074. Browning told Birkbeck’s Master, Tony J. Chandler, in October 1977, that changes to Latin and Greek teaching in schools, and a related reduction in ‘linguistic preparation’, were likely to affect Classics at the college ‘in a few years [sic] time’.

¹¹⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 142, p. 9. This critical event in the college’s history is explored fully in Chapter 3, *Classics*.

Head.¹¹⁸ The short-lived department offered an MA on The British Isles in the Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Periods, including the History of England, AD 400-100.¹¹⁹ Supervision was also provided at MPhil and PhD levels.¹²⁰ Significantly, staff from the Department of History, including McGurk, an early medievalist, taught on the MA Archaeology course – an early example of co-operation between the two disciplines at Birkbeck.¹²¹ Anglo-Saxon Archaeology was somewhat niche as a sub-field, lying outside prevailing academic and popular preferences for ancient archaeological subjects.¹²² Evison, through her own archaeological practice and research, pioneered the introduction of continental excavation methods.¹²³ She was also responsible for the development of ground-breaking theories on invasion and migration in the early medieval period.¹²⁴ These ideas departed from established, conventional understandings of pre-Anglo-Saxon society.¹²⁵ They also ran counter to a wider disciplinary trend since the 1960s – the emergence of a more scientific ‘New Archaeology’, or ‘processual’ movement.¹²⁶ This rejected migration as a valid ‘explanatory concept’ in archaeology, due to alleged inadequacies in methods and evidence.¹²⁷ In any case, there was little opportunity for further diversification of the

¹¹⁸ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1979-80*, p. 21.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹²¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 178A.

¹²² According to the archaeologist and former Director of the British Museum David M. Wilson, medieval archaeology in general was also taken less seriously in academic circles than work on the prehistoric period. David Wilson, email to Professor Joanna Bourke, ‘Archaeology at Birkbeck’, 14th April 2019.

¹²³ Catherine Hills and Leslie Webster, ‘Vera Evison Obituary’, *The Guardian* website, 31st May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/may/31/vera-evison-obituary> [accessed on 9th February 2023].

¹²⁴ According to Catherine Hills, co-author of Evison’s obituary and a former Birkbeck archaeology student (now of the University of Cambridge), much of Evison’s work was based on links between Anglo-Saxon and Frankish artefacts from the late fourth to fifth centuries. Catherine Hills, email to Professor Joanna Bourke, ‘Archaeology at Birkbeck and Vera Evison’, 16th April 2019.

¹²⁵ Catherine Hills and Leslie Webster, ‘Vera Evison Obituary’, *The Guardian* website, 31st May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/may/31/vera-evison-obituary> [accessed on 9th February 2023].

¹²⁶ Guy Halsall, ‘Archaeology and Historiography’, p. 26.

¹²⁷ Stefan Burmeister, ‘Archaeology and Migration: Approaches to an Archaeological Proof of Migration’, *Current Anthropology*, 41 (2000), pp. 539-567 (p. 539).

discipline at Birkbeck: by 1983-84, following Evison's retirement, the independent Archaeology department had folded.¹²⁸

A further structural shift at Birkbeck came in the 1980s with the incorporation into the college of the University of London's Extra-Mural Department – an adjunct centre for part-time, mature higher education. This process started in the autumn of 1986, with the establishment of the Hayhoe Committee working group at Birkbeck, to oversee 'restructuring'.¹²⁹ As explained in Chapter 4, *Expansion*, this new panel was a result of top-down pressure on university resources nationwide. It came a year after the Thatcher government's 1985 Jarratt Report on 'Efficiency Studies in Universities'.¹³⁰ It also closely followed Birkbeck's existential crisis in the spring of 1986, caused by the UGC's plan to drastically cut funding for the college.¹³¹ As part of the Hayhoe Committee's 'restructures', it recommended the incorporation of the University's Extra-Mural Department.¹³² This major move, aimed at boosting student admissions and income, and backed by Birkbeck's Master, Baroness Tessa Blackstone, went ahead in August 1988.¹³³ A new Centre for Extra-Mural Studies (CEMS) was established at the college, massively increasing the institution's total student population.¹³⁴

The incorporation of Extra-Mural into Birkbeck was not just a matter of student numbers, however. Prior to the merger, as a Department of the University of London in the 1980s, Extra-Mural had been a quite different place to the college. While both locations had roots in radical traditions of part-time university provision, Birkbeck had evolved in a more

¹²⁸ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1983-84*, p. 24.

¹²⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 38; File 11-J Jarratt Report 009, p. 2. The Hayhoe Committee was chaired by Barney Hayhoe MP.

¹³⁰ Moore, 'University Financing 1979-86', p. 194.

¹³¹ This episode is explored fully in Chapter 2, *The Battle for Birkbeck*.

¹³² Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 560.

¹³³ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1988-89*, p. 26; Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 560.

¹³⁴ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1988-89*, p. 201; Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 560. By the end of the period, CEMS, by then renamed the Faculty of Continuing Education, accounted for an additional 11,942 students at Birkbeck. The college's student total excluding this extra number was 7,615. Birkbeck, *Annual Review 2003-04*, p. 18.

conservative direction, to offer formal university teaching and degrees. Extra-Mural, by contrast, remained closer to a wider workers' educational movement.¹³⁵ It offered a much broader range of courses;¹³⁶ and, significantly, a more informal learning environment, where students could almost 'just turn up'.¹³⁷ As Joanna Bourke notes, Extra-Mural syllabuses were 'often negotiated between students and "tutors" (they did not call themselves "lecturers")'. It also taught in locations across London and the Home Counties, with reading materials carried in 'book boxes', from which students were able to borrow titles.¹³⁸ Furthermore, and in relation to its informal character, Extra-Mural was academically more experimental, and more overtly political. Indeed, by the 1980s, the Department was well established within a network of left-wing politics in London – also including the Trades Union Congress (TUC) headquarters, the Marx Memorial Library, and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) base.¹³⁹ Bourke observes that since the 1960s, Extra-Mural, like similar centres elsewhere, had 'attracted radical academics, keen to use education to empower minoritised communities'.¹⁴⁰ History teaching and research in Extra-Mural was led by James 'Jim' Fyrth – an active communist, with a reputation as an unconventional convenor.¹⁴¹ Fyrth personally promoted 'people's' and women's history within the department, and recruited Sally Alexander and Sheila Rowbotham – both later distinguished feminist historians – as tutors.¹⁴² Notably, Extra-Mural at the University also offered courses on archaeology, led by Anthony

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 222.

¹³⁶ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Centre for Extra-Mural Studies: Courses, 1988-89* (London: University of London, 1988).

¹³⁷ Evans, January 28th 2021, 00:49:27.

¹³⁸ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 560.

¹³⁹ Professor Sally Alexander, interviewed by Professor Joanna Bourke in 2018-19.

¹⁴⁰ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 222.

¹⁴¹ Alexander, 2018-19; 'Fyrth, Hubert James: 1918-2010', Bishopsgate Institute website, <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/fyrth-hubert-james> [accessed on 3rd May 2023]

¹⁴² Sally Alexander, email to the author, 'Re: Birkbeck Fact Checks', 26th April 2023. Alexander and Rowbotham also taught at the WEA.

‘Tony’ J. Legge – a former mature student, with a reputation for an ‘iconoclastic’ approach to teaching and research.¹⁴³

Alexander was also a former mature student, having studied at Ruskin College, Oxford, as a young mother, from 1968 to 1970.¹⁴⁴ While at Ruskin, she had participated in History Workshop, a movement that started with Raphael Samuel working with students, and later involved many academics from HCA at Birkbeck.¹⁴⁵ Alexander became a founder editor of its now-prestigious academic publication, *History Workshop Journal*.¹⁴⁶ She also helped to pioneer feminist history, alongside Rowbotham, who made the case for a women’s history conference at the 1969 History Workshop.¹⁴⁷ As Bourke suggests, figures such as Alexander and Rowbotham ‘not only emerged *from* but were also partly responsible *for* the development and flourishing of the Women’s Liberation Movement’.¹⁴⁸ They were also particularly drawn to the political and intellectual potential of part-time higher education.¹⁴⁹ As Bourke argues, ‘This was why Sally Alexander (one of the organisers of the first national Women’s Liberation Movement in the UK) threw her energies into [Extra-Mural].’¹⁵⁰ According to

¹⁴³ Legge joined the University of London’s Extra-Mural Department in 1974. He later transferred to Birkbeck following the incorporation of Extra-Mural and retired in 2004 as Professor in Environmental Archaeology at the college. Legge was known to challenge prevailing academic orthodoxies and believed that all students, once trained, could contribute to archaeological knowledge. Harvey Sheldon, ‘Tony Legge and Continuing Education in Archaeology at the University of London 1974-2004’, in *Economic Zooarchaeology: Studies in Hunting, Herding and Early Agriculture*, ed. by Peter Rowley-Conwy, Dale Serjeantson and Paul Halstead (Oxford; Havertown, PA: Oxbow Books, 2017), pp. 5-8 (p. 5 and p. 7).

¹⁴⁴ Sally Alexander, email to the author, ‘Re: Birkbeck Fact Checks’, 26th April 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:33:56.

¹⁴⁶ Sally Alexander, email to the author, ‘Re: Birkbeck Fact Checks’, 26th April 2023. Alexander worked as an editor on *History Workshop Journal* from 1976.

¹⁴⁷ The first National Women’s Liberation Conference, originally conceived as a feminist history meeting, was held at Ruskin College in 1970. History Workshop’s 1973 conference was themed ‘Women in History’. Eley, ‘Marxist Historiography’, in *Writing History: Theory & Practice*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), pp. 63-82 (p. 77). Many feminist historians considered their work less as a ‘sub-discipline’ and more as a movement aimed at fundamentally changing the analytical structures of historical practice. Laura Lee Downs, ‘From Women’s History to Gender History’, in *Writing History: Theory & Practice*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), pp. 261-281 (p. 263). Other pioneers of feminist history in this period included Anna Davin, who undertook a PhD in history at Birkbeck, supervised by Hobsbawm, and became an Editor of *History Workshop Journal*. *History Workshop Journal* website, https://academic.oup.com/hwj/pages/Editorial_Board [accessed on 17th October 2023]

¹⁴⁸ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 223.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Alexander, Extra-Mural had ‘an atmosphere of radical history’;¹⁵¹ and was ‘alive with interdisciplinary activity’.¹⁵² While at Extra-Mural, in her early academic career, Alexander said that she had developed new courses on women’s history from primary research, because ‘there wasn’t the literature’.¹⁵³ Alexander also recalled a ‘fluidity’ between institutions within the wider network outlined above, making it easier for academic and political ideas to be shared.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, Alexander remembered attending seminars led by Hobsbawm at Birkbeck, pre-merger, despite having no formal link to the college.¹⁵⁵ A formal relationship with Birkbeck was subsequently established through the incorporation of Extra-Mural in 1988.¹⁵⁶ And with this, came not only the massive increase in student numbers mentioned above, but a closer proximity to alternative intellectual and academic influences – even if the impact of these on HCA at the college would prove to be somewhat limited.¹⁵⁷

1990-1999

The start of the 1990s in HCA at Birkbeck was punctuated by the appointment of Richard Evans to the Department of History. Evans, who arrived at the college from the University of East Anglia (UEA), had trained at Oxford – and in Germany, where he undertook doctoral research.¹⁵⁸ Evans had a strong reputation for progressive social history, embracing new approaches to everyday experience and politics ‘from below’. In the mid-to-late 1970s, he had published a pioneering text, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894-1933*.¹⁵⁹ Evans

¹⁵¹ Alexander, 2018-19.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 560.

¹⁵⁷ The impact of Extra-Mural’s incorporation on HCA and Birkbeck is discussed further in Chapter 6, *Gender, Race and Ethnicity*.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel Snowman, ‘Richard J. Evans’, *History Today*, 54 (2004), pp. 45-47 (p. 45).

¹⁵⁹ Richard J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894-1933* (London: SAGE Publications, 1976).

was also a committed empiricist, influenced by the *Annales* school, with a concern for rigorous research spanning long terms.¹⁶⁰ He was recruited to History at Birkbeck in 1989-90, the same year as the early modernist Julian Swann,¹⁶¹ and joined colleagues including Foster, Blackbourn and Coward, who were similarly interested in new approaches to social and political history. Evans was appointed as Head of Department in 1991-92, and he remained in the role until 1997-98.¹⁶² As considered in Chapter 4, *Expansion*, during the decade History (also now housing the college's reduced Classics programme) recruited an unprecedented number of new academics, noticeably including many women, with fresh historical perspectives.¹⁶³ As a result, in academic terms, HCA diversified considerably in the 1990s, pushing its teaching and research in new social and *cultural* directions.

Highly notable among these shifts, at least in the Department of History, was a promotion of feminist history. Evans had an existing association with this field through his own work on women's movements.¹⁶⁴ In 1990-91, the year after Evans's arrival in History at Birkbeck, the Department launched a new BA course, European Feminism, 1750-1950.¹⁶⁵ In 1991-92, the socialist-feminist historian Joanna Bourke was recruited to the Department, from Emmanuel College, Cambridge.¹⁶⁶ Bourke's doctoral training, at the Australian National University in Canberra, had focused on women in nineteenth-century Ireland.¹⁶⁷ She arrived at Birkbeck a year before the publication of her first monograph, *Husbandry to Housewifery: Women, Economic Change and Housework in Ireland, 1890-1914*.¹⁶⁸ Notably,

¹⁶⁰ Snowman, 'Richard J. Evans', p. 46.

¹⁶¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1989-90*, p. 23.

¹⁶² Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p. 22; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1998-99*, p. 25.

¹⁶³ The significance of this change in terms of gender is explored in Chapter 6, *Gender, Race and Ethnicity*.

¹⁶⁴ Evans followed publication of his 1976 book *The Feminist Movement in Germany* with further work on women and politics, including *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

¹⁶⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1990-91*, p. 56.

¹⁶⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁷ 'Joanna Bourke', Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbkc.ac.uk/our-staff/profile/8008363/joanna-bourke> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Bourke was one of nine female academics recruited by History between 1991 and 1997;¹⁶⁹ and one of thirteen by the end of the 1990s.¹⁷⁰ Several of these new scholars identified closely with feminist history, even if it was not the explicit focus of their academic work. In 1996-97, History hired Jane Caplan as a Visiting Professor.¹⁷¹ Caplan had established one of the UK's first women's studies courses while working at Cambridge in the 1970s.¹⁷² Somewhat ironically, the 1990s also saw a return to History of Hobsbawm, perhaps *the* veteran, male historian, who had formally retired from the college in 1982. Hobsbawm was provided with an office in the Department in 1992-93, to aid his ongoing research and writing – on the understanding that he would try to engage with junior colleagues.¹⁷³ Meanwhile, although equivalent promotion of feminist academic approaches was not seen in Classics or Archaeology at Birkbeck during the decade, Women's Studies was offered via the college's Centre for Extra-Mural Studies.¹⁷⁴

During the 1990s, teaching and research in HCA at Birkbeck also moved further away from Anglo- and Euro-centric perspectives, and more towards post-colonial and global approaches. Colonial and imperial history at the college had for more than two decades from the early 1960s been overseen by Mary Cumpston. As noted in Chapter 1, *Tradition and Political Identity*, Cumpston's father had been a senior Australian government minister.¹⁷⁵ She was later described by Foster as a 'dyed-in-the-wool Commonwealth imperialist'.¹⁷⁶ Sturgis was appointed as Cumpston's de facto junior in 1969-70, and remained somewhat

¹⁶⁹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1997-98*, p. 22. This figure included eight full-time Lecturers, and one Visiting Professor.

¹⁷⁰ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 21. This further wave included one more full-time Lecturer, and three Visiting Professors.

¹⁷¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 23.

¹⁷² 'Jane Caplan', St Antony's College, University of Oxford website, <https://users.ox.ac.uk/~hist0138/Bio.html> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁷³ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, pp. 558-9.

¹⁷⁴ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1990-91*, p. 83.

¹⁷⁵ 'Cumpston, John Howard Lidgett (1880-1954)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, Australian National University website, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cumpston-john-howard-lidgett-5846> [accessed on 9th February 2023] John Cumpston was the first Director-General of the Australian Department of Health.

¹⁷⁶ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:25:10.

subordinate in departmental terms until her full retirement at the end of 1981-82.¹⁷⁷ Under Cumpston's influence, teaching and research on British colonial history had remained conservative, with a strong focus on conventional approaches to the Commonwealth and empire.¹⁷⁸ Post-Cumpston, in the mid-to-late 1980s, new BA and MA modules were introduced: in 1985-86, Regionalism, Separatism and Political Conflict in Canada, 1763 to the present day;¹⁷⁹ in 1986-87, Colonialism and Development in British and Commonwealth Africa, 1929 to the present day;¹⁸⁰ and in 1989-90, British Imperial Policy and Decolonization, 1938-1963.¹⁸¹ As such, by the end of the decade in HCA, there was a limited shift away from more conservative approaches to British colonial history.

This trend developed further, to also include *race* as a research and teaching subject, after the arrival of Hilary J. Sapire, in 1991-92, from the University of London's ICS. Two new BA options, Revolt and Resistance in Southern Africa in the Twentieth Century, and Race, Segregation and Protest in South Africa and the American South, 1860-1920, were introduced by 1993-94.¹⁸² Furthermore, in 1996-97, History at Birkbeck recruited Naoko Shimazu, who had undertaken doctoral training in International Relations at Oxford.¹⁸³ A year after Shimazu's appointment, the department introduced a new BA module, Japan and the West: Imperialism in East Asia.¹⁸⁴ In 1998-99, a further new BA course, Modern History of East Asia, was launched.¹⁸⁵ Linda Colley, a pioneer of alternative approaches to British imperial history, was hired as a Visiting Professor in 1997-98.¹⁸⁶ In 1999-2000, Ruth Watson,

¹⁷⁷ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1982-83*, p. 26.

¹⁷⁸ Birkbeck College, *Prospectus, 1981-82*, pp. 61-63.

¹⁷⁹ Birkbeck College, *Prospectus, 1985-86*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁰ Birkbeck College, *Prospectus, 1986-87*, p. 71.

¹⁸¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1989-90*, p. 60.

¹⁸² Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1992-93*, p. 53; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1993-94* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1993), pp. 70-71.

¹⁸³ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 23. The significance of Shimazu's appointment as a first non-white member of academic staff in HCA is also examined further in Chapter 6, *Gender, Race and Ethnicity*.

¹⁸⁴ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1997-98*, p. 48.

¹⁸⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1998-99*, p. 49.

¹⁸⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1997-98*, p. 22.

whose own doctoral training at Oxford had focused on Africa, was appointed as Lecturer in the History of Imperialism and Post-Colonial Societies.¹⁸⁷ In that same year, History offered a new BA option: Africa's Urban Past in Comparative Perspective, c. 1780-1950.¹⁸⁸ Meanwhile, in Classics – administered via History – Emma Dench, an ancient historian, also trained at Oxford, was hired in 1991-92.¹⁸⁹ Dench's appointment was partly based on her novel research into ethnic identities in antiquity. She later recalled that, 'I think [the interview panel at Birkbeck] liked what I was doing, that I was doing questions of identity and ethnicity, which were quite rare in pre-modern history at that time.'¹⁹⁰

HCA also diversified further to include other new historical approaches in the 1990s, notably concerning gender and culture. During the course of the decade, in the Department of History, Bourke developed new research and ideas on gender politics and the cultural history of warfare.¹⁹¹ In 1992-93, History launched a new BA course, Sexuality in American History.¹⁹² This was closely followed in 1993-94 by the appointment of Marybeth Hamilton, who had trained at Princeton, and whose research interests included gender and sexuality in popular culture.¹⁹³ Lucy J. Riall, who arrived at Birkbeck from the University of Essex in 1994-95, would later work on sexuality and gender in nineteenth and twentieth-century Italian politics.¹⁹⁴ In 1999-2000, Cynthia B. Herrup, an expert on law and culture in early modern England, with a particular interest in gender, was appointed as a Visiting Professor

¹⁸⁷ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 21. 'Dr Ruth Watson', University of Cambridge website, <https://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/people/dr-ruth-watson> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁸⁸ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 54.

¹⁸⁹ Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:02:14.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 00:26:37.

¹⁹¹ 'Joanna Bourke', Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/our-staff/profile/8008363/joanna-bourke> [accessed on 9th February 2023] Notable publications by Bourke during this time included *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996).

¹⁹² Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1992-93*, p. 53.

¹⁹³ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1993-94*, p. 23. Soon after joining Birkbeck Hamilton published *When I'm Bad, I'm Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

¹⁹⁴ 'Lucy Riall: Curriculum Vitae', European University Institute website, <https://www.eui.eu/Documents/DepartmentsCentres/HEC/Faculty/RiallCV.pdf> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

from Duke University.¹⁹⁵ These changes were also reflected to some extent in Classics at Birkbeck, as a much smaller sub-section of the Department of History: in 1999-2000 a new BA option, Gender and Sexuality in Ancient Greece, was listed under both History and Classics at the college.¹⁹⁶

Meanwhile, an archaeologist, Guy Halsall, had been appointed to the Department of History from the University of Newcastle in 1991-92.¹⁹⁷ As an undergraduate, Halsall had read History and Archaeology at the University of York.¹⁹⁸ He remained an advocate of closer academic collaboration between the two disciplines.¹⁹⁹ He was also sympathetic to a ‘post-processual’ movement in archaeology, which had become prominent since the 1980s.²⁰⁰ This criticised ‘processual’ archaeology, or the ‘New Archaeology’, for being ‘excessively functional’.²⁰¹ It called instead for material culture to be read ‘as a discourse’, within historical context.²⁰² During the 1990s at Birkbeck, BA courses including the Archaeology of Roman Britain were offered under Classics, via the Department of History.²⁰³ In 1996-97, a joint BA degree was established in History and Archaeology.²⁰⁴ Subsequently, in 1998-99, this course launched a new module, Culture Contact and Culture Change: the Archaeology of Roman Imperialism, c. 30 BC-AD 250.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, in 1999-2000, History launched a BA module on the Vikings, with the subtitle ‘Trading, Raiding and Culture’.²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁵ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 21. In the year of her appointment to Birkbeck Herrup published *A House in Gross Disorder: Sex, Law, and the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁹⁶ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 51 and p. 54.

¹⁹⁷ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p. 22; ‘Guy Halsall’, University of York website, <https://www.york.ac.uk/history/staff/profiles/halsall/#profile-content> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹⁹⁸ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p. 22. ‘Guy Halsall’, University of York website, <https://www.york.ac.uk/history/staff/profiles/halsall/#profile-content> [accessed on 9th February, 2023]

¹⁹⁹ Guy Halsall, ‘Introduction’, in *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992-2009*, ed. by Guy Halsall (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), pp. 1-18 (p. 2).

²⁰⁰ Halsall, ‘Archaeology and Historiography’, p. 32.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

²⁰³ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 45.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁰⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1998-99*, p. 49.

²⁰⁶ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-2000*, p. 54.

These different shifts to teaching and research within HCA during the 1990s also reflected broader disciplinary and university trends beyond Birkbeck. Changes in the Department of History over the decade can be contextualised as part of a much wider wave of ‘new cultural history’.²⁰⁷ As Eley observes, the period immediately preceding shifts to History at Birkbeck in the 1990s had been marked more broadly by an ‘unexpected questioning of social history’s materialist standpoints’.²⁰⁸ This led to

a series of long-running debates, whose consequences converged with a variety of other powerful intellectual tendencies, feminist historical work, and the diffusion of cultural studies most notable among them, to dislodge social history from its earlier anticipated primacy.²⁰⁹

The result of this longer-term disciplinary development was a ‘marked diversification’.²¹⁰ A similar shift was also witnessed by Colley. As a student at the University of Bristol in the early 1970s, she remembered how imperial history had been personified by ‘a very considerable specialist on British colonial Africa who was often to be seen dressed in a khaki safari suit’.²¹¹ By the end of the 1990s, however, the sub-discipline was ‘now far more cross-disciplinary and much more diverse in terms of subject matter and methodologies’.²¹² According to Evans, the fact that so many of the new academics appointed to HCA during the 1990s were female reflected the fact that ‘there was just a whole new generation of very talented young women coming up through the profession at the time’.²¹³ As such, recruitment

²⁰⁷ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 10.

²⁰⁸ Eley, ‘Marxist Historiography’, p. 77.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Linda Colley, ‘What is Imperial History Now?’, in *What is History Now?*, ed. by David Cannadine (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 132-147 (p. 132).

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²¹³ Evans, January 28th 2021, 00:23:59.

in HCA during the decade perhaps also reflected results of mass university expansion after Robbins, which had notably included a sharp increase in female students.²¹⁴ For Eley, there were also deeper, political resonances: new cultural historical critiques were linked to ‘the processes of capitalist restructuring driven so relentlessly forward during the 1980s’.²¹⁵ Eley suggests that

As the hold of the economy became loosened during the 1980s, and with it the determinative power of the social structure and its causal claims, the imaginative and epistemological space for other kinds of analysis grew. The rich multiplication of new cultural histories became the invaluable pay-off.²¹⁶

2000-2003

At the turn of the millennium, HCA was established as a single, joint entity – a School of History, Classics and Archaeology.²¹⁷ The new School had a total of thirty academic staff – more than double the combined number across History, Classics and Archaeology at the college in 1963.²¹⁸ These scholars specialised in different periods, ranging from the ancient to the contemporary, with some weighting towards the modern, where more than half the faculty were focused.²¹⁹ HCA’s staff also covered, of course, all three disciplines – History, Classics and Archaeology – included in the joint School’s title. At BA level, it offered degree courses in History, History and Archaeology, Classics and Classical Studies.²²⁰ Modules on

²¹⁴ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 101.

²¹⁵ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 130.

²¹⁶ Eley, ‘Marxist Historiography’, p. 79.

²¹⁷ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2000-2001*, p. 22.

²¹⁸ These comparative figures for HCA in 2003-04 and 1963-64 include Emeritus and ‘Research’ staff.

²¹⁹ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2000-2001*, pp. 22-23.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56. Birkbeck also offered a joint degree in Politics, Philosophy and History, partly run by HCA. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

the History degree ranged in period from The Greek World: Archaic and Classical Periods to Popular Culture in American History, 1870 to the Present; and in region from The English Revolution to Western Perceptions of Japan.²²¹ In Classics and Classical Studies, BA students were offered Greek and Latin language training, from beginners' to advanced, and modular options from Homer in Translation to The Body and Society in the Ancient Greco-Roman World.²²² History and Archaeology included both method and practice modules, plus broader subjects, such as Urbanism in the 1st Millennium and Other Peoples in Greek and Roman Thought.²²³ HCA also now offered a larger number of MA degrees, including Contemporary History and Politics, Imperialism and Post-Colonial Societies, and Classical Civilisation.²²⁴

The first Head of the new joint School of History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck was David Feldman, a modernist, recruited to the college from the University of Bristol, in 1994-95.²²⁵ Feldman had completed his doctoral training at Cambridge under Gareth Stedman Jones, who in the 1970s and 1980s had led critiques of social history that remained tied to structural, Marxist theory.²²⁶ Feldman said that subsequently he had joined a new generation of historians entering into 'critical engagement' with Marxism:²²⁷ 'exiting from Marxism, but thinking that Marxists were the people that we wanted to engage in debate with.'²²⁸ Feldman suggested that such perspectives became merged with new cultural approaches in HCA by the turn of the millennium, as part of a more expansive and diverse intellectual framework. He explained that

²²¹ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

²²² Ibid., p. 58.

²²³ Ibid., p. 62.

²²⁴ Ibid., pp. 86-87.

²²⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1994-95*, p. 22; Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:44:10.

²²⁶ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 93.

²²⁷ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:39:23.

²²⁸ Ibid., 00:37:50.

There were two strands in a way. There was a strand which was, if you like, a social history of politics. And that was represented by people like me in some ways, and by Lucy Riall, for example. But then there was a sort of history that people like Joanna [Bourke] were doing, which was really part of expanding what the terrain of history was, and bringing new subject matter.²²⁹

According to Feldman, this combination of progressive social and cultural approaches was key to the intellectual identity of the new joint School of HCA. He further explained that

It allowed us to cooperate across time periods. I think that's the thing. There was a sense of – in very broad terms – a commonality of approach. It came about that we were able to say to ourselves with some pride that we do history from the ancient world to the contemporary world. And I think the emphasis on social and cultural history ran – obviously with some variation – across those millennia.²³⁰

This sense of academic cohesion in the new joint HCA, based on a 'commonality of approach' through social and cultural history, also depended on successful recruitment.

According to Feldman, HCA was 'very good at reproducing ourselves'.²³¹ He recalled that

the closest we got to appointing an economic historian was Frank Trentmann, and he's very much at the cultural and political end of economic history. We didn't

²²⁹ Ibid., 00:16:52.

²³⁰ Ibid., 00:19:17.

²³¹ Ibid., 00:12:21.

appoint a historian of diplomacy or of foreign policy, or of high politics – so we had a very clear sense of ourselves as cultural and social historians.²³²

This was some distance away from the academic era of Darlington, or even Cumpston. Significantly, Feldman also remembered that recruitment in HCA, and the School's subsequent academic direction, was 'progressive, but not too progressive'.²³³ In particular, HCA's engagement with postmodernism, a prominent interdisciplinary trend across universities in the 1990s and early 2000s, was limited.²³⁴ Feldman explained that, 'although we prized social and cultural history, and were interested in theory, collectively we tended to prize certain rather traditional, historians' empirical virtues.'²³⁵ Feldman added that he thought the influence of Evans at Birkbeck had helped to shape this aspect of HCA's intellectual identity. He reflected that

On the one hand, if you read Richard's work, he expresses the most traditionalist, empiricist idea of what history is; on the other hand, he was a great promoter of women's history, feminist history, the history of crime – expanding the field. And I think that in a way left its mark.²³⁶

²³² Ibid. Trentmann joined Birkbeck from Princeton University in 2000-01 as Lecturer in British History since 1850, having previously trained at Hamburg University, the London School of Economics and Harvard. He is currently a Professor of History at Birkbeck. 'Prof Frank Trentmann', Birkbeck, University of London website, <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/our-staff/profile/8009279/frank-trentmann> [accessed on 17th October 2023]

²³³ Ibid., 00:13:17.

²³⁴ In the mid-1990s, postmodern critiques of academic history as a form of literature, and historians as individual creators of fiction, caused a crisis in the discipline. By the early 2000s, postmodernism was an established branch of historical theory, as evidenced by the launch of the journal *Rethinking History*. Evans, 'Prologue: *What is History? – Now*', p. 14 and p. 8.

²³⁵ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:13:17.

²³⁶ Ibid., 00:40:13.

Lastly, Feldman also remembered that in 2003, Hobsbawm, then still an Emeritus Professor in HCA, had been awarded the international Balzan Prize – a prestigious award for major achievements in research, culture or peace.²³⁷ The Prize, bestowed for Hobsbawm’s peerless work on European history from 1900, included funding for new research on Eastern Europe, which Feldman and Mark Mazower – recruited to HCA in 1999-00 – helped to administer.²³⁸ Feldman recalled that

Eric had some unhappiness, or dissatisfaction, with the way in which [the Prize-funded research] went, because he wanted something much more about bricks and mortar – concrete production, tractor production, agricultural production – and that sort of history was not really being written.²³⁹

Feldman continued

I mean, there was some of that, and we did our best, but there wasn’t as much as Eric would have liked. But that’s in a sense an index of the way in which the discipline itself had changed. And Eric, understandably, hadn’t quite changed with it.²⁴⁰

As Eley suggests, academic history more broadly had undergone a major pluralisation by the turn of the millennium.²⁴¹ It now included

²³⁷ ‘Eric Hobsbawm: 2003 Balzan Prize for European History since 1900’, International Balzan Prize Foundation website, <https://www.balzan.org/en/prizewinners/eric-hobsbawm> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

²³⁸ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:41:55. Mark Mazower was appointed as Anniversary Professor of Modern History. Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-00*, p. 21.

²³⁹ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:41:55.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 10.

not only the range of social histories that continued to be practised much as before, but also various redeployed and more sophisticated versions of political history and the history of ideas, distinct and self-consciously demarcated forms of the ‘new cultural history’, and a small but vociferous avant-garde of self-avowed ‘postmodernists’.²⁴²

Critically, and in close relation to the new joint HCA, Eley also identifies an ‘intermixing of standpoints’ as the defining characteristic of history and associated disciplines at this juncture:

it was patently possible now to be both a social historian and a cultural historian, to combine the history of ideas with careful forms of contextualization, and to take the measure of contemporary culturalist critiques without entirely vacating the ground of structural or materialist investigation.²⁴³

Conclusion

In the four decades after the 1963 Robbins Report UK higher education not only expanded but also diversified. History, as an academic discipline, experienced ‘two massive waves of innovation’.²⁴⁴ The first of these, from the 1960s, was a rise of social history. This change reflected deeper shifts in universities and politics, with new expectations among a growing student population. It also caused conflict within university departments, as ‘first tentative steps’ were taken towards reform of conservative and conventional curriculums.²⁴⁵ In HCA at

²⁴² Eley, ‘Marxist Historiography’, p. 78.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 10.

²⁴⁵ Evans, ‘Prologue: *What is History? – Now*’, p. 4.

Birkbeck, such tensions were evident in hostilities between Darlington and Hobsbawm. As Brown suggests, Darlington represented a generation of historians for whom ‘the last days of an Empire which placed Britain and England at the centre of the world’ required ‘a unique and exclusive English History to explain it’.²⁴⁶ In stark contrast, Hobsbawm and Browning represented a new wave of social history – embracing Marxist theory, social science methods and continental research approaches from the *Annales* school. Indeed, it is notable that while Eley cites the importance of *extra-curricular* influences at Cambridge, including E. P. Thompson, other key figures in the rise of social history were *internal* to HCA at Birkbeck. Hobsbawm reflected at the start of the 1970s that it was ‘a good moment to be a social historian’, and this was – following Darlington’s departure – as true of his own department as anywhere else.²⁴⁷

Hobsbawm’s influence over the academic direction of HCA was further demonstrated through his role in the recruitment of Floud as a successor to Dakin after 1973-74. In contrast to the long-standing Wilks, Floud was academically progressive – a leader in new statistical and computational methods in economic history. The development of new courses in HCA following Floud’s arrival coincided with a peak in ‘general advocacy’ for quantitative techniques – and social science methods more broadly – across history as a discipline. By the 1980s, other recruits in the Department of History – Foster, Hunter, Blackburn and Harding – had helped to further establish new social, economic and political approaches. This also included the creation of new *interdisciplinary* degrees with colleagues across the college – reflecting a larger, longer-term trend of collaboration between historians and scholars from other fields. As Eley suggests, these developments were also perhaps evidence that academics who had trained during the initial post-Robbins period of mass higher education

²⁴⁶ Brown, ‘Reginald Ralph Darlington, 1903-1977’, p. 431.

²⁴⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, ‘From Social History to the History of Society’, in *On History*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997), pp. 71-93 (p. 93). The significance of this essay in relation to wider disciplinary developments from the 1960s is highlighted by Eley. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 10 and p. 25.

expansion were now established within university departments, and able to wield curricular influence. In Classics at Birkbeck, a wider ‘democratic turn’ was reflected through the creation of a new BA in Classical Studies, and MA in Classical Civilisation, during the 1980s – before the department was closed. In Archaeology, Evison’s short-lived, independent unit provided an early example of co-operation with History, through joint teaching. Meanwhile, a prescient indication of future academic direction for HCA was presented through the pioneering feminist approaches of Alexander and Rowbotham at Extra-Mural, a centre soon to be incorporated into the college.

The start of the 1990s in HCA was marked by the appointment of Evans, who played a key part, as Head of History, in an unprecedented wave of recruitment. Significantly, this included many female academics – Bourke, Sapire, Shimazu, Hamilton, Dench – who pioneered new social and *cultural* approaches in the department. Over the course of the decade, this included the development of ground-breaking teaching and research on women, gender, sexuality, race and post-colonialism. Similar changes were made to a limited extent in Classics – administered via History – including the launch of a new course on gender and sexuality in Ancient Greece, offered under both disciplines. The appointment of Halsall, an archaeologist who supported interdisciplinary and cultural-historical research, was also significant in terms of cross-discipline collaboration within HCA. As Eley suggests, these departmental shifts reflected the cresting of a much wider wave of ‘new cultural history’ by the mid-1990s, leaving a ‘marked diversification’ in its wake.²⁴⁸ The changes in HCA were also perhaps further evidence of the ongoing impact of mass university expansion since Robbins, which had included unprecedented numbers of female academic trainees.²⁴⁹ Furthermore, again as Eley suggests, the ‘rich multiplication of new cultural histories’ in

²⁴⁸ Eley, ‘Marxist Historiography’, p. 78.

²⁴⁹ This trend is examined further in Chapter 6, *Gender, Race and Ethnicity*.

HCA was likely linked to deeper, political trends from the 1980s – a loosening of the economy ‘and with it the determinative power of the social structure and its causal claims’.²⁵⁰

The new joint entity of HCA at Birkbeck established by the turn of the millennium – a School of History, Classics and Archaeology – was markedly different to its constituent departments in 1963. This was not simply a matter of size. It concerned the range and breadth of subjects, disciplines and periods now covered. Feldman, first Head of the new HCA, suggests that its intellectual identity comprised two key strands: progressive approaches to social history, and new forms of cultural history – ‘expanding what the terrain of history was’.²⁵¹ These shared academic aims enabled a ‘commonality of approach’ across periods and disciplines – extending to Classics and Archaeology. This sense of academic cohesion also depended on successful recruitment: HCA’s social and cultural historians were ‘very good’ at maintaining a collective identity – to the exclusion of new scholars who were too traditional, or too progressive (that is, post-modern).²⁵² As Feldman suggests, that HCA rejected more extreme post-modernism in the late 1990s and early 2000s was possibly due to the lasting influence of Evans – who while a strong advocate of new research methods, was also a staunch defender of empirical values.²⁵³ By 2003-04, HCA clearly reflected a wider ‘dramatic pluralization’²⁵⁴ and ‘intermixing of standpoints’ in academic history, as observed by Eley.²⁵⁵ Over four decades from the 1963 Robbins Report, structural and curricular shifts in History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck had been linked to deeper disciplinary, university and political trends. Critically, these major changes were also a product of the ‘general dailiness of departmental life’.²⁵⁶ Indeed, it is striking that the most influential figure

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

²⁵¹ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:16:52.

²⁵² Ibid., 00:12:21.

²⁵³ Ibid., 00:40:13.

²⁵⁴ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 10.

²⁵⁵ Eley, ‘Marxist Historiography’, p. 78.

²⁵⁶ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 6.

in HCA throughout the research period, Hobsbawm, was still at the centre of departmental tensions over historical practices at its end. HCA's academics were by then distinctly aware of the disciplinary distance travelled since the 1960s. And yet, through a new joint School spanning approaches, disciplines and periods, they were now also particularly well-placed to pursue one of Hobsbawm's lasting objectives – the exploration of the history of society as a whole.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 11. Eley cites the existence of this historical objective, referring to Hobsbawm's essay 'From Social History to the History of Society'. Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society', pp. 71-93.

Gender, Race and Ethnicity

Introduction

The unprecedented expansion of higher education after the 1963 Robbins Report radically altered the social composition of UK universities. As Mandler observes, the nation's new students came from 'both genders, all ethnicities'.¹ Such change applied not just to those who packed lecture theatre seats, however, but, over time, to those who stood behind the lecterns, too. Put simply, the post-Robbins undergraduates of the 1960s and 1970s were future faculty members of the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, by the early years of this latter decade, the proportion of female academics in UK higher education had almost doubled, from 10 per cent to nearly 20 per cent.² Yet, shifts to the social composition of university senior common rooms were still less conspicuous than those seen in the student population. Departmental hierarchies were still dominated by male, white academics. The number of women in higher ranks of academic teaching remained disproportionately low.³ Moreover, the relative position of non-white academics was illustrated by a severe lack of relevant data.⁴

In 1963-64, HCA at Birkbeck consisted of just two departments: History, and Classics. Men outnumbered women by six to three in History, with one woman employed as a secretary;⁵ in Classics there were *no* women (and no secretary).⁶ The racial and ethnic composition of Birkbeck's History and Classics staff at the time of Robbins can be

¹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 135.

² Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 222.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴ *Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education*, ed. by Carter, Fenton and Modood, p. 1.

⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-64*, p. 87.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

summarised more concisely, as ‘white’.⁷ By 2003-04, a new joint School of History, Classics and Archaeology at the college boasted a much bigger total staff of thirty-three.⁸

Approximately half this total were now women – also including two female secretaries, alongside one male secretary.⁹ A noticeable imbalance in senior positions also remained, however: only one of five professors in HCA, Joanna Bourke, was a woman.¹⁰ Furthermore, change to the racial and ethnic composition of HCA at Birkbeck was extremely limited: four decades after Robbins, just two members of its total academic staff – Naoko Shimazu, of Japanese heritage, and Chandak Sengoopta, an Indian scholar – were not white.¹¹

In terms of historiography, shifts in the social composition of UK universities since the early 1960s have been examined in a number of academic works. Mandler has most recently analysed changes to who studied in higher education post-Robbins, although he pays less attention to who *taught*.¹² Halsey provides a more in-depth investigation of academic staff, including information on gender, but his analysis ends at the start of the 1990s – and does not include any data on race or ethnicity.¹³ More broadly, Carol Dyhouse’s illuminating study of women in universities stops in 1939, some time short of the research period.¹⁴ In terms of race and ethnicity, John Carter, Steve Fenton and Tariq Modood have contextualised some of the first useful data on UK universities, published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in 1996-97.¹⁵ The sociologists Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza, meanwhile, present up-to-date analyses of race issues affecting academic staff in UK

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60 and p. 87.

⁸ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-04*, pp. 25-26.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

¹² Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*.

¹³ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*.

¹⁴ Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex?*

¹⁵ *Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education*, ed. by Carter, Fenton and Modood.

institutions – albeit lacking historical perspective, due to the telling absence of relevant data.¹⁶

This chapter aims to provide fresh perspectives by investigating issues of gender, and race and ethnicity, within one department at one higher education institution, from 1963 to 2003. It asks: What shifts occurred in HCA at Birkbeck in terms of gender from the early 1960s, and how did these relate to UK higher education more broadly? What changes were there to HCA’s academic staff in terms of race and ethnicity – and how might these be understood more widely? And, finally, to what extent can shifts to the social composition of HCA’s staff during the period be considered significant in terms of ‘diversity’ – that is, in terms of power relations? These questions are addressed in two sections: *Gender*, which analyses changes in the male-female balance of HCA’s staff during the period, particularly in the 1990s; and, *Race and Ethnicity*, which investigates limited change in the racial and ethnic composition of HCA’s staff, within a wider context of deep failure on this issue across UK universities.

Gender

Issues of gender in the immediate post-Robbins era of higher education can be explored within HCA at Birkbeck through the professional history of one scholar – Emma Mason.¹⁷ Mason, originally from Northumberland, showed intellectual promise during her early education and secured a place at Bedford College, University of London.¹⁸ Her academic ambitions were curbed by senior staff at the all-female institution, however, who insisted that she should aim only to be a school teacher or secretary.¹⁹ Mason recalled that the then

¹⁶ *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*, ed. by Arday and Mirza.

¹⁷ Again, Mason’s full name is Edith Emma Mason; she was known at Birkbeck by her middle name.

¹⁸ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:00:08; 00:00:16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 00:04:40.

Principal of Bedford College, Dame Lillian Penson, presented her with ‘a very definite set of options’: “‘You are either going to do a teacher training postgraduate diploma, or a secretarial course.’”²⁰ Mason undertook a secretarial course at City of London College, and was subsequently recommended for a vacancy advertised by Professor R. R. Darlington, Head of History at Birkbeck.²¹ Darlington had started his academic career at Bedford College, and had approached his past employer for help with filling a new secretarial post.²²

Mason was appointed as a Secretary in the Department of History at Birkbeck in 1962-63.²³ Once at the college, however, the new recruit realised that Darlington’s job was in fact more academic than administrative. She later explained that, ‘there was practically no [departmental] administration in those days, and so I was given research assistance work virtually from day one.’²⁴ Mason’s early tasks in the department included transcribing archive materials and indexing manuscripts for Darlington and other staff, including Hobsbawm.²⁵ As Mason remembered:

Darlington presented me with an enormous box of charters from miscellaneous families in Derbyshire, and he said, ‘Sort those, and catalogue them.’ And they were

²⁰ Ibid., 00:04:25; 00:04:40. Penson was Professor of Modern History at Bedford College from 1930 until the early 1960s, having previously held a teaching post at Birkbeck. Penson had also studied at Birkbeck, in the Department of History, graduating with first-class honours at the age of 21 in 1917. In 1921, she became the first student in the wider University of London – male or female – to be awarded a PhD. Penson was elected as the first female Vice-Chancellor of the University in 1948. She died in 1963. Bourke, *Birkbeck*, pp. 199-201. Bedford College became coeducational in the 1960s, and later merged with Royal Holloway College, also part of the University of London, in 1985. ‘Bedford College Papers’, Archives Hub (Jisc) website, <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/ea72edbf-ccfd-3a04-8a64-021e9779134f> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

²¹ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:05:39; 00:05:27. City of London College merged with the Sir John Cass College of Arts and Science in 1970 to form City of London Polytechnic – later renamed London Guildhall University in 1992. London Guildhall University subsequently merged with North London University to form London Metropolitan University in 2002. ‘Our History’, London Metropolitan University website, <https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/about/our-university/our-history/> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

²² Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:05:39.

²³ Ibid., 00:08:19. Mason joined the Department of History at Birkbeck in April 1962. She had also been offered a job at the IHR but was ‘put off’ by a basement office and lower pay. Ibid., 00:04:57; 00:05:27.

²⁴ Ibid., 00:01:20.

²⁵ Ibid.

mostly in Latin, or in sixteenth-century writing; but by the end of it, I could read the various hands, and my Latin was picking up.²⁶

Mason still had to do a limited amount of secretarial work, such as typing letters for senior colleagues in History, including Mary Cumpston – who, according to Mason, could be ‘very finicky’.²⁷ But this first position within HCA enabled her to progress quickly from Secretary to Research Assistant by 1964-65 – a title with a clear, qualitative difference in terms of academic career potential.²⁸ Mason’s subsequent rise at Birkbeck was impressive: by 1969-70, after a hiatus for PhD research, she was a Lecturer in the Department of History;²⁹ by 1981-82, a Senior Lecturer;³⁰ by 1991-92, a Reader in Medieval History.³¹ Mason also had a remarkably long career at the college. By the academic year of her formal retirement, 1998-99, the once Secretary had been employed in the Department of History for almost four decades, with only brief breaks for PhD and research work.³² At the end of the research period, 2003-04, she was still connected to HCA as an Emeritus Reader.³³

Mason’s career within Birkbeck and HCA is particularly significant not just because she entered academia via an administrative role, but because she was a woman (these two aspects being related). Mason escaped a more conventional, ‘female’ career,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 00:03:30.

²⁸ Ibid., 00:08:34. Mason was made Research Assistant in October 1964.

²⁹ Ibid., 00:08:46; 00:10:55; 00:10:28. With support from Darlington, Mason secured a two-year fellowship at the IHR, and a one-term bursary from the Goldsmiths’ Company, to complete her PhD. During the doctorate, she continued to work six hours a week as an administrator for Darlington – which also enabled the Head of History to retain Mason’s office. Mason was subsequently offered a junior lectureship in History at Birkbeck.

³⁰ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1981-82*, p. 27.

³¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p. 22.

³² Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1998-99*, p. 25. Mason took a one-year leave of absence in 1995-96. Birkbeck College University of London, *Calendar, 1995-96* (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 1995), p. 22. Mason also qualified for a long service award worth £100 after thirty years at Birkbeck; she chose a lapis lazuli necklace from the British Museum – a ‘long service and good conduct badge’, which she still wears ‘on special occasions’. Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:28:32; 00:29:03.

³³ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-04*, p. 26.

as prescribed by her Bedford College masters, by joining Birkbeck to work as a Secretary for Darlington. At the time of her appointment, only a quarter (two out of eight) of the academic staff in the Department of History were women: Alwyn A. Ruddock, an expert on the fifteenth-century 'Age of Discovery'; and Cumpston, a historian of the British Empire and Commonwealth.³⁴ Notably, the Department of Classics at Birkbeck also had the same female-male academic staff ratio in 1962-63 – Professor Marjorie Webster being the only woman out of four full-time scholars.³⁵ Furthermore, the minority roster of three female academics in History – including Mason, after promotion from Secretary – remained static for almost a decade, even as the Department expanded to a total of ten staff, excluding secretarial posts (the only area of new female recruitment).³⁶ Indeed, with the exception of two short-term appointments, this imbalance stayed the same until the 1980s,³⁷ and even worsened, factoring in the gradual retirement of Ruddock, via a part-time post, by 1977-78.³⁸

History as a whole, meanwhile, further expanded to a total of thirteen academics by the end of the 1970s: ten men, alongside Cumpston, Mason and Annabel Gregory, a Research Assistant – plus two secretaries, both women.³⁹ Similarly, following Webster's

³⁴ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1962-63* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1962), p. 85.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59. Webster also retired in 1962-63. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1962-63* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1963), p. 18.

³⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1971-72*, pp. 21-22.

³⁷ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1980-81* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1981), pp. 26-27. Margaret E. Lambert was employed as a Part-time Lecturer by the Department of History for three academic years from 1972-73. Annabel Gregory was hired as a Research Assistant for 1979-80 only. One other Research Assistant, Y. Yanoulopoulos, whose gender is not clear from college records, was also hired in 1972-73. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1972-73*, (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1972), p. 23 and p. 26. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1979-80* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1979), p. 27.

³⁸ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1977-78*, p. 23. Ruddock was employed as a Part-time Lecturer for 1976-77 only. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1976-77*, p. 23.

³⁹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1979-80*, p. 24, p. 27 and p. 28. The full list of academic staff in the Department of History in 1979-80 was: Roderick Floud (Professor and Head of Department), Eric J. Hobsbawm (Professor), Michael J. Wilks (Professor), Mary Cumpston (Reader), Graham C. Gibbs (Reader), Patrick M. McGurk (Reader), Barry Coward (Lecturer), Roy F. Foster (Lecturer), Michael C. W. Hunter (Lecturer), Edith Emma Mason (Lecturer), James L. Sturgis (Lecturer), David G. Blackburn (Lecturer), and Annabel Gregory (Research Assistant). The department's two secretaries were Ann T. Myles and Marie-Anne Bastide.

departure after 1962-63, Classics developed as a small unit of four male scholars, with just one female addition – a first secretary – before the start of the 1980s.⁴⁰ The status quo in HCA shifted marginally over the decade, starting with the recruitment of Jennifer Bray and Judith Collingwood as junior researchers in History, alongside Gregory, in 1981-82.⁴¹ In the same academic year, Ruth S. Padel was hired as a Lecturer in Classics, becoming the only woman in a total staff of six, excluding the Department's secretary, Judith Higgens.⁴² This was followed in 1984-85 with the appointment of Vanessa Harding as a Lecturer in History.⁴³ With the exception of Padel, employed in Classics for just three years, Harding was the first woman from outside HCA recruited to a full-time teaching post since the 1950s.⁴⁴ The gender balance of academic staff in History and Classics between the 1960s and 1980s, meanwhile, contrasted briefly with the anomalous Department of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology at Birkbeck. This had an all-female staff of three during its three-year existence, from 1979-80 to 1982-83:⁴⁵ Professor Vera Evison as Head of Department, Valerie Cooper as a researcher, and Shireen Karanjia as Secretary.⁴⁶ Such was the limited size and longevity of the unit, however, it perhaps has only minor significance in terms of gender issues. More critically, and with the exception of Evison, no female academics in HCA between the start of this research period, 1963,

⁴⁰ The new secretarial position in Classics was filled in 1966-67 by Susan Archer, who held the post for more than a decade, until 1980-81, when she was succeeded by Judith Higgens. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1966-67* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1966), p. 66. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1979-80*, p. 31.

⁴¹ Jennifer Bray was employed as 'Research Staff' from 1981-82 to 1987-88; Judith Collingwood was similarly employed as 'Research Staff', but for 1981-82 only. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1981-82*, p. 31. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1987-88*, p. 26.

⁴² Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1981-82*, p. 24. Padel, a great-great-granddaughter of Charles Darwin, also wrote poetry while employed at Birkbeck and went on to have a successful career in that discipline. In 2009, she was appointed as the first female professor of poetry at the University of Oxford. David Batty, 'Ruth Padel Profile: From Teaching Greek to Poetry's Peak', *The Guardian* website, 17th May 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/17/ruth-padel-profile> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

⁴³ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1984-85* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1984), p. 29.

⁴⁴ Marjorie Webster ('Mrs A. M. Webster') was appointed as Reader in Classics at Birkbeck in 1953. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1952-53* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1953), p. 16.

⁴⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1979-80*, p. 21; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1982-83*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1979-80*, p. 21; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1982-83*, p. 24, p. 30 and p. 32.

and the mid-1990s – that is, in more than three decades – held a post higher than Reader or were at any time Head of Department.⁴⁷

Despite the departmental context outlined above, Mason later said that she did not think being a woman had been an important factor in the development of her career in HCA at Birkbeck. Mason did recall once being belittled over the nature of her entry into academia – the fact that she had first been appointed to the college as a Secretary later prompting one colleague to claim that she had ‘got in by the back door’.⁴⁸ But according to Mason, her identity as a woman within the Department of History was always secondary to the quality of her scholarship. When asked if she thought her academic career had been different because she was female, Mason replied, ‘No, not really.’⁴⁹ Mason suggested that she had measured her career against the academic success of her peers, particularly in terms of published work – and that she had been subjected to the same form of assessment by others in HCA, men included.⁵⁰ She did remember being patronised by one senior male colleague, although the offender was apparently also known to patronise others in History – male and female alike.⁵¹

Mason further suggested that she had always had a pragmatic approach to any gender issues in the workplace, influenced by her upbringing in the North East, where, ‘it’s the women who do a lot of the planning and organising and things of that sort; the men provide the brawn, the women provide the brains.’⁵² Certainly, being in a minority of female academics within her department – and HCA more broadly – did not prevent

⁴⁷ As above, Professor Marjorie Webster retired from the Department of Classics in 1962-63. The college’s *Report* for that year paid tribute to her as ‘a scholar of great distinction’. Birkbeck College, *Report, 1962-63*, p. 18. Classics also appointed one Visiting Professor, E. Degani, in 1977-78, whose gender is not clear from college records. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1977-78*, p. 21.

⁴⁸ Mason said that the claimant was a ‘stranger’ whom she met while sitting on an academic board. Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:35:16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 00:36:31; 00:56:57.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 00:36:49.

Mason from making some direct appeals and complaints to senior figures at Birkbeck. In May 1980, Mason wrote directly to the college's Master, W. G. Overend, regarding who should be appointed as a new Head of History.⁵³ She forcefully told him that, 'It would have been appreciated if formal and individual submissions on the rotation of the headship had been invited from all members of the department before any such decision was reached and announced.'⁵⁴ Mason's persistence on the headship issue eventually led the Master to commit to a more democratic system: consultation with all departmental academic staff prior to Head of Department appointments.⁵⁵ Mason also later successfully secured a pay rise at a senior college committee meeting chaired by the then Master, Baroness Tessa Blackstone.⁵⁶ Interestingly, in this latter instance, Mason suggested that being a woman was helpful: some male colleagues were allegedly intimidated by Blackstone because of her gender; but for Mason, the Master was a fellow female.⁵⁷

Similarly, Harding, who joined Birkbeck in 1984-85, said that although she was 'very aware' of being one of few female academics in the Department of History, it had not stifled her career.⁵⁸ Harding recollected that

There were only two women – academics – in the Department when I joined. One of them had just retired – Mary Cumpston; so, there was Emma Mason, who was quite a number of years senior to myself, and me.⁵⁹

⁵³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 115.

⁵⁴ Mason's concern related to alleged plans for Michael Wilks to permanently succeed Roderick Floud as Head of History; Mason preferred Floud, whom she credited with having introduced a form of 'open government' to the department. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 115.

⁵⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 116, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁶ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:26:14.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Harding, 14th January 2021, 00:26:56.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Despite this situation, Harding claimed that on a ‘daily basis’ women academics in History often didn’t feel in a minority, because there were two female secretaries, and at one point a female Research Assistant, in the Department.⁶⁰ Harding added that

Although most of the members of staff were male, it didn’t feel like a very male-dominated or masculine department, in the way that I often felt King’s College, London seemed – which I thought was quite interesting. It felt like a department of people who were working at the same sort of thing, you know, at different levels and [with] different qualities and different characteristics. But I didn’t feel in any way disregarded.⁶¹

Harding also reflected that

I never felt disadvantaged as a woman. I mean, I never felt that if there was anything I couldn’t do or couldn’t get done or whatever, that it was to do with being a woman, rather than anything else.

These accounts of departmental and professional development by Mason and Harding point to the importance of personal perspectives and attitudes in relation to gender issues within higher education. Through closer readings, however, it might also be possible to extract further understanding from the testimonies of these two female academics. Firstly, it is worth reiterating that Mason’s route into academia was effectively via secretarial college – a path which her future male colleagues in the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 00:27:15.

⁶¹ Ibid., 00:28:09.

Department of History at Birkbeck would most likely never have had to consider. While Mason was clearly proud of her association with Bedford College, referring to it as having been ‘formed in the nineteenth century to bring women forward’, in reality, senior staff there had to some extent curbed her career ambitions.⁶² Secondly, it is also possible to further scrutinise Mason’s academic promotion within HCA. Mason’s progress from Lecturer to Reader is comparable with some male colleagues, notably Barry Coward. Indeed, while Mason and Coward were both made Lecturers in 1968-69, Mason was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1981-82 – some six years ahead of Coward.⁶³ Both academics were then promoted to Reader in 1991-92.⁶⁴ However, it is also notable that while Coward was eventually promoted to Professor by 2003-04, Mason had by then retired as a Reader.⁶⁵ As such, Mason is exceptional amongst academics in HCA between 1963 and 2003 as having the longest departmental career – thirty-seven years – without reaching the top level of Professor.

Harding, like Mason, also claimed that her career in HCA had not been negatively affected because she was a woman. In part, Harding referred to a sense of gender balance created by the presence of other women in the Department of History: Mason; a Research Assistant (in fact, there were two – Jennifer Bray and Annabel Gregory); and, two secretaries – Ann T. Myles and Eleanor E. Thomas.⁶⁶ Harding suggests that secretaries were particularly important in contributing to a sense of gender balance in the Department because they were consistently present – compared with academic colleagues, male and female, who perhaps came to Birkbeck only on certain days, or around evening teaching hours.⁶⁷ It is possible to question, however, whether any of

⁶² Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:36:49.

⁶³ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1981-82*, p. 24; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1987-88*, p. 22.

⁶⁴ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p. 22.

⁶⁵ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-04*, p. 26.

⁶⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1984-85*, p. 29, p. 33 and p. 35.

⁶⁷ Harding, 14th January 2021, 00:26:54.

Harding's male academic colleagues would have had reason to identify with the Department's administrative staff at all. Separately, while Harding had only one senior and two junior female academic colleagues in History, she also recalled that at the time of her appointment to Birkbeck there were new female academics in other departments, including History of Art and French.⁶⁸ She remembered that she was 'aware of other women around the college'.⁶⁹ Notably, however, while History of Art and French at Birkbeck did have a number of female academics in 1984-85, the most senior positions in both departments were occupied by male scholars.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, although Harding favourably compared the working environment of the History department at Birkbeck to a 'male-dominated' and 'masculine' equivalent at King's College, it should be noted that this latter institution had always been more traditional, with historic links to the Church of England.⁷¹

Carol Dyhouse, in her analysis of women in UK higher education before 1939, reflects that

Discrimination is a complex issue. It can be overt or covert, direct or indirect; it can operate subtly and the acknowledgement or even the perception of having experienced it can carry political implications.⁷²

Dyhouse also cites the doctoral research of Ingrid Sommerkorn, who studied female university teachers in England during the mid-to-late 1960s – that is, the period during

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1984-85*, pp. 28-9. Ian Short was the only Professor and also Head of Department in French; Francis Ames-Lewis held the highest academic rank (Senior Lecturer) and was Head of Department in History of Art.

⁷¹ 'The University of London: The Constituent Colleges: King's College', British History Online (IHR) website, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol1/pp345-359#h3-0005> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

⁷² Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex?*, p. 153.

which Mason was beginning her formal academic career at Birkbeck.⁷³ In interviews for her work, published in 1967, Sommerkorn found that although a majority of women felt that discrimination against women in academia existed, only a small minority admitted to having experienced it personally.⁷⁴ According to Sommerkorn, some female scholars were cautious about being critical because they believed in meritocracy, and considered themselves to have succeeded within such a system.⁷⁵ Sommerkorn further concluded that

Because – consciously or unconsciously – women might fear criticism, it is possible that they refrain from complaining about having experienced a sex-differentiated treatment in the academic world.⁷⁶

Notwithstanding the testimonies of Mason and Harding, nor the possibility that HCA at Birkbeck was perhaps freer of discrimination against women than equivalent departments elsewhere, the work of Dyhouse and Sommerkorn points to the potential importance of alternative readings. At the least, it is notable that during the period in which both Mason and Harding worked in the Department of History, discrimination against women in UK higher education was formally recognised by organisations including the Association of University Teachers (AUT)⁷⁷ and the Hansard Society.⁷⁸

The most significant shift for HCA at Birkbeck in terms of gender balance came in the 1990s. Notably, this important phase was preceded by the incorporation into the college of the University of London's Extra-Mural Department. As noted in Chapter 5,

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 222.

⁷⁸ Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex?*, p. 1.

Expansion, Extra-Mural had developed a political identity as part of a broader landscape of left-wing activity in London during the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, Extra-Mural had an association with gender politics, manifested through the development of new courses on women's studies and women's history. This academic progress was led by tutors including Alexander and Rowbotham – individuals who had helped to pioneer women's history, via the History Workshop movement, from the late 1960s. Female scholars in Extra-Mural were also actively involved with gender politics in the 'real world', outside universities. Alexander and Rowbotham were both key participants in the Women's Liberation Movement;⁷⁹ and both were active in struggles including the Night Cleaners' Campaign of the early 1970s, which fought for better conditions and pay for female workers.⁸⁰ When Extra-Mural was incorporated into Birkbeck in 1988-89, Alexander and Rowbotham did not transfer their teaching to the college.⁸¹ Also, the new Centre for Extra-Mural Studies (CEMS) at Birkbeck was somewhat siloed institutionally, as a separate unit unconnected to other faculties. According to David Feldman, later Head of a joint HCA, academics in Extra-Mural and those in History at the college were 'not closely integrated at all'.⁸²

Yet, the transfer of a teaching centre with a reputation for progressive academic approaches, particularly on women's history, was perhaps at least symbolically significant. Furthermore, the incorporation of Extra-Mural into Birkbeck had been overseen by the college's first female Master, Blackstone. As recorded in Chapter 1,

⁷⁹ 'Beyond "Misbehaviour": Sally Alexander in Conversation', History Workshop website, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/feminism/beyond-misbehaviour> [accessed on 26th September 2023] Other notable historians involved in the Movement included Catherine Hall, Barbara Taylor and Anna Davin.

⁸⁰ 'Sally Alexander discusses the night cleaners [sic] campaign', British Library website, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/sally-alexander-night-cleaners-campaign> [accessed on 26th September 2023]

⁸¹ Sally Alexander, email to the author, 'Re: Birkbeck Fact Checks', 26th April 2023. History courses in CEMS at Birkbeck were convened by W. H. Liddell and Michael Harris. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1988-89*, p. 26.

⁸² Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:28:15.

Tradition and Political Identity, Blackstone arrived at Birkbeck in 1987 having already been an advisor to the Cabinet Office, a professor at the University of London's Institute of Education, and a senior officer at the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA).⁸³ As such, and particularly based on her latter post inside the notoriously political ILEA, Blackstone came to the college with a distinguished reputation as a tough and highly strategic administrator. Notwithstanding the primacy of these professional attributes, there was perhaps also some symbolic value for female academics within Birkbeck, including HCA, of having a woman in the college's top post.⁸⁴

The Department of History at Birkbeck started the 1990s with just three female academics – Mason, Harding and a temporary lecturer, Joyce Whale – out of a total thirteen (approximately one quarter).⁸⁵ It ended the decade with twelve out of twenty-five academic posts filled by women (roughly half).⁸⁶ Similarly, though Classics at the college entered the 1990s as a reduced entity housed within History, the appointment that started its revival, made in 1991-92, was a woman – Emma Dench.⁸⁷ In part, this change in gender balance within HCA can be explained by the expansion of its departments.⁸⁸ The shift also reflected a broader trend, however, in the composition of university departments nationwide. The proportion of female academics across the UK had as much as doubled between 1964 and 1989, from around one tenth to one fifth.⁸⁹ This development was in-turn related to the longer-term impact of more women entering

⁸³ 'MPs and Lords: Baroness Blackstone', UK Parliament website, <https://members.parliament.uk/member/3561/experience> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

⁸⁴ Blackstone held the position of Master at Birkbeck for a decade, from 1987-88 to 1996-97. Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1987-88*, p. 2; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 2.

⁸⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1989-90*, p. 23.

⁸⁶ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1999-00*, p. 21.

⁸⁷ Dench, 13th January 2020, 00:02:14.

⁸⁸ This subject is examined fully in Chapter 4, *Expansion*.

⁸⁹ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 222. The figure of one fifth (or 20 per cent) quoted here includes both full- and part-time female academic employment, plus research-only roles; the 1989 figure including only full-time posts involving both research and teaching was 14 per cent.

higher education as students from 1963, as a result of mass university expansion, post-Robbins. While the number of male full-time undergraduates had gone up by 11,400 between 1970 and 1989, the increase in female undergraduates had been almost five times greater, at 52,700.⁹⁰ There were also significant disciplinary trends from the 1960s, towards social and cultural history – academic approaches embraced by many new female students, who subsequently emerged as leading scholars in these fields. Finally, as established in Chapter 4, *Expansion*, by 1991, there was at Birkbeck also a Head of Department in History, Evans, who recognised these confluent trends, and helped to facilitate female academic recruitment.⁹¹

Subsequent appointments made under Evans in History at Birkbeck in the 1990s were representative of a new generation of women historians: Bourke, Sapire, Dench, Dorothy Porter and Marianne Elliott in 1991-92;⁹² Marybeth Hamilton in 1993-94;⁹³ Lucy J. Riall in 1994-95;⁹⁴ and Shimazu in 1996-97.⁹⁵ Evans later claimed that this wave of female recruitment ‘wasn’t in any way deliberate’.⁹⁶ As noted in Chapter 5, *Diversification*, the former Head of Department, whose own research had focused in part on women’s political movements, insisted that the shift was due to the emergence of a new generation of talented female scholars.⁹⁷ Again, interestingly, the influx of younger, female academics in History at Birkbeck coincided with a return to the department of Hobsbawm – arguably *the* veteran, male historian.⁹⁸ According to Porter, there was an

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 220.

⁹¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1991-92*, p. 22. The term ‘Head of Department’ is used here for continuity; Evans was officially listed in Birkbeck’s *Calendar* as ‘Chairman’ of History.

⁹² Ibid. Porter was appointed as a Wellcome Research Lecturer.

⁹³ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1993-94*, p. 23.

⁹⁴ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1994-95*, p. 22.

⁹⁵ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 22. Ruth Watson was appointed in 1999-2000, after Evans had departed. Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-00*, p. 21.

⁹⁶ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:23:59.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ As also noted in Chapter 5, *Diversification*, Hobsbawm, who formally retired from Birkbeck in 1982, had requested an office in the Department of History to help facilitate his ongoing research and writing; he was

excitement among younger academics in the department, created by Hobsbawm's renewed presence.⁹⁹ She reflected that, 'It was a true privilege and honour to be in the department at the same time as him, and to be able to just chat to him in the corridor.'¹⁰⁰ There was also, however, perhaps a sense of tension: more widely, Hobsbawm had been a target of criticism for younger, female historians – particularly on issues of gender, as demonstrated in a 1998 *Slavic Review* article on women and Soviet art, by Susan E. Reid.¹⁰¹ In this way, the Department of History at Birkbeck in the 1990s to some extent reflected a broader disciplinary transition, away from established Marxist and social history orthodoxies, and towards more cultural and gendered approaches.¹⁰²

Significantly, any analysis of shifts to gender balance in HCA at Birkbeck during the 1990s must consider not just numbers, but levels of seniority, too. In 1995-96, Harding was appointed as the first female Head of History.¹⁰³ A more equal situation was also reflected in the appointment of several female Visiting Professors in the second half of the decade: Jane Caplan in 1996-97;¹⁰⁴ Linda Colley in 1997-98;¹⁰⁵ and, Cynthia B. Herrup and Judith M. Bennett in 1999-2000.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, in 1999-2000, Bourke was appointed as the Department of History's first full-time female Professor.¹⁰⁷ Ostensibly, these changes at senior level point to more balance in terms of gender within HCA by the end of the research period. Critically, however, any case for gender diversity in History at the college shouldn't be overstated. The watershed promotions of Harding, to Head of

granted space with backing from the Master, Blackstone, in return for agreeing to engage with junior colleagues. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, pp. 558-9.

⁹⁹ Porter, 23rd February 2021, 01:12:50.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 01:19:17.

¹⁰¹ Susan E. Reid, 'All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s', *Slavic Review*, 57 (1998), pp. 133-173.

¹⁰² This trend is examined further in Chapter 5, *Diversification*.

¹⁰³ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1995-96*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁴ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1997-98*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁶ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1999-00*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. Bourke also became the first full-time female professor in HCA more widely since Marjorie Webster, who retired from the Department of Classics in 1962-63. Birkbeck College, *Report, 1962-63*, p. 18.

Department, and Bourke, to Professor, were also markers of how slow and limited change in HCA had been. Indeed, it should be restated that for more than thirty years after 1962-63, no woman in HCA held a post higher than Reader or was at any time Head of a department.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, while the present period ends, in 2003-04, with women occupying two out of four readerships in a new joint HCA, Bourke remained the only woman to hold one of five professorial posts.¹⁰⁹

This gender inequality amongst senior academic staff within HCA at Birkbeck also reflects a broader trend. Halsey, reporting at the start of the 1990s, observed that

Despite the large increase in female students in higher education, barriers against an academic career [remain], with the consequence that the numbers of women in the higher ranks of teaching are disproportionately low.¹¹⁰

Halsey noted that there was an ongoing contradiction between the willingness of universities to embrace statutory policy on equal opportunities between sexes, and the persistence of female minorities in senior common rooms.¹¹¹ By way of partial explanation, Halsey's research revealed that more male than female academics were married – that is, perhaps, that more men than women were able to start or continue an academic career after getting married.¹¹² Similarly, the research showed that women academics were more likely to be 'secondary bread-winners' – with a consequential impact on their career perceptions and aspirations.¹¹³ Female academics were also more

¹⁰⁸ Again, Webster, of the Department of Classics, retired in 1962-63. *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-04*, p. 25.

¹¹⁰ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 221.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

likely to work part-time, and to have less-secure contracts than men.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, women in universities tended to be engaged more in teaching than research, compared with their male colleagues.¹¹⁵ All of these factors put women ‘at a disadvantage in the competition to produce research’ – a key requirement in academic promotion.¹¹⁶ Subsequently, in 1990 the Hansard Society – as cited by both Halsey and Dyhouse – declared that UK universities remained ‘bastions of male power and prestige’.¹¹⁷ By the turn of the millennium, these major issues of gender inequality, including those reflected in HCA at Birkbeck, were by no means resolved.

Race and Ethnicity

Relative to the gradual shift in gender balance in HCA at Birkbeck, change to the racial and ethnic composition of its staff was even slower, and much more limited. For more than three decades, from the early 1960s to the mid-to-late 1990s, no non-white academics were employed in the separate departments of History, Classics or the short-lived Anglo-Saxon Archaeology.¹¹⁸ Secretarial appointments across HCA for most of this same period also included only one non-white recruit – Shireen Karanjia, in Archaeology.¹¹⁹ Until the 1990s, racial and ethnic difference amongst academic staff within HCA existed only in terms of various white identities – British, Irish, European, and Antipodean. Indeed, even as the Department of History embraced post-colonial ideas through new appointments in the early 1990s, those hired to teach this new sub-discipline

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 225-226.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 227. As Halsey notes, citing Kate Purcell, this reflects a wider sexual division of labour, in which women in different professions ‘tend to be marginalized into “caring” rather than decision-making roles’.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 234.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 222; Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex?*, p. 1.

¹¹⁸ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1962-63*, p. 59, p. 65 and p. 85; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 22.

¹¹⁹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1980-81*, p. 31.

were still all white.¹²⁰ A first significant change came only in 1996-97, with the appointment of Naoko Shimazu as a Lecturer in Japanese History.¹²¹ This was followed seven years later by the recruitment of Chandak Sengoopta, as a Senior Lecturer in the History of Medicine and Science, in 2003-04.¹²² These two scholars – Shimazu and Sengoopta – were the only non-white academics permanently appointed to HCA during the whole research period, 1963 to 2003. Even including this limited change, the period ends with just two full-time BAME academics out of a total twenty-seven (7 per cent), in a joint School of History, Classics and Archaeology.¹²³ Moreover, if we permit a further crude distinction – between Black, and Asian and minority ethnic identities – no Black academic staff at all were recruited to HCA during the whole research period; the only Black HCA employee being a secretary, Paula Woodley, hired in 1993.¹²⁴

This was not diversity. But it was also shamefully not unusual in the context of UK higher education more broadly. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in 1996-97, less than 7 per cent of academic staff in UK higher education institutions were not white.¹²⁵ Of this minority, academics of Chinese, ‘Asian Other’ and Indian ethnicity were the largest groups, accounting for roughly three-quarters of all non-white scholars.¹²⁶ By 2004-05, the percentage of BAME academics working in UK

¹²⁰ A possible exception was C. Ghazi-Harsiny, appointed to the Department of History as ‘Research Staff’ for 1990-91 – but no more information on this academic’s race or ethnicity was available at the time of writing. Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1990-91*, p. 25.

¹²¹ Birkbeck, *Calendar, 1996-97*, p. 22.

¹²² Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-04*, p. 25.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26. The term ‘Black, Asian and minority ethnic’, and the acronym ‘BAME’, are used in this chapter for concision. The author acknowledges that, as Heidi Safia Mirza suggests – citing Claire Alexander – such a term both ‘denotes the social construction of difference’, and is a ‘crude reduction of complex ethnic, cultural and religious differences’. Heidi Safia Mirza, ‘Racism in Higher Education: What Then, Can Be Done?’, in *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*, ed. by Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 3-26 (p. 4). This figure of twenty-seven full-time academic staff in HCA in 2003-04 excludes Emeritus Professors (two) and research-only posts (one). Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2003-04*, pp. 25-26.

¹²⁴ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:23:59; Evans, email to the author, ‘Re: Birkbeck Fact Checks’, 2nd May 2023. Woodley was appointed as a secretary in the Department of History.

¹²⁵ *Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education*, ed. by Carter, Fenton and Modood, p. xi.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

universities had increased slightly to around 10 per cent.¹²⁷ Within HCA at Birkbeck, the appointments of Shimazu, in 1996-97, and Sengoopta, in 2003-04, might therefore be seen to roughly reflect this larger national picture, depressing as it is. That HCA ends the present research period with only 7 per cent of its full-time academics being of BAME identity – slightly lower than the available national figure for 2004-05 – is perhaps surprising, given Birkbeck’s location at the centre of the UK’s cosmopolitan capital. In part, this disparity might be explained by the historic ‘whiteness’ of the disciplines that make up HCA – History, Classics and Archaeology – relative to academic disciplines as a whole. More broadly, further analysis of race and ethnicity across academia is complicated by an acute lack of data. The 1996-97 HESA survey provided figures for a *first* extensive study of ethnic minority staff in higher education.¹²⁸ The sociologist Paul Warmington has similarly identified racial inequality in UK universities as being a ‘belated concern’.¹²⁹

That issues of race and ethnicity were not recognised by government or university bodies at the start of the research period is reflected in the 1963 Robbins Report. While the watershed paper had a designated section on ‘Women in Higher Education’, there was no equivalent segment on racial or ethnic identities.¹³⁰ Similarly, a separate section in the Report on academic staffing made no reference to race or ethnicity.¹³¹ Indeed, even

¹²⁷ ‘Latest staff data’, Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) website, 5th June 2006, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/05-06-2006/latest-staff-data> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹²⁸ *Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education*, ed. by Carter, Fenton and Modood.

¹²⁹ Paul Warmington, ‘Foreword: Dismantling Racial Inequality Within the Academy’, in *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*, ed. by Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. v-ix (p. vii). As Warmington observes, early post-war work on racial inequality in UK education as a whole focused on schooling; university access was not properly considered until the 1980s; academic staffing has only recently received critical attention.

¹³⁰ Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1963), Table of Contents, p. v., via Education in England website, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹³¹ Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1963), Chapter 12, *Staffing*, pp. 170-180, via Education in England website,

the 1965 Race Relations Act, passed two years after the Robbins Report, was criticised for failing to address discrimination in the workplace.¹³² Heidi Safia Mirza suggests that it was not until around thirty years later, after the racist murder of the Black teenager Stephen Lawrence, in 1993, that ‘the concept of institutional racism entered the lexicon of higher education in Britain’.¹³³ The first HESA survey of race and ethnicity in academic staffing, published in 1996-97, can be placed within this period. Notably, however, the government’s 1997 Dearing Report on UK universities, which paved the way for tuition fees, made only limited references to race or ethnicity – and then only in terms of students.¹³⁴ Moreover, the subsequent 2003 White Paper on higher education, published just four years after a major public inquiry into institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police (following its flawed investigation of Lawrence’s killing), also made only minimal reference to race or ethnicity – and again, only with regard to students.¹³⁵

All of this points to a major, prevailing issue with race and ethnicity in UK higher education, particularly in relation to academic staffing. The sociologist Les Back suggests that, ‘there is a deep resistance in the academy to reckon with what might be called the sheer weight of whiteness.’¹³⁶ Similarly, Warmington also argues that

<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹³² ‘Race Relations Act 1965’, UK Parliament website,

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/race-relations-act-1965/race-relations-act-1965> [accessed on 9th February 2023] The 1965 Race Relations Act was amended in 1968, making acts of discrimination within employment, housing and advertising unlawful. The significance of the 1965 Act in relation to the 1963 Robbins Report is raised by Ian Law, Deborah Phillips and Laura Turney in *Institutional Racism in Higher Education*, ed. by Ian Law, Deborah Phillips and Laura Turney (Stoke on Trent; Sterling, VA: Trentham Books, 2004), p. vii.

¹³³ Mirza, ‘Racism in Higher Education: What Then, Can Be Done?’, p. 6.

¹³⁴ The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *The Dearing Report: Higher Education in the Learning Society* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1997), p. 105, via Education in England website, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1997/dearing1997.html> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹³⁵ Department for Education and Skills, *The Future of Higher Education* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 2003), pp. 69-73, via Education in England website, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2003-white-paper-higher-ed.pdf> [accessed on 9th February 2023]

¹³⁶ Les Back, ‘Ivory Towers? The Academy and Racism’, in *Institutional Racism in Higher Education*, ed. by Ian Law, Deborah Phillips and Laura Turney (Stoke on Trent; Sterling, VA: Trentham Books, 2004), pp. 1-6 (p. 1).

There exists a stubborn refusal to acknowledge that academia itself might be complicit in the (re)production of racial injustices, that it does not just passively ‘reflect’ disadvantages already existing in society but actively (re)creates inequalities.¹³⁷

To reiterate, historical investigation on this issue is complicated by a critical lack of national statistics on race and ethnicity in universities, before the mid-to-late 1990s. Mandler observes that the mass expansion of UK higher education after the 1963 Robbins Report attracted students from ‘all ethnicities’.¹³⁸ Likewise, Mirza notes that the national expansion of universities, ‘opened the door to a post-colonial generation of Black and Asian British students from the former colonies.’¹³⁹ An absence of contemporary data makes it difficult to further examine these assertions, however. It obstructs effective comparison of any post-Robbins increase in BAME students with that of female undergraduates, for example. Subsequently, and in combination with a similar lack of historical data on academic staffing, analyses of any relation between an increase in BAME students during mass expansion and the racial and ethnic composition of university faculties are rendered problematic. As such, a number of vital questions remain unanswered. For example: if there was a significant increase in BAME students after Robbins, why did this not translate over time – as it did with female undergraduates – into greater representation of these groups within university staffs?

One partial explanation of any such disparity concerns the nature of academic recruitment. John Carter, Steve Fenton and Tariq Modood, in their response to the 1996-97 HESA survey of race and ethnicity in higher education employment, observe that

¹³⁷ Warmington, ‘Foreword: Dismantling Racial Inequality Within the Academy’, p. vi.

¹³⁸ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 135.

¹³⁹ Mirza, ‘Racism in Higher Education: What Then, Can Be Done?’, p. 5.

academic recruitment is often, ‘dependent on informal networks, contacts and recommendations which could work to the disadvantage of ethnic minority persons.’¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Warmington asks, ‘How can a sector so dependent on the shoulder tap, on buying-in, on headhunting commit itself to principles of equality in its recruitment and promotion of academic staff?’¹⁴¹ It is perhaps possible here, to return to HCA at Birkbeck in the post-Robbins period. These statements might serve as a reminder of the nature of Roderick Floud’s appointment, in 1974 – initiated through a direct, informal approach by Hobsbawm – to a senior position in the Department of History.¹⁴² Evans, too, suggested that having a friend in the department, David Blackbourn, had helped during his move to a senior post in History, from the University of East Anglia.¹⁴³ Certainly, there was nothing untoward in these communications. Yet, they are perhaps illustrations of a much larger issue: the self-perpetuation, or ‘(re)production’, of elite university circles, in which BAME academics are underrepresented.

Conclusion

The 1963 Robbins Report marked the start of a historic shift in the social composition of UK universities, relating not just to students, but to academic staff, too. This long-term development across higher education, including changes in gender, and race and ethnicity, was reflected within HCA at Birkbeck. In 1963-64, women made up just one quarter of academics in both the departments of History and Classics at the college. By 2003-04, the proportion of females had increased to half the academic staff, in a new joint HCA. There was also change in terms of seniority, with more women in higher

¹⁴⁰ *Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education*, ed. by Carter, Fenton and Modood, p. 57.

¹⁴¹ Warmington, ‘Foreword: Dismantling Racial Inequality Within the Academy’, p. viii.

¹⁴² Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 430.

¹⁴³ Evans, January 28th 2021, 00:36:36.

roles. These shifts also reflected wider disciplinary trends – demonstrated in HCA most conspicuously in the 1990s, which saw an influx of younger, female scholars. The personal career histories of Mason and Harding point to the possibility of professional progress for women in HCA between 1963 and 2003, despite a prevailing gender imbalance. Both women claim that gender was not a significant factor in their academic careers at Birkbeck; and that HCA might compare favourably in terms of gender equality with similar workplaces elsewhere. Meanwhile, HCA also witnessed change to its racial and ethnic composition by the end of the research period. This was very limited, with just two non-white full-time academics out of a total twenty-seven (around 7 per cent) by 2003-04. Depressing as it is, this low figure also reflected the contemporary racial and ethnic composition of UK higher education more broadly.

Any case for gender balance in HCA by the end of the research period should not be overstated. The watershed promotions of Harding and Bourke were also markers of slow and limited progress. Again, for more than three decades prior to the first of these changes, no female academic in HCA had held a post higher than Reader or been made Head of Department. That some female scholars were able to successfully progress their careers within HCA during this period points to the importance of individual abilities and attitudes. More critical readings of these professional histories, however, might suggest that deeper, structural inequalities in terms of gender across higher education were also present in HCA at Birkbeck. Indeed, while half the academic staff of the new joint HCA were women by 2003-04, a significant imbalance in terms of professional rank remained. Furthermore, any case for balance in terms of racial and ethnic composition of scholars in HCA at the college is even harder to make. The presence of just two non-white staff in HCA by the end of the period, and the more specific racial and ethnic identity of these academics as ‘Asian’, did reflect a broader, national picture. But the size of this shift in

composition was perhaps also less than might have been expected, given Birkbeck's location in the centre of London – the UK's most cosmopolitan city.

These limitations to changes in the composition of academic staff in HCA at Birkbeck, particularly in terms of race and ethnicity, subsequently make it difficult to present any case for 'diversity' – that is, significant shifts to individual, departmental and institutional power relations. A considerable imbalance in terms of academic positions remained for HCA's female scholars, reflecting a continuation of gender inequality within senior university ranks nationwide. To some extent, then, HCA at Birkbeck was still one of many 'bastions of male power and prestige' in UK higher education. The situation in terms of racial and ethnic identities is more severe. Critically, the depth of structural inequality in this area is acutely demonstrated by a major lack of contemporary data, which obstructs historical analysis. The low proportion of non-white academics in HCA by 2003-04, including a notable absence of Black scholars, can be accurately understood as part of a depressing, national reality. But this must not detract from the possibility that particular practices – notably in recruitment – within HCA at Birkbeck might have contributed to the '(re)production' of racial and ethnic inequalities. If we are to talk at all of post-Robbins 'diversity' in HCA at the college, its own 'sheer weight of whiteness' must first be fully acknowledged.

Students

‘That moment at six o’clock when people would start flooding into the lecture rooms. It was a magic moment, it really was. You were teaching people who were changing their lives.’¹

Professor Roy Foster, faculty member, HCA, Birkbeck (1974 -1997)

Introduction

In the four decades after the 1963 Robbins Report, the UK’s student population boomed. At the start of this period, the proportion of 18- to 19-year-olds entering university was languishing at around 7 per cent;² not much higher than pre-war levels.³ By the 1990s, however, the total number of full-time students nationwide had nearly tripled, from 119,000 pre-Robbins, to almost 335,000.⁴ The figures then leapt again, following a further expansion drive over that decade.⁵ More also meant different. As Mandler observes, these new students came from all classes, both genders, and a broad range of ethnicities.⁶ Notably, in terms of gender, female university entrants were outstripping male peers by 1993.⁷ The new waves of

¹ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:19:05.

² Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 221. The proportion of 18-to-19-year-olds entering higher education was formally known as the Age Participation Rate (APR). This measure was superseded by the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) in 2004. The APR only included school-leavers, thus excluding part-time and mature higher education; the HEIPR included all students aged 17 to 30. *Ibid.*, p. 151; ‘Participation measures in higher education’, Explore education statistics (gov.uk) website, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-measures-in-higher-education/2018-19> [accessed on 15th December 2021]

³ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 72. Before the Second World War, the national APR was just 2 to 3 per cent.

⁴ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 92. The total number of UK full-time students in 1989-90 was 334,500.

⁵ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 130.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

students drifted away from scientific degrees, and flowed towards ‘social studies’.⁸ This current reflected deeper shifts in UK society – further deindustrialisation and a transition towards a service economy based on white-collar work.⁹ Significantly, the period also saw a dramatic increase in *part-time* higher education. Already by the end of the 1980s, the UK’s wider total number of students, including part-timers in universities, polytechnics and other colleges, was approaching one million.¹⁰ Meanwhile, state financial support for all students declined steeply: between 1963 and 2003, university funding per full-time student fell by almost a third, from about £7,750 to £5,500 (this last figure also incorporating private tuition fees, from 1998 onwards).¹¹

These national trends in university demography were reflected at Birkbeck over the same period – with some distinctions between the college and the wider UK picture. In the academic year 1963-64, Birkbeck had a total student population of just over 1,500;¹² by 2003-04, this number had increased fivefold to more than 7,600.¹³ Significantly, however, the college started the post-Robbins era with a uniquely high proportion of part-timers: in 1963-64, only one in ten of its student body was full-time, and these were exclusively post-graduates.¹⁴ By 2003-04, the proportion of full-time students at the institution had fallen just slightly to about 9 per cent.¹⁵ At the time of Robbins, the proportion of women students at Birkbeck was roughly in line with the national average, at about a quarter.¹⁶ The trend for

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁹ Collini, ‘Snakes and Ladders’, p. 16.

¹⁰ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 91. According to Halsey, the total number of university students including both full- and part-time by 1988-89 was 964,000.

¹¹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 224.

¹² Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 80. In 1963-64, Birkbeck had a total student population of 1,568. Of these 947 were undergraduates; 621 were postgraduates.

¹³ Birkbeck, *Annual Review 2003-04*, p. 18. In 2003-04, Birkbeck had a total of 7,615 students: 4,071 undergraduates; 2,889 taught postgraduates; and 655 postgraduate researchers. This total excludes 11,942 students based in the college’s Faculty of Continuing Education.

¹⁴ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 80. In 1963-64, Birkbeck had 170 full-time postgraduates, compared to 403 part-time.

¹⁵ Birkbeck, *Annual Review 2003-04*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 80. In 1963-64, Birkbeck had a total of 418 female students, including undergraduates and postgraduates.

female entrants outstripping male peers came slightly earlier to the college: already by 1970-71, women outnumbered men on its undergraduate arts courses;¹⁷ by 1991-92, men were outnumbered in both arts and sciences at this level.¹⁸ In 1963-64, just over half of all Birkbeck students were reading arts subjects.¹⁹ By 1970-71, the college's social sciences had expanded to include new departments of Economics, and Politics and Sociology.²⁰ Separately, by 1997-98, the Department of Physics had been closed down.²¹ Within this institutional context, HCA had one of the largest student bodies at Birkbeck between 1963 and 2003.²² Meanwhile, no students at the college were spared the impact of government cuts to university funding. Indeed, due to a lack of recognition by the state, part-time and mature learners were often disproportionately affected.²³

Much recent research on the development of UK universities post-Robbins has focused on the negative impacts for students of major shifts towards managerialism and marketisation. While mass higher education expansion has enabled wider access, critics argue that 'more' has also meant less state funding per head, higher student-staff ratios, and a greater financial burden of fees. Moreover, and particularly since the mid- to late 1980s, government efforts to stimulate a university market have forced institutions to redefine

¹⁷ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1970-71* (London; J. W. Ruddock Ltd, 1971), p. 117. In the academic year 1970-71, Birkbeck had 269 female arts undergraduates, compared to 254 male; the overall arts student totals, including postgraduates, were 477 female and 614 male. In sciences at both levels that same year, men outnumbered women by 904 to 249.

¹⁸ Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1991-92*, p. 4. Figures on the gender of Birkbeck undergraduates between 1972-73 and 1991-92 are unavailable; it is possible that women began to outnumber men on all undergraduate courses before 1991-92 (the figures for that year were approximately 1,200 women compared to 1,050 men).

¹⁹ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 80. In 1963-64 at Birkbeck, a total of 805 students studied arts subjects; 763 studied sciences.

²⁰ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1970-71*, p. 16.

²¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1997-98*, p. 53. Birkbeck's Department of Classics had also been effectively closed down by 1989-90, through merger with King's College – an event fully examined in Chapter 3, *Classics*.

²² Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 24; File 1-1-7/1 069.

²³ The disproportionate impact of government university cuts on part-time and mature higher education was demonstrated most acutely in 1986, when a UGC decision to drastically slash funding for part-time students plunged Birkbeck into existential crisis – an episode analysed in depth in Chapter 2, *The Battle for Birkbeck*.

themselves as competitive teaching and research ‘providers’.²⁴ Students, meanwhile, have increasingly been encouraged to act as degree ‘consumers’.²⁵ In contrast, Mandler has argued that this prevailing, negative view is flawed: far from being passive sufferers of detrimental policy shifts, students have in fact driven change – ‘social demand’ for higher education having been *the* force behind a broadly positive transformation of UK universities.²⁶ Even in Mandler’s more optimistic historical analysis, however, a clear disconnect is cited between the plural motivations of university students and the reductive focus of government higher education metrics. Students have ‘other reasons’ for reading degrees, including enjoyment;²⁷ but successive administrations in the post-Robbins period have focused on measurable economic factors, at the expense of these more human aspects. As such, dispute over the fundamental purpose of a university education remains key to the history of UK students, 1963 to 2003.

This chapter aims to question prevailing, macro-level assumptions on the experiences of UK university students after Robbins, through a close analysis of one department – HCA at Birkbeck. To this end, it asks: Who were HCA’s students between 1963 and 2003 – and how were they different to those in ‘mainstream’ university departments? What motivated HCA’s students, and to what extent were these driving factors different to those found in other institutions? What – if anything – was particular in terms of academic standards in HCA, and how might any such distinction relate more broadly to universities, post-Robbins? And, finally, to what extent can university tuition in HCA at Birkbeck over the period be considered as a ‘common enterprise’ involving staff and students – and how might this inform wider debates? These questions are answered in four sections: section one,

²⁴ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 43.

²⁵ Stefan Collini, ‘Sold Out: Privatizing Higher Education’, in *The Creation of a University System*, ed. by Stefan Collini (London; Verso, 2017), pp. 119-154 (p. 130).

²⁶ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 211.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

Demography, analyses the composition of HCA's student body, and compares this population with the university 'mainstream'; section two, *Motivations*, considers what drove people to study within HCA at Birkbeck, and asks to what extent such factors were unique; section three, *Standards*, examines the abilities and achievements of HCA students and staff, in comparison to those in other university departments; section four, '*Common Enterprise*', investigates the existence of a shared sense of mission for staff and students in HCA at Birkbeck – and what significance this might have for wider higher education debates.

Demography

The 1963 Robbins Report predicted that the number of full-time university students in the UK would more than double by the mid-1980s.²⁸ This forecast proved largely accurate: the proportion of school-leavers entering higher education had increased twofold, to about 14 per cent, by 1985.²⁹ Growth was far less steady than expected, however, due to the sizable slump of the 1970s.³⁰ The Report also failed to anticipate the rate of resumed expansion in the 1990s, with the number of 18- to 19-year-olds starting university doubling again, to 28 per cent, already by 1993.³¹ Furthermore, the decades following Robbins were marked by an unprecedented diversification of higher education. As Halsey observes, 'total enrolment rose but the composition of the student body crucially shifted.'³² The vast majority of new university students still came via a traditional school route, with numbers of eligible entrants boosted by more inclusive qualifications, including the GCSE.³³ Yet, the rate of increase was

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

³⁰ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 105.

³¹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 130.

³² Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 100.

³³ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 134. As Mandler notes, the General Certification of Secondary Education (GCSE) was first examined in 1988. By replacing separate CSE and O-Level exams – typically taken by

up to ten times greater for women than for men, and the figures were even higher respecting part-time study, where students were more likely to be mature and on non-traditional tracks.³⁴ Between 1970 and 1989, the UK's total number of full-time male undergraduates rose by 9 per cent; female full-timers increased by 93 per cent.³⁵ For part-time university courses, the increases in male and female students were 60 per cent and 270 per cent, respectively.³⁶ Further, this gendered trend was even stronger across part-time higher education defined more broadly, including polytechnics and the Open University.³⁷

At Birkbeck, part-time university education was a deep-rooted institutional tradition by the time of Robbins. In 1963-64, the vast majority of the college's total 1,568 students were evening learners, with daytime occupations.³⁸ Only Birkbeck's postgraduates, about two fifths of the total student number, included full-timers.³⁹ Women, roughly a quarter of the overall student total, were disproportionately distributed between disciplines, with about three quarters studying arts subjects and only one quarter studying sciences.⁴⁰ Student culture at Birkbeck was in many ways conventional, with college colours (silver-grey and scarlet), publications, and clubs – from boating and jazz, to nuclear disarmament.⁴¹ Still, the vast majority of the college's students were workers, mostly teachers, with an average age

lower and higher achievers, respectively – the GCSE 'provided a bridge that took larger and larger tranches of the 16-18 cohort into post-compulsory and ultimately into higher education'.

³⁴ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 101.

³⁵ *Ibid.* According to Halsey, citing figures from the Department of Education and Science (DES), male full-time undergraduates increased by 11,400 from 128,300 to 139,700 (8.9 per cent) between 1970-71 and 1988-89; female full-time undergraduates increased by 52,700 from 57,000 to 109,700 (92.5 per cent) over the same period.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* Between 1970 and 1989, the numbers of male and female Open University students increased by 215 and 660 per cent, respectively; the increases in male and female part-time (day) polytechnic students were 70 and 900 per cent, respectively.

³⁸ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 80.

³⁹ *Ibid.* A little more than a quarter of candidates for higher degrees in both arts and sciences were full-time, representing only about 11 per cent of the college's students overall.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80. The student gender balance in 1963-64 at Birkbeck was most equal at undergraduate level in the arts, where around 60 per cent of students were male and 40 per cent were female. The balance was least equal at postgraduate level in the sciences, where almost 90 per cent of all students were male.

⁴¹ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1963-1964*, pp. 136-7. In 1963-64, Birkbeck's Students' Union published a termly magazine, *The Lodestone*, and a bi-monthly *Newsletter*.

considerably higher than those studying in ‘mainstream’ universities.⁴² Chris Wrigley, currently an Emeritus Professor at the University of Nottingham, who completed a PhD in History at Birkbeck under Eric Hobsbawm between 1968 and 1971, remembered the college as, ‘a curious place, because the undergraduates were all part-time and there weren’t many postgraduates.’⁴³ On student societies at Birkbeck, Wrigley recalled that

None of them had got too many people because everybody was coming in from work and knackered before they started, and they were all eating and drinking in the bar or down in the canteen, and they rushed to their seminars, and, at nine, they were out like greyhounds to get a train home.⁴⁴

Notably, Birkbeck’s students did have two representatives on the institution’s Board of Governors – a unique privilege, at least among University of London colleges, and a sign, perhaps, of a particularly democratic ethos.⁴⁵

Expansion of Birkbeck’s student body between 1963 and 2003 broadly mirrored national trends. There was a strong increase in the first decade after Robbins, by roughly half, to almost 2,400.⁴⁶ This was followed by a slump to 1983, with numbers rising only by about a tenth, to under 2,700.⁴⁷ The college’s student total then rose sharply before 1993 – more than doubling, to 5,500,⁴⁸ and increased again in the subsequent decade, by more than a third,

⁴² Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, p. 82. In 1963-64, almost half (691) of all Birkbeck students were teachers or lecturers. The next most common professional types were secretaries, typists and ‘clerical workers’ (112); scientific researchers and technicians (106); and civil servants and local government officers (92).

⁴³ Professor Chris Wrigley, interviewed by Dr Lorraine Blakemore in 2018-19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar for 1963-1964*, p. 136.

⁴⁶ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 90. In 1973-74, Birkbeck had a total of 2,387 students.

⁴⁷ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar 1985-86* (Hertford; Stephen Austin Ltd, 1986), p. 179. In 1983-84, Birkbeck had a total of 2,663 students.

⁴⁸ Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1993-94* (High Wycombe, Bucks; Ethedo, 1994), p. 4. In 1993-94, Birkbeck had a total of 5,541 students – almost 12 per cent more than the previous academic year alone.

to over 7,600.⁴⁹ At the end of the 1980s, when Birkbeck – and higher education institutions nationwide – began to see a most significant increase in numbers, almost 3,400 students were registered at the college.⁵⁰ More than 40 per cent of these were undergraduates; almost 90 per cent of the total were studying part-time.⁵¹ Of those taking first degrees, nearly a quarter were employed by hospitals, the police and other social services; more than a fifth worked in university, civil service, local government, library and clerical jobs.⁵² Just over a tenth had professional arts and journalism roles, with a similar proportion working in business; half as many were unemployed, and only a small number, about four per cent, were now teachers.⁵³ Just under a third of all Birkbeck’s students were working on ‘advanced degrees’, and just over a tenth were research students.⁵⁴ Even at this highest level, more than two thirds were part-time.⁵⁵ In the early 1990s, about 90 per cent of the college’s student population were also older than 25 – the approximate limit of ‘mainstream’ university age.⁵⁶ Almost half were aged 25 to 34, more than a fifth were 35 to 44, a little over a tenth were 45 to 59, and just more than two per cent were 60 or above.⁵⁷ By the end of the research period, in 2003-04, while Birkbeck’s student total had risen to 7,615, more than 90 per cent of those enrolled were still part-time.⁵⁸ Just 0.1 per cent were aged 18 to 20, with almost two thirds aged 30 and above. More than half of all students at the college – undergraduates and postgraduates – were women.⁵⁹ In summary, while Birkbeck’s own student expansion from the early 1960s

⁴⁹ Birkbeck, *Annual Review, 2003-04*, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Birkbeck College, University of London, *Annual Report, 1989-90* (London; Birkbeck College, University of London, 1990), p. 3. In 1989-90, Birkbeck had a total of 3,397 students – almost 14 per cent more than the previous academic year.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* The term ‘advanced degrees’ is understood to mean MA and MSc degrees.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1991-92* (Birkbeck College, University of London; London, 1992), p. 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Birkbeck, *Annual Review, 2003-04*, p. 18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

reflected national trends, a particular, overwhelming tendency towards part-time and mature learning was also maintained.

At the start of the period, students in HCA at Birkbeck were based in two separate departments: History and Classics. The first of these was much larger throughout – until both units were consolidated, along with Archaeology, into a joint *School* in 1999-2000. Already by the end of the 1960s, the Department of History had one hundred and seventeen students at BA level, and forty-four at MA.⁶⁰ By contrast, even by the second half of the 1980s, Classics still only had nineteen undergraduates and fifteen taught postgraduates.⁶¹ For a department of relatively small size, Classics did have an unusually high number of research students.⁶² The totals grew significantly post-Robbins in both History and Classics, while the departments' relative size difference remained. In 1963-64, History recorded sixteen BA degrees;⁶³ in 1973-74 it recorded twenty-four BA and twenty MA degrees;⁶⁴ in 1983-84, eighteen BA and fifty-one MA degrees, including joint subjects.⁶⁵ Classics recorded no BA or MA degrees in 1963-64;⁶⁶ one BA in 1973-74;⁶⁷ and, two BA and nine MA degrees in 1983-84.⁶⁸ Similar increases were also seen in both departments at research-degree level, where the vast majority of full-time students were found – again, an unusually high proportion in Classics, which attracted many from overseas.⁶⁹ Gender was fairly evenly represented in all History degrees recorded during these decades.⁷⁰ Although the very small number of research

⁶⁰ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box: 27; File: 9-D/2 019.

⁶¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box: 42; File: 3-D/24 096.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, pp. 72-73.

⁶⁴ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, pp. 76-80.

⁶⁵ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1985-86*, pp. 171-172. These degree figures for 1983-84 were published in Birkbeck's *Calendar* for 1985-86.

⁶⁶ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, pp. 72-73.

⁶⁷ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 78.

⁶⁸ Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1985-86*, pp. 166-167. Equivalent figures for both departments were no longer published after 1988, presumably as the sheer number of degrees awarded became unmanageable to print.

⁶⁹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 094.

⁷⁰ In 1963-64, approximately 50 per cent of all recorded graduates in History were women. In 1973-74, this proportion fell to 48 per cent; in 1983-84, the figure was 41 per cent. Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, pp. 71-73; Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, pp. 75-81; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1985-86*, pp. 171-172.

degrees recorded in Classics in 1963-64 went only to men, women received three quarters of all degrees in 1973-74, and four fifths in 1983-84.⁷¹ Archaeology, meanwhile, recorded just a handful of degrees in total, as a short-lived, independent department in the late 1970s and early 1980s – a high proportion of these being awarded to women.⁷² While departments in the pre-consolidation HCA differed in relative size, then, they also shared two student trends – a growth in numbers and increasing balance in gender.

Motivations

This initial survey provides a sense of who studied in Birkbeck and HCA, post-Robbins. Subsequently, it prompts a further question: why were they studying? Nationwide, as Mandler observes, a mass expansion of universities from 1963 was driven by popular desire for more higher education. This ‘social demand’ was closely related to employment trends: many occupations, from teaching to law and accountancy, became *graduate* professions during the first phases of university ‘massification’.⁷³ Such change also reflected deeper, national shifts – towards further deindustrialisation and a ‘service economy’.⁷⁴ As Mandler suggests, employers recruiting for the new graduate professions primarily saw higher education not as a source of ‘new technological skills’, but as a ““screening” mechanism to find the right kind of employee’.⁷⁵ Birkbeck and HCA provided a vital way through this new

⁷¹ Birkbeck College, *Report, 1963-64*, pp. 71-73; Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, pp. 75-81; Birkbeck College, *Calendar, 1985-86*, pp. 166-167.

⁷² Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1974-75* (London; Birkbeck College, University of London, 1975), p. 60. The future Head of Archaeology, Vera Evison, was awarded a DLitt in Archaeology at Birkbeck in 1974-75. Other Archaeology degrees and diplomas awarded were listed in Birkbeck’s *Reports* for 1973-74 (one); 1975-76 (two); and 1977-78 (one). Birkbeck College, *Report, 1973-74*, p. 76; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1975-76* (London; Birkbeck College, University of London, 1975), p. 78 and p. 80; Birkbeck College, University of London, *Report, 1977-78* (London; Birkbeck College, University of London, 1977), p. 81.

⁷³ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 138.

⁷⁴ Stefan Collini, ‘Snakes and Ladders’, p. 16.

⁷⁵ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 138.

selection process for those already locked into the labour market. Workers in the new graduate fields with only basic qualifications could considerably increase their career prospects by doing a degree part-time in HCA. Mason recalled that

When I first arrived in '62, although I wasn't teaching them then, a lot of [HCA students] were schoolteachers who had their diplomas, certificates or whatever, and were working towards a degree. The profession was known to be going all-graduate.⁷⁶

Similarly, Evans said that – in contrast to the college as a whole – teachers still dominated HCA's student body at the end of the Thatcher era:

What I gathered was that most of the students were teachers. History teachers – that was the largest contingent by some way. They wanted a degree qualification in order to get on in their career and schools.⁷⁷

Indeed, part-time study in HCA even enabled some teachers to transfer into academia – such as Jennifer Moore-Blunt, who secured an academic post at Portsmouth Polytechnic after completing a PhD in Classics, while working in a school during the day.⁷⁸

More broadly, a prominent promotional slogan for Birkbeck after Robbins was 'A second chance for a first degree'.⁷⁹ Indeed, for many the college represented the *only* opportunity for a first degree, once past conventional university-going age, and employed during daytime lecture and seminar hours. History, as an academic subject, was particularly

⁷⁶ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:30:35.

⁷⁷ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:18:19; 00:18:27; 00:19:03.

⁷⁸ White, 23rd January 2020, 01:07:46.

⁷⁹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:26:48.

attractive to part-time and mature students: it was relatively accessible, compared to physical and life sciences, or even most pure social sciences – not to mention archaeology, which involved practical skills, or classics, which normally required Greek or Latin.⁸⁰ The potential white-collar career progress facilitated by evening study in HCA at Birkbeck post-1963 was, *prima facie*, somewhat removed from the college's historic purpose of university education for mechanics. As Evans jokingly confirmed, students in HCA during his time there, 'were not "horny-handed sons of toil"'.⁸¹ Yet, in reality, the occupational status of Birkbeck's students had always been a complex and contested issue;⁸² and even within the first decades of the institution's existence, a clear shift in attendees from mechanics to clerks had been observed.⁸³ As Joanna Bourke suggests, in the nineteenth century at Birkbeck, 'Social mobility was an education aim.'⁸⁴ There was, therefore, some institutional precedent for the student motivations of the post-Robbins period. Furthermore, not all of those enrolling in HCA from the early 1960s were white-collar professionals. Nick Pelling, a celebrated HCA student, was employed as a postal worker when he started at the college as a 25-year-old part-time undergraduate in 1984-85. He had previously struggled with A-levels in sixth form and had subsequently dropped out of art school.⁸⁵ As he later explained, 'I'd actually wasted what used to be a mandatory grant. So, having done that, I was in a bit of a bind as far as higher education was concerned.'⁸⁶ Birkbeck and HCA provided a solution, allowing Pelling to earn

⁸⁰ Similar issues of accessibility also exist within history as an academic discipline, for example with econometric history, which involves statistical and computational methods, and as such is difficult for non-specialists to read or comprehend. Pat Hudson, 'Economic History', in *Writing History: Theory & Practice*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), pp. 223-242 (p. 232).

⁸¹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:19:34.

⁸² Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 39. As Bourke explains, this complexity was partly caused by the term 'mechanic' – a 'very fluid one', which could mean both employee and employer. Students at Birkbeck who wished to be involved in the governance of the institution were also liable to inflate their occupational status – leading to further obscurity.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42. As Bourke suggests, this apparent shift from mechanics to clerks might also be considered as evidence of social mobility in action at Birkbeck, as students increased their status over time.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸⁵ Nick Pelling, interviewed by the author on 2nd December 2021, 00:07:15; 00:07:49.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 00:08:00; 00:08:14.

during the day and study afresh for a degree by night. After graduating, he became a history teacher at one of the UK's most prestigious schools – a clear example, perhaps, of the college's 'second chance' in action.⁸⁷

Wrigley suggested that most Birkbeck students were 'hard pressed', juggling evening classes with daytime jobs and families.⁸⁸ As a result, studies were perhaps prioritised over politics. According to Wrigley, 'Most of the people at Birkbeck were anything but radical! A slogan of the place was "Better job, more money", which wasn't quite the radical notion.'⁸⁹ Wrigley added, however, that students at the college were also engaged in demonstrations, for example against the Vietnam War – and producing publications, which included political articles.⁹⁰ Furthermore, as Bourke observes, Birkbeck students had been politically active just prior to the research period: they had protested against the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956; and, subsequently, had helped to house Hungarian student refugees who arrived in the UK.⁹¹

Moreover, students from the college, including many from HCA, were politically energised in face of an existential institutional crisis caused by severe university funding cuts in the late 1980s. The so-called 'Battle for Birkbeck' erupted after the UGC announced plans to slash funding for part-time higher education, including £2 million from the college's budget.⁹² The President of Birkbeck's Students' Union, Patricia Ford, told newspaper reporters at the time that

⁸⁷ Ibid., 00:17:20; 00:17:49. Pelling was later made Head of History and a house master at Charterhouse school in Godalming, Surrey; he is now retired. Mrs Catherine MacDonald, 'Nick Pelling', *The Carthusian*, 45:1 (2020), pp. 13-14 (p. 13), Charterhouse website, https://issuu.com/charterhouseschool/docs/the_carthusian_magazine_2020?e=42927361/81082425 [accessed on 3rd February 2023]

⁸⁸ Wrigley, 2018-19.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Bourke, *Birkbeck*, p. 277. As Bourke notes, efforts by Birkbeck students to convert a derelict house in Surrey into a hostel for Hungarian refugees were featured in BBC reports and a Pathé newsreel.

⁹² Lucy Hodges, 'College in Peril from Cash Curbs', *The Times*, 6th June 1986, p. 2. This institutional crisis is fully explored in Chapter 2, *The Battle for Birkbeck*.

Birkbeck's usually a sleepy place – we don't have much time for student politics after work and classes. But the reaction to the cuts produced our biggest-ever union meeting; we've been deluged with offers of help.⁹³

Classics students appealed to the press in defence of the college, describing their part-time studies as 'the passion of our lives'.⁹⁴ Floud, Head of the Department of History and a leading campaigner for Birkbeck during the 1986 crisis, later confirmed that

Certainly, the more politically active and so on were very much involved, yes. There were a few of them who within the History department became involved to the extent of coming to meetings in the House of Commons and the House of Lords and so on, representing the college. They were important, and very supportive.⁹⁵

Birkbeck students, including those from HCA, also collected 15,000 signatures for a petition in support of their college, delivered to Parliament, as reported in *The Times*.⁹⁶ Significantly, this episode combined both the interests of the institution's students, and the wider politics of part-time and mature higher education. Beyond this crisis for the college, and away from broader university issues, however, political engagement amongst Birkbeck's student body was later quite low. By the summer of 1999, the college's student magazine, *The Lamp & Owl*, reported that just six out of almost 6,000 students had attended the Students' Union's annual general meeting;⁹⁷ just two per cent had turned out for its elections.⁹⁸

⁹³ Eva Kaluzynska, 'London University night school fights off a closure threat', *Daily News*, 30th June 1986, [page no. unknown].

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:31:18.

⁹⁶ Lucy Hodges, 'Birkbeck Fights £2m Cut in Budget', *The Times*, 4th July 1986, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Birkbeck Archive; Birkbeck, Malet Street: BK 11/3/3; [Author unknown], 'The Tick List', *The Lamp & Owl*, Summer 1999, p. 6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

According to Evans, Birkbeck's promotional slogan unofficially shifted in the 1990s, to 'A *first* chance for a *second* degree'.⁹⁹ He explained that there was then a growing demand for part-time master's courses. These changes reflected two deeper, national trends across universities. Firstly, from 1990, there was a further expansion of UK higher education under Major's Conservative leadership – a response to 'social demand' for degrees.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, there was a growth in demand for MA degrees in particular as the labour market, most noticeably in London, became flooded with graduates.¹⁰¹ As Mandler suggests, 'drawing larger and larger tranches of the workforce into the graduate labour market must eventually dilute it and lower the graduate premium at the bottom end.'¹⁰² HCA began to see an increasing number of entrants, from a wider pool of professions, who wished to study at MA level. Mason, a Reader in Medieval History by the 1990s, noted that many of these students appeared to be under significant professional strain:

We got people who were coming under more and more pressure at work themselves. I remember we had a student, a very good student. He would come in, go to the lecture – we had a system of lecture, with the seminar following – he would give his seminar paper and say, 'Excuse me, I've got to get back to work now.' And this would be at about eight o'clock at night. I don't know what most of them did for a living, but it was obviously very demanding.¹⁰³

A further core contingent of students in HCA at Birkbeck, however, at least until the late 1990s, were those taking degrees primarily for non-professional reasons. This

⁹⁹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:27:46.

¹⁰⁰ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 130.

¹⁰¹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:26:48.

¹⁰² Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 138.

¹⁰³ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:30:35; 00:31:24.

section of the college's student population was often somewhat disparagingly referred to as 'leisure learners'.¹⁰⁴ Feldman defined this sub-group as, 'people just doing it for the sake of improving the quality of their lives.'¹⁰⁵ Many 'leisure learners' were more mature and accounted for HCA students who enrolled around retirement age – a quite different university journey to the post-school norm. Ida Holland, a retired social worker, graduated at age 75 with a BA History degree from Birkbeck in 1980.¹⁰⁶ But there were also many younger students of working age, for whom evening higher education was a relief from the tediousness of daytime employment. As Evans recalled, 'there was always a group of hospital porters, because they had nothing much to do during most of the day, and so could read up on their history.'¹⁰⁷ Again, as this recollection suggests, history as a degree subject was perhaps particularly attractive to casual students, due to its relative accessibility. Furthermore, this appeal of part-time study as an antidote to working life applied not just at undergraduate level in HCA, but to postgraduate courses, too. As Evans made clear, the market for part-time master's courses was driven in part by people who 'felt their jobs [were] boring and wanted to carry on with interesting things'.¹⁰⁸

For many HCA students taking degrees for non-career reasons, finding intellectual stimulation outside the workplace was sufficient justification for part-time study. In a 1990 *Financial Times* feature, 'Escape from Boredom', mature student Mike Lea explained how a part-time MA at Birkbeck had helped him after a quarter of a century in dull clerical posts. Mike, who had left education at 17, and was then aged 46, frankly admitted that

¹⁰⁴ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:08:47.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Birkbeck Archive; Birkbeck, Malet Street: BBK 10/11; Maggie Gruner, 'Still Learning at 92', *Viewpoints: The Magazine of the Birkbeck Society*, Spring, 1998, p. 6. Holland was advised to take a degree at Birkbeck after studying for a diploma at the City Literary Institute (City Lit) in London, where she was still attending part-time, aged 92. She said of Birkbeck, 'I went into College three nights a week, and loved it.'

¹⁰⁷ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:18:27.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 00:27:46.

I think my career in insurance was basically a waste of time. It required no thinking. I worked for twenty-five years and I needed a break from the grindstone, from the sheer boredom of it. I had probably got to the stage where I was unemployable. I'm happier now. I'll probably live longer.

Such life benefits might have been obvious to part-time and mature students in HCA at Birkbeck. But they were widely unrecognised by successive governments in the post-Robbins era, which increasingly prioritised economic gains. As Mandler observes, 'only individual graduate premia pay off student loans, not happier or thinner or more tolerant graduates.'¹⁰⁹ This prevailing political preoccupation with the economic aspects of higher education also had a direct detrimental impact on 'leisure learning' in HCA. The government's introduction of university tuition fees from 1997 became a significant deterrent to potential part-time or mature entrants wishing to study degrees 'for the sake of improving the quality of their lives'. Again, as Feldman remembered, the introduction of fees, 'took the stuffing out of the sort of face-to-face "leisure learner".'¹¹⁰

Students in HCA at Birkbeck from 1963 to 2003 had a variety of motivations: obtaining university degrees for the new 'graduate professions'; securing MA qualifications to further career prospects; and learning primarily for intellectual stimulation – as an escape from the monotony of work or retirement. Critically, however, further significance can be found in the fact that part-time and mature students in HCA were able to transfer between these general categories. Some, such as Pelling, who undertook BA degrees to improve their employment prospects, were then able to progress further in new careers by taking part-time MA courses. Others, who perhaps started evening courses in HCA on a leisurely basis,

¹⁰⁹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 212.

¹¹⁰ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:08:47.

subsequently chose to take their part-time studies more seriously. As cited in previous chapters, in 1969 the Head of Classics Browning wrote to the Master Tress about one student, Marlow, who had for several years ‘attended regularly but never seemed to make much progress or to take his work terribly seriously’.¹¹¹ Browning added, however, that

In the last couple of years he has become a reformed character. He is very anxious to get a degree, both I think to prove his own ability to do it, and because it would enable him to qualify as a Chartered Accountant in a much shorter period than he could do without a degree. He has begun to work hard and regularly and shows signs of considerable intelligence.¹¹²

For others, an initial phase of part-time and mature learning in HCA led to postgraduate research, or even academic careers. Marie-Louise ‘Mary-Lou’ Legg enrolled on a part-time BA History course as a 45-year-old single mother of three, graduating in 1982.¹¹³ She then undertook an MA in Victorian studies and, subsequently, a PhD – before being appointed to teach British and Irish history at the college. She was further made an Honorary Teaching Fellow in the Department of History.¹¹⁴ Legg, who left school at 16, and worked as a secretary and councillor before joining HCA, later acknowledged that, ‘Being a single parent with three children, I thought there was no way I could go back to college. But Birkbeck really changed my life.’¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 010, p. 1.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Birkbeck, *Annual Review, 2003-04*, p. 17.

¹¹⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Birkbeck, Malet Street: BBK 10/11; [Author unknown], ‘First Past the Post’, *Viewpoints: The Magazine of the Birkbeck Society*, Spring, 1998, p. 13. Legg was also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Birkbeck, *Annual Review, 2003-04*, p. 17.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.; Birkbeck Archive; Birkbeck, Malet Street: BBK 10/11; [Author unknown], ‘First Past the Post’, *Viewpoints: The Magazine of the Birkbeck Society*, Spring, 1998, p. 13.

Standards

In terms of academic standards, Birkbeck and HCA were distinct from the university 'mainstream' in several ways. Most prominently, the college had unconventional entry requirements. In contrast to undergraduate history, classics and archaeology applicants elsewhere, those hoping to start first degrees in these subjects at Birkbeck required no formal qualifications – A-levels or otherwise. Instead, candidates for BA courses in HCA were selected on the basis of interviews with departmental staff. The purpose of this relatively informal screening was to assess individual capacity for part-time, mature university study. As Evans, who oversaw admissions as Head of History in the 1990s, explained: 'That was one of the great things – there weren't any entrance qualifications. What you had to do was to show in the interview that you knew what you were taking on.'¹¹⁶ Attitudes towards applicants in HCA tended towards the liberal. Porter, also a former Head of Department, recalled that, 'There was always this sort of sense that you took everybody on. We took most people on who we thought could have a chance at getting an undergraduate degree.'¹¹⁷

In some cases, applicants were directed to HCA from other institutions offering pre-degree qualifications – part of a wider network of part-time and mature education. Pelling, for example, was encouraged to apply for a BA at Birkbeck by an evening A-Level history course tutor at South East London Technical College.¹¹⁸ These candidates, still selected via interview, perhaps had more experience of evening classes and a better understanding of Birkbeck's degree system than most. Often, however, HCA entrants, returning to formal education after many years, or facing considerable work or family pressures, were quite unprepared for the particular challenges of part-time, degree-level study. Evans estimated

¹¹⁶ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:41:28.

¹¹⁷ Porter, 23rd February 2021, 00:24:28. Porter was appointed Head of HCA in 2001-02. Birkbeck, *Calendar, 2001-02*, p. 23.

¹¹⁸ Pelling, 2nd December 2021, 00:09:08; 00:09:40.

that, ‘a good quarter or a third of them didn’t really know that this would involve spending two evenings a week in the college, and most weekends doing preparatory work.’¹¹⁹ This situation was exacerbated, at least in the first three decades after Robbins, by a lack of departmental and institutional student oversight. According to Evans, until the 1990s,

There was almost no attempt to monitor, trace or mentor students. And so, the dropout rate in the first year was horrendous. I mean, a quarter of the students dropped out before the end of their first term.¹²⁰

These, then, were the pros and cons of Birkbeck and HCA’s liberal admissions policy: university access for more, but premature departure for many.

Birkbeck’s unconventional admissions process also resulted in an unusually broad range of academic abilities inside the classroom. In part, this special spectrum reflected the wide variety of ages and occupations amongst its part-time and mature students. Evans recalled that the undergraduates he taught in the Department of History ranged ‘almost from the barely literate – after three years, you’d find you had a sense of achievement if they could actually write a decent essay – to the absolutely stellar’.¹²¹ He added: ‘I think I had more absolutely brilliant students in Birkbeck than I ever had at Cambridge, because they might be professors, or surgeons, or really, really clever people – and anything in between.’¹²² Significantly, due to the relative informality of admissions in HCA and the non-linear route to university taken by many of its entrants, the academic potential of new students was difficult to predict. Indeed, the fact that so many applicants with little evidence of academic ability were given a chance to pursue degrees in history, classics and archaeology was partly

¹¹⁹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:41:28.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 00:40:49.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 00:37:27.

¹²² *Ibid.*

what made HCA different. Porter, who joined Birkbeck from Harvard University, reflected that

It really taught me that if you do give people a chance – who may not look on an admissions application like [they’re] going to get a first or succeed in a master’s degree with distinction – wait and see, because you just never know [...] people can really start to excel.¹²³

Pelling, who enrolled in HCA’s BA History as a postal worker, with mediocre school grades and a record of past failure in higher education, went on to win the Derby Prize for the best undergraduate history mark across the entire University of London.¹²⁴ He was not the only one. Birkbeck as a whole, while providing unique access to degrees for part-time and mature learners, also boasted a high proportion of University firsts and prizes.¹²⁵ Foster, who remembered Pelling, Legg and other ‘high-flyers’ in HCA, confirmed that, ‘There were people like that. And one watched their lives turn around, because the second chance that Birkbeck gave them was so enabling.’¹²⁶

Critically, the academic achievements of HCA’s part-time and mature students depended on first-rate tuition. As Foster suggested, HCA ‘wouldn’t have been so enabling if the standards hadn’t been so high’.¹²⁷ Similarly, Pelling reflected that, ‘Birkbeck was pretty unique I think in lots of ways. Because it’s not that you just go to night classes – you go to university, with some extremely highly-regarded academics giving lectures.’¹²⁸ He added: ‘It was very transformative – just by virtue of meeting people like [the prominent historian of

¹²³ Porter, 23rd February 2021, 00:26:35.

¹²⁴ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:37:19.

¹²⁵ Birkbeck College, *Annual Report, 1989-90*, p. 5.

¹²⁶ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:36:49.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 00:37:01.

¹²⁸ Pelling, 2nd December 2021, 00:27:53.

Germany] David Blackburn, you're forced to think in ways you've never thought before.'¹²⁹

Foster also suggested that academic staff across Birkbeck had shared, 'a determination to make the standards as high, or higher, than any college in London University.'¹³⁰ According to Foster, this mission to match the best of the full-time 'mainstream' was powered partly by the presence of eminent academics in HCA: 'They were so high profile [...] I think people who came to Birkbeck didn't feel they were getting a second-best deal. In fact, they felt they were getting a very good deal.'¹³¹

Vitality, this advantage was based not just on the research reputations of leading scholars, but on their active engagement in teaching. Foster said that he had experience of other, elite university departments where the 'big names were always off on research grants or not wasting their time – as they would have seen it – on undergraduates'.¹³² By contrast, Foster insisted that

Birkbeck was not in the least like that. You got Eric Hobsbawm – you know, you got them face-to-face. And it was that kind of commitment to a personal connection to the student, and to give them as good a teaching experience as they could possibly get.¹³³

This adherence to high standards of *face-to-face* tuition also helped HCA and Birkbeck to distinguish their part-time and mature provision from that offered elsewhere. Foster explained that

¹²⁹ Ibid., 00:15:39.

¹³⁰ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:37:01.

¹³¹ Ibid., 00:08:13.

¹³² Ibid., 00:29:01.

¹³³ Ibid., 00:29:14; 00:29:23.

We constantly compared ourselves, or were compared, to the Open University [OU].

But we always emphasized that, unlike the OU, at Birkbeck you met real people.

And you were taught face-to-face by them.¹³⁴

Similarly, White suggested that classics students were attracted to the college because ‘it was the only [place] where you could do part-time work face-to-face with a professor’.¹³⁵

Notably, high standards at Birkbeck were also displayed publicly through the success of its students in the BBC television series *University Challenge*. Student contestants from the college reached the final of the popular intellectual quiz in 1998; and won the contest for a first time in 2003.¹³⁶

‘Common Enterprise’

Students in HCA had a much broader range of ages, occupations, motivations and standards than those enrolled in ‘mainstream’ university departments. Significantly, there was also an unusually high level of academic engagement. Foster claimed that the ‘sense of commitment’ among his students was ‘extraordinary’.¹³⁷ As above, this was partly because individuals wanted to progress professionally, or to try to escape the monotony of work or retirement. But there were also other pressures on HCA students, less common in equivalent departments elsewhere. For example, Pelling explained that

¹³⁴ Ibid., 00:28:18. Foster jokingly added, ‘Well, we’ve all turned into the OU, ironically, under [the COVID-19 pandemic].’

¹³⁵ White, 23rd January 2020, 01:09:23.

¹³⁶ ‘University Challenge’, Wikipedia website, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_Challenge [accessed on 9th February 2023] Birkbeck lost to Magdalen College, Oxford in the 1998 final; in 2003 Birkbeck triumphed over Cranfield University.

¹³⁷ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:35:45.

My wife was pregnant in the first year of the course, we were embarking on having a family. So, that puts a whole other pressure on you, because you think, ‘Well hang on, I’m doing a degree here, and I’ve got a family coming – beginning at least; I’ve got to do this very well.’¹³⁸

Added to the demands of a new child for Pelling was geographical distance, after the young family decided to move to Bristol and then Southampton in search of better housing. Pelling recalled that

At one point I was a postman in Southampton – working in the early hours of the morning, and then having to get on a train to go up to Birkbeck: starting at 4.30am, or something like that, to do your post round – and then you’re hopping on a train, trying to work out about renaissance Italy, or whatever it might be! Pretty tough [...] but tougher on my wife really.¹³⁹

Pelling, at 25, was quite young for a ‘mature’ student when he started at Birkbeck. His life situation was such, however, that ‘maturity’ was a defining aspect of his experience of – and approach to – university. Indeed, by the time he graduated from the college, aged 29, Pelling had three children.¹⁴⁰ More widely, Pelling also stated that many of his fellow students in History were very committed to their studies:

¹³⁸ Pelling, 2nd December 2021, 00:10:58; 00:11:13.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 00:12:39; 00:13:25; 00:13:23.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 00:33:33; Nick Pelling, email to the author, ‘Re: Birkbeck Fact Checks’, 24th April 2023.

Most worked pretty hard. There was very little of, you know, let's go out drinking and forget about it all. Mostly because people I rubbed along with had jobs and serious lives to get on with. There was a different mentality [to art school].¹⁴¹

Similarly, White said that she remembered an industrious ethic among students in Classics: 'They turn up there, they haven't got much time, and they get on with the work.'¹⁴²

Crucially, this culture of commitment among HCA's students was reflected by its academic staff. As Evans explained:

One of the things that makes Birkbeck really great, of course, is the sense of commitment you have, because it's a very special kind of student. It's a sense of mission about Birkbeck, to do with lifelong education and mature students, which is absent from the conventional university.¹⁴³

Foster agreed, maintaining that even senior scholars 'all had a commitment to teaching mature students as well, which we all felt very much I think'.¹⁴⁴ Faculty members in HCA went to extra lengths to support students, including tuition at Birkbeck outside of term times. In April 1980, Classics student Alfred McGready wrote to the college's Master, W. G. Overend, to report that Giangrande and White had provided 'daily supervision at research level' throughout the Easter break.¹⁴⁵ McGready informed the Master that

¹⁴¹ Pelling, 2nd December 2021, 00:21:36; 00:21:54.

¹⁴² White, 23rd January 2020, 01:36:18.

¹⁴³ Evans, 28th January 2021, 01:01:48.

¹⁴⁴ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:02:42.

¹⁴⁵ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 42; File 3-D/1 114.

we believe that the high success rate of Professor Giangrande's School of Research [sic] is due not only to our intense personal work but also to the time, devotion and organisational ability which Professor Giangrande and Dr White place at our disposal.¹⁴⁶

A particular awareness for part-time and mature higher education was also shown by Floud, who introduced new training for HCA staff on specific methods for teaching older students with more life experience. As outlined in Chapter 4, *Expansion*, Floud had observed that many of his HCA colleagues were repeating as university tutors their past experiences as young, full-time undergraduates – thus failing to fully recognise the departments' particular population of part-time and mature learners.¹⁴⁷ Floud, who initiated his new scheme of specialised, 'adult' teacher training in the late 1980s, said that it was 'one of the things I'm quite proud of having done at Birkbeck'.¹⁴⁸ Part-time and mature students in HCA also benefited from a formalisation of student oversight at the college under Baroness Tessa Blackstone, as Master from the late 1980s. As Evans, who himself helped to improve the supervision of PhD students in HCA, explained:

A whole system was set up whereby you had to register students. You had to keep tabs on them, keep closer contact with them. And that was a very good change. And the History faculty, the History department, benefited very much from that.¹⁴⁹

Furthermore, a specific sense of support for part-time and mature students was also present in an institutional move towards a modular degree system in HCA. For much

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:01:01.

¹⁴⁸ Floud, 4th February 2021, 00:40:12.

¹⁴⁹ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:41:58.

of the period, students in History and Classics at Birkbeck faced an intensive run of exams at the end of their final year. From 1989-90, however, unitised assessment spread more evenly throughout the different years of a degree was introduced. According to Mason, some HCA academics, most notably Michael Wilks, voiced opposition to the change because they were attached to the traditional model of final-year exams.¹⁵⁰ But Mason, who supported the transition, said that she had ‘always thought that the old degree where you took all your papers at the end of four years was not fair to students at all – because they were working [...] they had other commitments’.¹⁵¹ She added that, ‘I know [the students] used to get in a real state some of them about finals, when it was all those papers in one fell swoop.’¹⁵² Thus, the move to a modular system was specifically aimed at facilitating the academic success of part-time and mature learners.

Significantly, the sense of scholarly engagement shared by students and staff in HCA produced mutual benefits. As above, high standards of face-to-face tuition in history, classics and archaeology at Birkbeck helped part-time and mature students to achieve academically. For those teaching HCA’s lectures and seminars, meanwhile, an unusually broad and committed collection of students made for a more rewarding experience. Evans further explained that

The students were interesting, fun to teach. I got much, much, much more stimulation than students in a conventional university, because the range of abilities was far greater than you’d normally find.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Mason, 10th October 2019, 00:45:46.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 00:45:57.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:37:27.

He added: ‘I got so fed up when I went to Cambridge with teaching 18-year-olds, brilliant though they all were, that I missed mature students.’¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Foster, who after Birkbeck became a Professor of Irish history at the University of Oxford, said that he considered tuition he had given in HCA as, ‘still the most stimulating teaching I’ve ever done.’¹⁵⁵ This applied particularly to the MA Victorian Studies course – co-founded by Foster – which attracted a number of ‘high-flyers’.¹⁵⁶ Also according to Foster, teaching HCA students was uniquely challenging not just because of their range of abilities, but because, as mature and working (or retired) students, they possessed a greater amount of life experience. For example, Foster said that he remembered

giving a lecture on the 1930s after I came [to Birkbeck], and some elderly student standing up and contradicting me because he was there, and it wasn’t quite like that. That was always a [laughs] slight danger.¹⁵⁷

Harding also cited the range of ages and life experiences among HCA’s students as having shaped her teaching experience. She reflected that

One of the things of being at Birkbeck is you don’t have this sense of growing older than the students, because there are always older students. Whereas colleagues [in other institutions] who started teaching in their twenties or early thirties would find

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 01:01:48. Evans added that this feeling led him to later work at Gresham College, London – an institution devoted to public lectures. ‘About us’, Gresham College website, <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/about-us> [accessed on 3rd February 2023]

¹⁵⁵ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:04:48. Foster was made Carroll Professor of Irish History at Hertford College, Oxford in 1991. ‘Professor Roy Foster’, University of Oxford website, <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-roy-foster> [accessed on 3rd February 2023]

¹⁵⁶ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:04:48.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 00:20:18.

that they were getting more and more distant from the predominantly twenty-somethings that they were teaching.¹⁵⁸

Harding added that

My feeling is that there's something that's rather good, perhaps it's particularly to do with the mixed ages among the students, that you get much less of a sense of an age division between staff and students.¹⁵⁹

Vitality, these reflections point to a very different staff-student dynamic within HCA compared to equivalent 'mainstream' departments, where a vast majority of entrants arrived fresh from school.

Most significantly, in terms of staff-student dynamics, there was perhaps in HCA a greater sense of *collective* endeavour. This specific, shared aspect of academic life was promoted each year, at least until the late 1980s, through a residential symposium held outside London. Students and staff from the Department of History decamped together to a rural property in West Sussex for the annual research weekend.¹⁶⁰ Foster fondly remembered these 'Rogate House' events as, 'great fun – people would read papers, we'd watch a film, we'd go to the village pub, you know, that sort of stuff.'¹⁶¹ He added that it

¹⁵⁸ Harding, 14th January 2021, 00:47:41.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:19:32. According to Foster, History academics Michael Wilks and Graham Gibbs played a large part in establishing the annual weekend away; the property was owned by King's College, London. In 1984-85, the Department of History planned to take forty students and six staff on the trip. Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 011.

¹⁶¹ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:19:50.

helps the atmosphere of integration between the student body and the staff. And the fact that the student body were sometimes older, quite often older than the staff members, was also conducive to that.¹⁶²

Notably, these communal trips were hit by cuts to departmental budgets at Birkbeck from the mid-1980s – part of institutional measures in response to nationwide decreases in government higher education funding.¹⁶³ By the late 1990s, HCA field trips were running again, however. In a May 1999 edition of Birkbeck's student magazine, *The Lamp & Owl*, the college's History Society reflected on a recent 'Wye Weekend', involving staff and students from the History department. Michael Peterson, outgoing President of the Society, happily reported that during the retreat in Kent

Orlando Figes, who has won world renown for his book on the Russian Revolution, *A People's Tragedy*, and who joins the academic staff as a professor in the summer, was able to spare the time to give an after dinner [sic] address and afterwards meet us informally.¹⁶⁴

Back at Birkbeck, even the most prestigious scholar in HCA, Hobsbawm, was known to join his students in the bar during seminar breaks, to discuss current affairs.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, Hobsbawm's lectures and seminars also suggest a sort of symbiosis at work in HCA. Part-time and mature students who packed into the famous historian's evening classes were

¹⁶² Ibid., 00:20:04.

¹⁶³ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 007, pp. 1-2. On 7th August 1984, Birkbeck's Secretary, R. E. Swainson, wrote to the Department of History to inform its staff that separate maintenance and 'field course' budgets – the latter used for the 'Rogate House' trips – were to be consolidated into a single, reduced figure.

¹⁶⁴ Birkbeck Archive; Birkbeck, Malet Street: BBK 11/3/3; Michael Peterson, 'History Society', *The Lamp & Owl*, May 1999, p. 4. Figes was appointed as a Professor of History at Birkbeck in 1999. Birkbeck College, University of London, *Calendar, 1998-99* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1998), p. 25.

¹⁶⁵ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, p. 423.

inspired by the depth and detail of his teaching. In return, Hobsbawm was able to regularly interact with students older and, perhaps, wiser than those in university departments elsewhere – an experience that likely influenced his popular writings. As Evans suggests, Hobsbawm's

style of exposition surely derived not least from the experience of teaching Birkbeck students, all mature part-timers who had spent years away from formal education and thus constituted exactly the kind of intelligent general public to whom [his] books were addressed.¹⁶⁶

Moreover, Harding observed that

If you read the prefaces to Birkbeck historians publishing books they will tend to say, 'I've really got a lot out of teaching at Birkbeck,' or, 'Thanks to the Birkbeck students for their contributions,' and so on.¹⁶⁷

Top degrees and prizes in HCA, within the wider University of London sphere, were celebrated by its staff because they were evidence not just of individual student success, but of collective achievement in part-time and mature higher education. As Foster affirmed, the fact that such awards were secured by Birkbeck students was, 'immensely important for all of us.'¹⁶⁸

This sense of shared endeavour was an essential part of HCA and Birkbeck's unique identity. It also has wider significance, however, in relation to the development of UK higher

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 398.

¹⁶⁷ Harding, 14th January 2021, 00:21:51.

¹⁶⁸ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:37:19.

education after Robbins. In 1963, Birkbeck and HCA were already different to the national norm, due to their relatively high proportion of part-time and mature students. As critics of post-Robbins university policy suggest, however, in subsequent decades staff-student dynamics have shifted towards a ‘new normal’. Political drives towards the marketisation of higher education, a prevailing solution to public demand for university expansion, have increasingly cast students as consumers. As Collini observes, ‘students have come to be regarded as the front-line troops of market forces, storming the walls of those obstructive bastions of pre-commercial values, the universities.’¹⁶⁹ Academic staff, meanwhile, have been pushed progressively towards an opposing role of ‘providers’ by the dominant political ideology. As Michael Shattock and Aniko Horvath suggest, this approach to higher education ‘regards the role of universities and colleges as service providers there-to-be criticized, rather than institutions whose students are part of a common enterprise’.¹⁷⁰ Vitaly, in this deeper context, the particular experience of staff and students in HCA at Birkbeck, based on a greater sense of ‘common enterprise’, points to an alternative model.

Conclusion

In the decades following the Robbins Report the UK’s student population boomed; its composition also shifted, with a much higher proportion of women and part-timers. At Birkbeck, part-time and mature higher education was already deeply rooted by 1963. In many ways, university culture at the college was conventional, but a vast majority of its students were older, with daytime jobs – a marked difference to the straight-from-school, full-time ‘mainstream’. Expansion at Birkbeck broadly mirrored national trends, with a slump in the

¹⁶⁹ Stefan Collini, ‘Higher Purchase: The Student as Consumer’, in *The Creation of a University System*, ed. by Stefan Collini (London; Verso, 2017), pp. 155-157 (p. 158).

¹⁷⁰ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 43.

1970s dividing periods of significant growth in student numbers, including a higher percentage of women. Significantly, by 2003, more than 90 per cent of those enrolled at the college were still part-time, and just 0.1 per cent were aged 18 to 20. Students at Birkbeck had plural motivations. In his analysis of UK universities, Mandler argues that students are typically concerned with both careers and intellectual enjoyment: higher education is, ‘almost always both a consumption and an investment good.’¹⁷¹ What makes Birkbeck unique within this period of national university expansion, however, is the sheer latitude it provided to new entrants. HCA, with its range of history courses, was perhaps particularly accessible. Those past conventional university-going age, or locked into daytime work, found a ‘second chance’ for a ‘first degree’. Others could further their careers while in jobs through part-time MA study. Others still, could access evening courses to escape the monotony of work or retirement – and could even try to pursue advanced avenues of intellectual enquiry. This rare breadth of university opportunity, particularly in terms of so-called ‘leisure learning’, was compromised by the introduction of tuition fees from the late 1990s. Yet, crucially, such latitude still provides a critical contrast to what Collini identifies as a prevailing concept of higher education, ‘exclusively in terms of preparation for the labour market.’¹⁷²

Birkbeck and HCA were also different from the university ‘mainstream’ in terms of academic standards. Notably, there were no entrance qualifications at the college, and HCA staff had a liberal attitude towards admissions, based exclusively on interviews. One consequence of this relatively informal approach, at least until the introduction of new oversight procedures, was a high drop-out rate. It also meant that HCA students, particularly undergraduates, had an unusually broad range of academic abilities – from the ‘barely literate’, to the ‘absolutely stellar’.¹⁷³ Academic potential was hard to predict, but many

¹⁷¹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 143.

¹⁷² Collini, ‘Snakes and Ladders’, p. 16.

¹⁷³ Evans, 28th January 2021, 00:37:27.

students excelled. Indeed, HCA and Birkbeck had strong reputations for firsts and prizes within the wider University of London. This success in matching the academic results of full-time institutions depended on first-rate evening tuition from leading scholars. Vitally, the student experience in HCA was uniquely ‘transformative’ not just because eminent academics were present, but because they were actively engaged in *face-to-face* teaching – even for undergraduates.¹⁷⁴ As such, degree-level education in HCA and Birkbeck during the period was distinct not just from conventional universities, but from other institutions for part-time and mature study.

HCA had a broader spectrum of student ages, occupations, motivations and standards than ‘mainstream’ university departments. According to its staff, many of whom had taught at elite level elsewhere, there was also an ‘extraordinary’ level of academic engagement.¹⁷⁵ Those enrolled on history, classics and archaeology courses at Birkbeck tended to work hard. They were subject to greater career and family pressures than school-leavers; the ‘mature’ aspect of their part-time studies was often defined by situation as much as age. Crucially, this culture of commitment was reflected by HCA’s academics, who had a ‘sense of mission [...] absent from the conventional university’, as Evans explains.¹⁷⁶ This spirit, which extended even to senior scholars, manifested in moves such as the introduction of specialised teacher training, to maximise the potential of part-time and mature tuition. There were also mutual benefits to this shared sense of engagement. HCA’s students were enabled by high standards of face-to-face tuition; and, symbiotically, staff experienced their ‘most stimulating teaching’.¹⁷⁷ The unusual range of ages and life experiences among HCA’s students further contributed to this unique staff-student dynamic, encapsulated in annual scholarly retreats together. The fact that these communal ‘Rogate House’ symposiums were hit by university

¹⁷⁴ Pelling, 2nd December 2021, 00:15:39.

¹⁷⁵ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:35:45.

¹⁷⁶ Evans, 28th January 2021, 01:01:48.

¹⁷⁷ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:04:48.

funding cuts from the mid-1980s is, perhaps, symbolic. As many critics of higher education development post-Robbins argue, prevailing political ideology, based on market logic, has promoted a provider-consumer model, to the detriment of ‘common enterprise’ between staff and students.¹⁷⁸ In this deeper context, the particular sense of collective academic endeavour in HCA between 1963 and 2003 stands as a vital example of possible alternatives.

¹⁷⁸ Shattock and Horvath, *The Governance of British Higher Education*, p. 43.

Conclusion

Generalisation in university history, as Rothblatt warns, is a perilous pursuit.¹ Arguably, this risk is particularly acute in respect of the four decades following the 1963 Robbins Report. It was in this time that UK higher education shifted seismically from an elite system to mass participation. As Collini observes, such was the speed and magnitude of change to universities during this unprecedented period, it is difficult to identify constants.² ‘More’ meant many different things: as Scott suggests, the national move to mass higher education had ‘plural meanings’.³ The historic increase in student numbers following Robbins was also far from ‘a simple linear progression’.⁴ Furthermore, expansion was not simply a matter of numbers; nor was it just a matter of higher education: university shifts were inextricably linked to larger social, economic and political trends. The financial cost of widening access forced a radical recasting of relations between higher education institutions and the state. This deeper change was manifested, particularly from the early 1980s, in major cuts to public funding for universities. Critically, it also resulted in a relentless rise of managerialism and marketisation within higher education, introducing new forms of external scrutiny and pressure. By the turn of the millennium, these combined trends had permanently altered the activities and character of universities nationwide. What is left, in terms of historical research, is a highly complex field of inquiry. Yet, it also remains one with vitally important resonances and relevance for our understanding of universities today.

For Birkbeck and HCA, as with higher education more broadly, the meanings of mass university expansion were multiple. Most conspicuously, it meant – of course – expansion.

¹ Rothblatt, ‘The Writing of University History at the End of Another Century’, p. 153.

² Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 22.

³ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 168.

⁴ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 103.

Between 1963 and 2003, Birkbeck's student population increased by more than 400 per cent – and this excludes the massive number of 'continuing education' learners who joined after the incorporation of Extra Mural. This change in the four decades after Robbins, broadly reflecting a national, non-linear trend, remains the greatest proportional increase in student numbers in the college's history. Throughout, in HCA, the Department of History was one of the most populous at Birkbeck; the Department of Classics was always relatively smaller in number. Crucially, the UK's mass higher education expansion applied not just to students, but to teachers and researchers, too. HCA was no exception. In the same forty years, HCA's faculty more than doubled in size. Again, the course of this expansion roughly mirrored wider university trends: initial growth in the 1960s; stagnation – and even decline – in the 1970s and 1980s; and a resumption of recruitment, at the highest rate in the period, by the 1990s. Notably, a further sense of academic expansion was also created through internal, structural shifts: while HCA started the period as two separate units, with archaeology still a peripheral concern, by the turn of the millennium History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck had been established as a single, sizable school.

More also meant different. For HCA, expansion led in turn to diversification. In the early 1960s, it had offered only conventional courses. In History, under the patriarchal control of the ultra-traditional Darlington, teaching and research was largely limited to the national and the empirical. Options in Classics were similarly conservative; Archaeology consisted of just one narrow, special subject (Anglo-Saxon Archaeology) run via the Department of English. Over the next four decades, however, academic activity in all three disciplines at Birkbeck was transformed. This was a direct consequence of expansion, which, through recruitment, introduced a much broader, newer range of academic ideas and expertise into HCA. As such, the development also reflected deeper, disciplinary trends – Eley's 'two massive waves of innovation', in social history from the 1960s and cultural

history by the 1990s – which were themselves closely tied to the long-term effects of increased university access.⁵ The new joint school – later a *department* – also covered an impressive range of periods, from the ancient to the contemporary. Key to its capacity to span subjects and time was a ‘commonality of approach’, based on shared interests among HCA academics in progressive social and cultural historical methods.⁶ Again, this departmental situation reflected wider, disciplinary developments – a ‘marked diversification’, and an ‘intermixing of standpoints’, having emerged as defining characteristics of academic history and related fields by the end of the period.⁷

Further to the expansion of HCA’s academic staff, and the diversification of its teaching and research, there were also shifts in the social composition of its faculty. Indeed, these additional changes were closely related to both the longer-term results of wider university participation and disciplinary developments over the period. In 1963, only one quarter of academics in both History and Classics at Birkbeck were women; by 2003, the proportion of female scholars, now in the new joint HCA, had increased to half. This change reflected broader trends in gender balance across academia from the 1960s and, in particular, the prominence of rising female scholars in social science and humanities subjects, including history. Meanwhile, within HCA, there was also a limited shift in the racial and ethnic profile of the academic staff – for so long classifiable simply as ‘white’. By the end of the period, two full-time academics out of a total twenty-seven (7 per cent) were of BAME identity, roughly reflecting the (lamentable) situation in universities nationwide.

Mass higher education expansion also meant cuts in state funding for Birkbeck and HCA. In the 1960s and 1970s, the college’s departments of History and Classics were subject to frequent freezes and savings. But by the early 1980s, such institutional belt-tightening was

⁵ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 10.

⁶ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:19:17.

⁷ Eley, ‘Marxist Historiography’, p. 78.

being surpassed by more severe reductions, driven by new political priorities. These heavier government cuts forced emergency plans and ‘drastic measures’ at Birkbeck during the decade.⁸ Moreover, in 1986, they briefly pitched the college into existential crisis. In addition to decreases in state funding, there were increases to state scrutiny. The 1985 Jarratt Report on ‘efficiency’ in universities, a further product of prevailing political forces, promoted pervasive forms of managerialism across UK higher education. At Birkbeck, this led to significant structural changes, including the scrapping of traditional faculties and their replacement with ‘Resource Centres’. More external pressure followed with the introduction of the RAE from 1985-86. This major new audit represented not just further managerialism, but marketisation: RAE league tables, published in the press, stimulated a market for new students; the reputational and financial rewards attached to positive RAE results stimulated a market in ‘RAE-able’ staff. In HCA at Birkbeck, as with university departments nationwide, the RAE encouraged a shift in focus from teaching to research and increased administrative burdens on academics. These trends of managerialism and marketisation were subsequently strengthened in the 1990s, as New Labour embraced the mass higher education solutions of its predecessors. As Feldman suggests, by then the ‘whole ethos’ of universities ‘was being bureaucratised and monetised’.⁹

Significantly, these multiple developments in HCA over the period confirm the university department as a key site of change during the mass expansion of higher education. Major shifts to UK universities after Robbins were determined by government – in response to deeper social, economic, and political trends – and administered by national bodies, most notably the UGC. New higher education plans and policies were subsequently imposed at an institutional level – in the case of Birkbeck, these being largely received via the University of

⁸ Birkbeck Archive; Ely, Cambs.: Box 09; File 9-D 002, p. 1.

⁹ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:07:25.

London. At the far ends of this vast, branch-like power network, however, were the academic departments – including HCA. It was at this departmental level that the everyday realities of the seismic move to mass higher education were experienced. For HCA, as with its equivalents elsewhere, student and staff expansion, disciplinary diversification, state funding cuts, and managerialism and marketisation drives manifested on the ground as real shifts in teaching and research practices. Moreover, academic departments such as HCA can be most accurately considered not simply as abstract institutional units, but as ‘live’ groups of individual scholars, researchers, tutors and secretaries. These collectives had formal, hierarchical structures, based on professional positions and ranks – Head of Department, Professor, Reader, and so on. But they were also subject to informal social dynamics, resulting from more random relations between academics – Rothblatt’s ‘play of personalities too intricate for summary’.¹⁰ In these ways, for HCA at Birkbeck, the reception of mass higher education expansion was not only departmental but individual. And as such, it was also highly complex.

Such complexity is evident in the way HCA’s faculty expanded over the period. Increases to the academic staff in HCA were complicated not just because mass university expansion was entangled with deeper social, economic and political trends – fluctuating forces, which made expansion far from simple or linear. The expansion of faculty across HCA at Birkbeck was also complex due to specific departmental and individual factors. For example, while a growth in postgraduate teaching in the Department of History during the 1990s was driven by a wider boom in demand for master’s degrees, it also depended on a particular mechanism of expansion. New lecturers were recruited by History at this time not only because a demand for more MA degrees existed, but because Evans, as Head of Department, recognised the market trend, and – crucially – was adept enough to exploit

¹⁰ Rothblatt, ‘The Writing of University History at the End of Another Century’, p. 153.

Birkbeck's funding system, to finance fresh posts. Something similar might be said of the further expansion in faculty that followed towards the end of the period, as HCA moved towards consolidation. What Feldman termed 'playing the game' – another form of departmental opportunism, also aimed at growth – depended not only on external conditions, namely the market-oriented expansion of universities under New Labour from the late 1990s, but internal strategy.¹¹ As such, mass higher education expansion was not simply something that HCA was subjected to. Rather, it was something which, at a departmental and individual level, many HCA academics sought to engage with, and even benefit from.

This connection between wider, external trends and specific, internal factors was also present in the diversification of HCA at Birkbeck over the period. As noted, above, two huge waves of disciplinary change transformed history and related academic subjects between the early 1960s and 2000s. These movements – the rise of social history and, subsequently, cultural history – were themselves a consequence of deeper currents: the mass expansion of higher education; and broader social, economic and political shifts. Again, however, at the far, receiving end of academic networks, wider disciplinary change was a departmental and individual concern. Larger, external trends in history, classics and archaeology were received by specific units and scholars, such as the component sections and staff of HCA. Indeed, there was a further level of complexity: these particular departments and individual academics were themselves also contributors to disciplinary developments. Within HCA, Hobsbawm is a notable example. While Eley cites the significance of extra-curricular influences for students at Cambridge in the 1960s, Hobsbawm, a leading light of the new social history, was an established, active member of staff *inside* HCA at Birkbeck.¹² Many others, too – not least, Floud, Evans, Bourke and Dench – were representative of wider

¹¹ Feldman, 11th February 2021, 00:29:50; 00:07:25.

¹² Eley, *A Crooked Line*, p. 4.

disciplinary waves while also being prominent forces within them. As Scott suggests, academic disciplines are ‘embodied’ at departmental level; and this process depends on individual scholars, who instruct ‘their cognitive codes and value hierarchies’.¹³ Furthermore, in HCA, disciplinary development was also determined through departmental recruitment, which reflected individual and collective priorities, and decided future academic direction.

A sense of agency was also present in the way academics in HCA at Birkbeck received other forms of external change during the transition to mass higher education. Firstly, in many cases, HCA’s scholars did not simply accept institutional cuts – resulting from larger reductions in state funding – to their teaching and research budgets. Instead, through direct communication with the Master and other senior college figures, they often sought to clarify, to negotiate and at times – with aid of alternative evidence – to contest. Secondly, in respect of the rise of managerialism and marketisation over the period, HCA was, again, not simply subjected to change from above. Certainly, government drives towards ‘efficiency’ in universities, formalised in the 1985 Jarratt Report, led to major institutional shifts at Birkbeck. These included the dissolution of the college’s Heads of Department Committee, which transferred authority away from History and Classics. Around this same time, increasing external pressure on academic appraisal and accountability across higher education, including for HCA at Birkbeck, was demonstrated through the introduction of the first RAE. Significantly, however, some scholars inside HCA also independently recognised a need for such changes. Indeed, in History, senior academics – notably, Floud and Evans – developed their own improvements to teaching and research oversight. These initiatives point strongly to Scott’s suggestion that shifts to universities after Robbins arose ‘from within the academic culture’, as well as being imposed.¹⁴ Crucially, these changes from within were

¹³ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 157.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

also made at a departmental – and individual – level. And, as such, the university department can be understood not just as a key site of change, but as one of action, too.

A consistent theme throughout the period was the situation of Birkbeck and HCA outside prevailing concepts of higher education. As an institution and departments devoted specifically to part-time and mature students, the college and HCA did not fit easily into the major plans and policies of mass university expansion. Indeed, Birkbeck and HCA were forced into uncertain positions in 1963, due to the full-time, fresh-from-school focus of the Robbins Report. And, remarkably, the situation was still confusing forty years later, with the failure of the 2003 White Paper on higher education to adequately consider part-time and mature learners. A similar lack of recognition was demonstrated in blanket cuts to university funding in the 1970s, imposed by government to solve a severe shortfall in entrants starting straight after school. These were in effect disproportionately harsh for Birkbeck and HCA, where a vast majority of students were of older, working age. This ‘outsider’ situation became more critical in 1986, when a serious miscalculation on part-time higher education funding by the UGC threatened Birkbeck and HCA with institutional catastrophe. Similarly, and also in the late 1980s, the UGC verdict to close Classics at Birkbeck through merger with King’s College, London, was notable for the complete absence of any official reference to the department’s unique part-time and mature teaching and research. Crucially, while these examples point to contemporary social, political and economic pressures, they also confirm the predominance within government and university governance of conventional concepts of higher education.

University tradition in the UK stretches back to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century foundations of Oxford and Cambridge. As Collini suggests, these ‘medieval’ models have continued to exert powerful academic and cultural influence over more modern higher

education institutions.¹⁵ Birkbeck, established in 1823, was always different. In contrast to the elite colleges of Oxbridge, and even the more aspirational ‘red-brick’ universities, which followed in the late nineteenth century, Birkbeck was primarily concerned with higher education for mature students with daytime jobs. The ‘negotiation processes’, to use Välimaa’s term, behind this unique university tradition were rooted in the radical social politics of industrialisation, setting the college somewhat to the left.¹⁶ Significantly, this institutional position later enabled Birkbeck and HCA to accommodate communist scholars during the heights of the Cold War. From the early 1960s, both the college and HCA also included conservative figures, however; and the prevailing political identity of the latter by the end of the period can be considered most accurately as a ‘broad left church’.¹⁷ Furthermore, while there is a lack of explicit reference in HCA papers, at least until the late 1970s, to any distinct, ‘Birkbeckian’ mission, a sense of particular purpose is implicit within the day-to-day actions of its academics, who strived to support working students. As such, the institutional tradition of Birkbeck and HCA can be understood not as an overtly political cause, nor as an abstract ideology, but as a practical, ‘everyday’, *departmental* process.

The situation of Birkbeck and HCA outside conventional concepts of university over the period therefore had two key aspects: a prevailing lack of government-level recognition for part-time and mature higher education; and a unique institutional tradition of university provision for older, working students, manifested through day-to-day teaching and research. These dual aspects were in obvious tension with one another. And, notably, this tension was most acute during times of crisis. Prominently, pivotal events during the mid-to-late-1980s both betrayed a severe lack of concern for part-time and mature higher education within government and university governance, and – simultaneously – heightened Birkbeck and

¹⁵ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 28.

¹⁶ Välimaa, ‘On Traditions and Historical Layers in Higher Education’, p. 67.

¹⁷ Foster, 27th January 2021, 00:25:05.

HCA's sense of their own exceptionalism. In 1986, when the UGC's rash decision on student funding cast the college and HCA into existential crisis, the ensuing 'Battle' led to staff and student protests, and passionate pleas in support of Birkbeck's 'special' purpose, mounted in the press and Parliament.¹⁸ At around this same time, spirited arguments were also made publicly in defence of the college's Department of Classics, threatened with closure under broad UGC plans for the discipline. When enforced merger with King's went ahead in 1988-89, HCA academics strived to maintain evening tuition at Birkbeck. Certainly, these critical events sit within wider social, economic and political contexts of the 1980s. In both cases, however, they can also be considered as clashes between a prevailing attachment to conventional university models at government level, and a fierce commitment within Birkbeck and HCA to a particular form of part-time and mature higher education.

The university department, then, can be understood not simply as a site of change during the transition to mass higher education, but as one of negotiation, action – and contestation.¹⁹ Moreover, in the specific case of Birkbeck and HCA, such reactions and resistances to major shifts to universities from the early 1960s, and particularly in the 1980s, can be understood as demonstrations of a unique institutional tradition. Indeed, to further understand this dynamic, it is helpful to return to another of Scott's ideas – that of the embodiment of the codes and values of different academic disciplines at departmental level.²⁰ The research above suggests that, in respect of HCA at Birkbeck, Scott's theory of embodiment might be adapted to also include an internalisation of the practices and ethics of part-time and mature higher education for working students – again, at departmental level. As discussed, above, interventions by HCA academics – namely, Floud and Evans – during the rise of managerialism in higher education are evidence of change 'from within the

¹⁸ Our Education Correspondent, 'College's Fight to Keep Funds', *The Times*, Friday 27th June 1986, p. 3.

¹⁹ Scott, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, p. 160.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

academic culture' during the mass expansion of universities.²¹ Critically, however, such internal shifts were also dependent on individual scholars with personal understandings of the distinct issues and challenges of part-time and mature university provision. As such, these actions at a departmental level are significant not just as examples of independent, internal change, but as demonstrations of unique institutional codes and values. Birkbeck – and HCA – had always been different; and during mass university expansion, they remained so.

The development of UK higher education after Robbins, and, in particular the mass expansion of the university system, have been the subjects of a considerable number of critical, academic works. For Mandler, many such analyses of the transition to mass higher education since the early 1960s have erroneously conflated the history of university policy with that of *universities* (and this, according to Mandler, all too often with a left-wing bias).²² Separately, for Collini, critiques of the multiple changes to higher education during this period – most notably, cuts, managerialism and marketisation – have increasingly tended towards abstraction and 'rhetorical overkill'.²³ This research has attempted to address these analytical issues by taking a different approach. While still concerned with the development of higher education in the post-Robbins era, the scale of study has been radically reduced – from the national, governmental level, to a single department – or small group of departments – within one university institution. This work is cognizant of the machinations of government and related higher education bodies during mass university expansion (and the fact that these related to *successive* political administrations – both Conservative and Labour). Its priority, however, has been less to detail ministerial moves, and more to reveal the repercussions of higher education shifts for those teaching and researching on the ground. As such, this

²¹ Ibid., p. 167.

²² Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*.

²³ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 52.

research has aimed to move away from policy, abstraction and rhetoric; instead, it has strived to establish the everyday, the departmental and the individual – that is, the academic reality.

Thus, the work above is concerned not just with wider higher education expansion in the four decades after Robbins, but the particular phases, figures and mechanisms of faculty increases within HCA at Birkbeck. It considers not only a broader diversification of history and related disciplines over the period, but the specific structures, scholars and shifts that obstructed or facilitated academic developments at this departmental level. Similarly, changes in social composition post-Robbins are investigated through the individual, lived experiences of female academics; and the department is used to frame national failure on racial and ethnic equality in the senior common room. Also, in terms of students, deeper trends from the early 1960s are examined alongside unique institutional and departmental situations and dynamics. Certainly, all of this helps to confirm that the mass expansion of higher education from 1963 had ‘plural meanings’; that it was neither simple nor linear; that academic change also came ‘from within’; and that the university department was a key site of contestation. Vitally, however, this research also does more: it reveals, through the particular experiences of HCA at Birkbeck, that mass university expansion also had further, exceptional meanings for departments in an institution devoted to part-time and mature higher education. HCA and Birkbeck, with their purpose of evening tuition for working students, were traditionally different to the university ‘mainstream’; and during the transition to mass higher education, this unconventional situation meant specific struggles with cuts, crises, closures and a ‘Battle’ for institutional survival.

It is this exceptionality during the mass expansion of universities that matters most. As above, HCA and Birkbeck, specialising in university provision for people with daytime jobs, always stood outside the prevailing concepts of higher education held within government and governance. Similarly, critical analyses of the development of higher

education after Robbins – including those of both Mandler and Collini, despite their differences – have focused overwhelmingly on full-time university for school leavers. In contrast, this research has sought to invert this historical bias, through the methodology of *microhistory*. This work has prioritised a radical reduction in scale, and a particular concern for human agency – within a departmental context. Crucially, it has also recognised a further significance of HCA at Birkbeck as a microhistorical subject. As with Giangrande, the unconventional professor in Classics, HCA and Birkbeck were anomalies – or ‘normal exceptions’, to use Grendi’s term – within the wider higher education system. As such, HCA at Birkbeck, again, as with Giangrande, provides a special lens through which relations between different forms of authority during the transition to mass higher education – individual, departmental, institutional, governmental – are thrown into relief. This in turn helps to reveal analytical connections – ‘micro-macro links’ – between these different layers and structures.²⁴ And thus, this research is able not only to consider the impact of the *macro* – major plans and policies – on the *micro* – HCA at Birkbeck; critically, it can also use the latter to question prevailing understandings of the former.

Ultimately, then, this research is concerned not just with what the massive expansion of UK universities between 1963 and 2003 meant for HCA at Birkbeck, but with what the particular experiences, reactions and demonstrations of academics in HCA over the period might mean for mass higher education. Such meanings, as with those of the shift to mass higher education more broadly, are plural. Most valuably: The history of HCA in the four decades after Robbins suggests that inequalities among academics – both in terms of gender, and, more severely, a ‘sheer weight of whiteness’ – might be better understood not in the abstract, as a national, statistical issue, but as a real problem perpetuated at a departmental level. It indicates that in an increasingly politicised sphere, university teaching and research

²⁴ Magnússon and Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory?*, p. 8.

based on high intellectual standards for all can have ‘transpolitical’ significance. It illustrates that, notwithstanding the value of vocational training, for so many students – and their tutors – higher education can mean so much more than simply preparation for the labour market. It confirms that throughout life, in work and retirement – indeed, even in face of university cuts and closures – the drive for knowledge, as Collini suggests, ‘can never accept an arbitrary stopping point’.²⁵ And it demonstrates that, while through management and market logic, a ‘consumer-provider’ concept has come to dominate mass higher education, other models, based on ‘common enterprise’ between academic staff and students, are possible.

²⁵ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 55.

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