Students in England and the Legacy of the First World War

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Cover image: Detail from Christmas 1915 and New Year 1916 card sent by UCL Provost and the President of the Union Society to all members of the College serving in the forces [UCL Library Services, Special Collections].
This publication explores a transformative moment in the history of UK higher education. After the First World War, British universities received an influx of students who had undertaken wartime service in different forms. In what ways did this development reshape university life, and what were the implications for student activism?

We shed light on these questions through case studies from London and the North East of England, focusing on University College London (UCL) and Durham University (including Armstrong College, Newcastle). Special emphasis is placed on gender relations at these institutions as well as students’ attempts to foster dialogue, cooperation and reconciliation in the wake of international conflict.

Although the introduction of a grants scheme for ex-service students created a more socially diverse student body, access to higher education remained limited to a relatively small group of people. The publication therefore extends the discussion of post-conflict learning to the field of adult education: the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) played a pioneering role in bringing together working-class people and academics.

Our material originates in a wider project on “British Ex-Service Students and the Re-Building of Europe, 1919–1926”, which is based on a collaboration between academics from Northumbria University and UCL as well as representatives of two partner organisations, namely the National Union of Students (NUS) and the North East branch of the WEA. Funding for the project has been provided by “Everyday Lives in War”, a World War One Engagement Centre at the University of Hertfordshire.

World War One Engagement Centres are an initiative of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), supporting the interaction between academic institutions and community partners in the context of the war centenary. We gratefully acknowledge the support from our colleagues in Hertfordshire and at the AHRC. The WEA’s contribution is connected to its own projects which, thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund, have shed light on the organisation’s wartime and post-war history.

Our project team comprises three historians (Daniel Laqua, Georgina Brewis, Sarah Hellawell) as well as Mike Day from the NUS and Jude Murphy from the WEA. In addition to writing this publication, we have produced a pop-up exhibition and hosted public events at Newcastle’s Literary and Philosophical Society and at NUS Macadam House in London.

For information on future activities, please contact Daniel Laqua (daniel.laqua@northumbria.ac.uk) or Georgina Brewis (g.brewis@ucl.ac.uk).
The First World War transformed British society. Well beyond the Armistice, the impact of war was felt strongly at British universities. Demobilisation coincided with a sharp increase in the student population. Those whose studies had been disrupted by war service resumed their education, whilst others embarked on university courses for the first time.

In 1919 the government set up a scheme, enabled by the 1918 Education Act, to provide university grants for ex-servicemen, covering tuition fees and living costs. Up to 1923, the government provided grants to 33,668 ex-service students across England, Scotland and Wales.

The memories of those who had not returned from war were all around students in the early 1920s, as universities and colleges published commemorative albums and erected war memorials to the fallen.

Ex-officer’s application for funding (Albert Edward Viccars), 1919 [UCL Institute of Education Archives, IE/STU/C/1].

UCL South Cloisters in the early 1920s, showing memorials to the fallen and the Roll of Honour guarded by a Beadle [UCL Library Services, Special Collections].
Men and women with direct experience of conflict – as frontline soldiers, as members of the field ambulance or nurses – were a distinguishable cohort at universities and colleges between 1918 and 1923. Due to the disruption of the war, the majority of these students were older than average and some were married with children. Educationalists welcomed the positive impact of these older students on undergraduate life:

“*The presence of older men who had been through the difficulties, anxieties and responsibilities of war was having a marked and very wholesome effect on the younger generation of students by adding an intensity and seriousness.*”


In particular, ex-service students were instrumental in the revival and establishment of student societies such as sports teams, debating societies and students’ unions. In many universities, this period also saw greater collaboration between male and female students on extra-curricular activities.
**Over 2,600 members** and former members of UCL served during the war, of whom 301 died on service. Women students made a contribution to the war effort through UCL’s Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), which maintained an Ambulance Squad in St Pancras and sent students to nurse in military hospitals in France. Others worked on the land during vacations as part of a 600-strong group from the University of London. After the war, hundreds of ex-service students enrolled or re-enrolled at UCL. Some of them took a four-year course that included a year of teacher training at the London Day Training College (LDTC, now UCL Institute of Education). These students played an active role in college life through a new Ex-Service Students’ Association and other societies.

Student life was revived through sports, elaborate Foundation Week celebrations, regular dances and fundraising rags in aid of the Universities Committee of the Imperial War Relief Fund. In 1919, an Inter-Union Standing Committee was set up to coordinate many activities previously carried out by the separate men’s and women’s unions.

The revitalised student societies assumed a more serious outlook than before the war and international affairs were of particular interest. The prevention of another conflict was an important concern:

“*The matter rests with the present generation, and it is for us to decide. Are we going to be break away from the past and start afresh, or are we to remain blind to the lessons of war? ... It is a new spirit we want, and it should spring from us – the youth of the nations.*”


In early 1920, the University of London Students’ Representative Council organised a mass meeting of 2,000 students, who heard a talk on the League of Nations by one of its architects, Lord Robert Cecil. A UCL branch of the League of Nations Union was formed soon after.

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*Charles W. Judd, Londinium, 1923 [UCL Institute of Education Archives, IE/PUB/12/3/18].*
Ex-service students took a lead in founding the University of London Union Society, which was set up in 1921 to foster inter-collegiate cooperation. London students were also at the forefront of the movement to set up the National Union of Students (NUS). Its first president Ivison Macadam was a King’s College London student. One of the first NUS secretaries was Charles Judd, an ex-service student who attended both UCL and the LDTC, where he was union president in 1922–23. His student record noted his leading role in student activism:

“As Secretary of the National Union of Students. [Judd] has not only displayed quite remarkable energy and tact, but has done work of international importance in bringing together in brotherly association University students all over Europe.”

Charles Judd’s student record card [Institute of Education Archives, IE/1/STU].

Judd was to dedicate his life to the cause of promoting international understanding in his later work for the League of Nations Union, the Council for Education in World Citizenship and the United Nations Association.

Charles W. Judd, Student Record Card, 1923, [UCL Institute of Education Archives, IE/STU/M].
The First World War dramatically affected Durham University, which at the time included Armstrong College and the College of Medicine in Newcastle upon Tyne. 2,683 Durham students and graduates served during the war, 311 of whom died.

As well as undertaking war-related work, female students sustained some of the college societies and student journals during the war. At the end of the war, ex-service students were instrumental in revitalising societies, sports teams and representative bodies, including the Union Society and the Student Representative Councils.

The case of James Lawrence Cecil Horstead illustrates the role of ex-service students in post-war university life at Durham.

Initially awarded a Maths scholarship in 1916, he postponed his studies until after the war. Serving in the Royal Garrison Artillery, he fought at Passchendaele in 1917.

In 1919, Horstead arrived at University College, Durham where he threw himself into college life. He was a member of the Cricket, Rugby and Rowing teams and elected President of the Union Society. He was also active in the Student Christian Movement and carried out missionary work in Gateshead and Stockton.
Horstead was ordained in 1924 and became Principal of Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, which was affiliated to Durham University, before serving as Archbishop of West Africa. Before moving to Africa, Horstead played a significant role in representing Durham students, and this was noted by student paper *The Sphinx*:

“[H]is most important contribution to ‘Varsity life has been his work on student representative bodies, and there is no form of undergraduate activity in which he is not interested, and few in which the duties of office have not taken up his time and thought.”

“Man of Mark”, *The Sphinx*, vol. 8, no. 7 (March 1922), p. 11.

Influenced by their wartime experiences, many ex-service students also helped to establish new societies that emphasised international co-operation, including a branch of the League of Nations Union at Armstrong College. The latter student society provided:

“a real link between College and the great world outside, into which we have to go at the end of our time here. In the L.N.U. we learn what is being done to establish a sense of internationalism in a world which tottering towards barbarism under the stress of militant nationalism.”


In 1924, the new Students’ Union building was opened as the centre of student life on the Newcastle campus. On the opening of the Union building, the NUS reported that there was a vibrant and cohesive student community at Armstrong. Students from the North East of England were also keen to forge national and international connections. For instance, the Durham Student Representative Council recommended that all college councils join the newly founded NUS.

Drawing of the Newcastle Union Building in *The University* (Winter 1925), p. 4.
British women contributed to the war effort in a variety of ways – for instance through VAD work, agricultural labour, fire watching and air raid precautions, nursing and staffing canteens. After the end of hostilities, however, the Board of Education concluded that the service of women could not be compared with men’s military service.

As a result, women were omitted from the post-war Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Service Students, which would have provided them with grants. Likewise, the Representation of the People Act of 1918 ensured the right to vote for all servicemen, even if they were under 21 years old, but many women, including all those under 30, were excluded from the parliamentary franchise until 1928.

During the war, women had outnumbered men in the lecture theatres. In this period, female undergraduates kept student societies and magazines running. The subsequent male influx shifted the balance yet again. As Newcastle-based student magazine *The Northerner* noted, this had implications for university life:

“The only society not patronized by the men is the Women’s Debating Society … At all the other societies, instead of two or three bored-looking men among a crowd of women, we have at least an equal number of men. The Northerner, too, is passing into the hands of the men, who have far outnumbered the woman [sic] as contributors to this number.”


In 1920, women made up a quarter of the total student population at English universities. This varied across the country. For example, 23 per cent of students at Armstrong College, Newcastle were women, while around a third of students at UCL were female.

Female students contributed to the reconstruction of university life – for instance by being active in sports teams, student politics and debating societies – and they did so in a way that was out of proportion to their numbers.

At Armstrong College, women participated in the Toynbee Society, which supported relief efforts for students in Central and Eastern Europe. At UCL, a new committee co-ordinated the activities of the (male) Union Society and the Women’s Union Society.

Inter-Union Standing Committee, *University College London Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 6 (December 1922), p. 191.
Violet E. L. Anderson, a prize-winning Botany student at UCL, served as President of the Women’s Union Society in 1921–1922, and was a key player on the new Inter-Union Standing Committee. A strong advocate of international student co-operation, she travelled to Prague to attend the 1921 conference of the International Confederation of Students. She was optimistic about the prospect for further cooperation:

“Where so many young people can meet on the best terms and in an atmosphere of good fellowship, it augurs well for the future of the nations.”


Women students were also active in the newly founded NUS. A teenager during the war, May Hermes graduated from Bedford College, London in 1921 with a degree in German and French before training to be a teacher.

Hermes was an important figure in the early NUS. As Correspondence Secretary (1922–23) and Secretary of the Travel Department (1923–26), she organised the exchanges and educational tours that formed a key aspect of the organisation’s work for international student friendship. Throughout her life, Hermes remained committed to international co-operation, presenting evidence to the League of Nations’ International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation in 1931. In 1941, she received an MBE for her work in the Royal Empire Society.
**British activists and international student organisations**

The Great War ruptured many international movements and organisations. In the aftermath of the conflict, university students made distinct contributions to the post-war revival of internationalism. Between 1919 and 1926, a plethora of international student organisations was founded. Some of these bodies were organised along the lines of religion, ethnicity or gender, while others were dedicated to particular activities or causes.

European Student Relief was one such organisation. Launched in 1920, this humanitarian venture was connected to the World’s Student Christian Federation (WSCF), the oldest existing international student organisation at the time. The original impetus for European Student Relief derived from the desperate conditions of Austrian students, which WSCF members had witnessed during a visit to Vienna. An initial appeal raised 175,000 Swiss francs within a short period. European Student Relief soon spread further: in the early 1920s, it set up branches in over 40 countries and provided assistance to students in 19 countries, particularly Central and Eastern Europe.

Activists portrayed this initiative as a contribution to post-conflict dialogue and reconciliation:

“Like a stone dropped in the ocean of the student world, the thought of European Student Relief, the thought of comradeship and love, carried ripples to the farthest shore and set in motion ties of healing works which brought heath and renewal to the world’s academic life.”

Pamphlet on International Student Service of the World’s Student Christian Federation (Geneva, November 1926).

Support for refugee students as well as the promotion of self-help became key features of European Student Relief. Its work reached into the life of British universities. For instance in November 1923, a contributor to Armstrong College paper *The Northerner* reported on the destitute conditions of students in Germany as well as self-help schemes that had been created to address the situation. He asked each college member to donate one shilling in support of this cause:

“These self-help schemes need capital to keep them going and the E.S.R. [European Student Relief] is trying to provide it. I hope that Armstrong College will do its share to help these students more unfortunate than ourselves.”

British activist Ruth Rouse was an important figure in European Student Relief. While studying in London and Cambridge during the 1880s, she had joined the Student Christian Movement. As “travelling secretary”, she visited a range of countries before 1914. After the war, she was one of the WSCF members whose experiences in Vienna had inspired the organisation to launch its aid efforts. Rouse also initiated a separate humanitarian venture, the creation of a universities committee as part of the Imperial War Relief Fund.

The International Confederation of Students (Confédération Internationale des Étudiants, CIE) was another product of post-war internationalism. Having been founded in Strasbourg in 1919, it served as forum for the representatives of national unions of students.


Front cover of Ruth Rouse’s history of European Student Relief (ESR), Rebuilding Europe: The Student Chapter in Post-War Reconstruction (London: SCM Press, 1925).
During the 1920s and 1930s, the CIE promoted student interests at the League of Nations, organised sporting events and supported study exchange. British student leaders had attended the CIE’s founding meeting. Indeed, the creation of the NUS in 1922 was partly aimed to ensure full participation in this international organisation.

“The aims of the [National] Union [of Students] are to unite more closely the students of this country, and to establish friendly contact and foster practical co-operation with the students of other lands.”

“History and Aims of the National Union”, in Paul Reed, Conference Handbook (London: NUS, 1923), p. 8

Alongside the Student Representative Councils of Scotland, the NUS was a full member of the CIE. In September 1923, British students hosted the confederation’s fifth general council. The conference took place in Oxford and London, with prominent political backing.

During the 1920s, British student leaders participated in the CIE’s conferences and its intense debates regarding the potential admission of German students. Compared to French, Belgian and Polish student leaders, NUS representatives adopted a more conciliatory stance. Yet the nationalism of the principal German student organisation meant that they never joined the CIE, highlighting the limitations of interwar internationalism. Instead, the CIE’s focus became the promotion of student travel – an area of activity in which former NUS president Ivison Macadam played a prominent role.
Academics maintained many links to the growing field of adult education, which sought to extend access to academic provision for people who did not have the privilege of a university education. One key organisation in this field was the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA), which had been founded in 1903. Consolidating pre-existing educational opportunities such as university “extension classes”, the WEA also pioneered co-operative learning via study circles.

The First World War seriously impacted on the WEA. In its Northern District, inspirational tutor Philip Brown was killed in action, while District Secretary Jack Trevena was imprisoned as a conscientious objector. His wife Hilda took on the role in his stead, becoming the first female to hold this post. Meanwhile, WEA tutor Dr Ethel Williams was among the campaigners whose work led to the creation of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

Regular WEA activities continued throughout the war, with a new focus on the origins of conflict, leading to the 1915 publication of study guides such as War and the Workers. The association’s newsletter, The Highway, highlighted the hunger for learning even in the theatres of war:

“For the past year or so there has been a great deal of solid educational work in the B.E.F. [British Expeditionary Force]. Not ‘up the line’ – although I know a man who managed to read Matthew Arnold there – but at the Bases, where we are able to avail ourselves of the facilities offered by public bodies such as the YMCA.”


Emerging from WEA records is a conviction that education would be a vital and urgent priority in preventing a recurrence of conflict. The organisation lobbied national government throughout and after the War, advising on the 1918 Fisher Education Act and the Ministry of Reconstruction’s 1919 report on adult education.
The report indicates the concerns that the WEA engaged with:

“As time passed the attention of thoughtful people was turned to the problems of the future… The [Workers’ Educational] Association has lately organised classes and study circles, lectures and conferences for the consideration of ‘the problems of reconstruction’, ‘industry after the war’, ‘women in industry after the war’, ‘the League of Nations’ and similar topics.”


The post-war growth of the WEA was impressive, with an almost six-fold increase in student numbers (from 3,343 to 22,748) between 1914 and 1923. The proportion of ex-service students is unclear, but collaboratively written class notes from a 1925–1926 Psychology class held in the Durham pit village of Annfield Plain show that students drew on their experiences in the armed forces when debating leadership and its potential abuse.

Moreover, a photograph of the 1921 Durham Summer School suggests an increased proportion of female participants and the presence of children. Crèche facilities had been trialled in Birkenhead settlement during the war, and this may have represented a post-war continuation of this trend.

A commitment to international dialogue and exchange featured prominently on the WEA’s agenda after the war. For instance, the class notes from Annfield Plain also featured discussions about internationalism. Internationalist ideals also led to continued expansion into Australia, South Africa, Canada and the USA. Moreover, in April 1923, The Highway announced a summer school to be held that August in “Frankfort-on-Maine”, led by British and German tutors to explore European developments since the turn of the century.

In July 1920, The Highway published an article by Oxford-based classicist Gilbert Murray, who later became a key figure in the League of Nations’ work for intellectual cooperation. Murray bemoaned the League’s paralysis in tackling aggression and armaments production. He called for “an organised mass of public opinion in favour of the League, so strong that it cannot be disregarded”. He used the WEA publication to encourage readers to join the League of Nations Union, the mass membership organisation that promoted the principles of the League in Britain:

“If the Union has a million members governments will not dare to flout the League as they are flouting it in the matter of Poland. If it stays below fifty thousand let us prepare for the results which are likely to flow from such national indifference – aggression, secret plotting, conscription and the ‘Next War’.”

Gilbert Murray, “What is Wrong with the League?”, The Highway, vol. 12, no. 10 (July 1920), p. 177.

It is yet to be established how far WEA students and members followed this call to action in the cause of peace; however, in the years that followed, the outcome of Murray’s gloomy prediction was to become all too evident.
1921 WEA Northern District Summer School, Durham [image courtesy of Tyne & Wear Archives, TWA E.WEA1/16/29].
Further reading


Burkett, Jodi (ed.), *Students in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018)


