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“Scholars in Great Need:” Responses to Refugee Staff and Students at the University of Birmingham 1933–1945

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which the University of Birmingham assisted refugee academics and students from Nazi Germany and other Nazi occupied countries across Europe between 1933 and 1945. It draws on the university’s rich but underused archives to explore institutional policy and to assess the influence of individual staff members in driving it. As a case study it examines and evaluates the role played by a British provincial university in supporting displaced academics before the Second World War and refugee students during the war. Analysis of the primary source material reveals the importance of personal connections and the agency of individual university staff in helping refugees. This study aids our understanding of the roles played by British universities in helping displaced scholars and identifies areas for further research.

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Introduction

The recent legislation in Germany, and the action of the central and municipal governments have made things even more difficult and harsh than they were six months ago. The number of scholars, artists, and scientists in great need is very distressing, and, while in England we are trying to do what we can, we realise it is not possible for us to cover all the cases that deserve help and consideration (27 November 1935).¹

These remarks by Charles Grant Robertson, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, to Dr Albert Mayer-Reinach, the German musicologist, music educator and conductor, encapsulate the issue facing university leaders in Britain after the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in January 1933. Scholars were prevented from working in academic institutions in Germany on the grounds of their Jewish descent or political or religious beliefs, and the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in September 1935 had an even more profound economic and social impact on the German Jewish population.² Increasing numbers of academic refugees hoped to find positions in British universities and appealed to British academics for assistance.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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As Grant Robertson's letter suggests, though in principle universities and their staff may have sympathised with the situation of scholars hoping to find refuge in Britain, the extent and kind of support which individual higher education institutions were prepared to offer to refugees was a more complex matter and one which has been underexplored.³ With the exception of Bill Williams's work on refugee scholars at Manchester, we know very little about the policy of provincial universities towards displaced academics and refugee students.⁴ This article aims to further our understanding through a case study of the University of Birmingham. It considers the ways in which the institution assisted displaced academics and refugee students between 1933 and 1945. It will examine the strength of the university's response and assess whether it was driven by institutional policy or by the influence of individual members of university staff who were motivated to help, either because they had personal connections with refugee scholars or because they were part of existing humanitarian networks within the city.

Methodologically this article draws on a reading of previously uncatalogued records from the University of Birmingham's institutional archive, which is a rich, but so far underused, resource. Large parts of it remain uncatalogued, forming a barrier to research on less well-known areas of the institution's history. However, recent archival work to catalogue the correspondence of the Vice-Chancellors during the 1930s and 1940s, Charles Grant Robertson and Raymond Priestley, and the correspondence of the Senior Tutor to Women Students, Jane Johnston Milne, has revealed evidence of the university response to displaced academics and refugee students which can now be assessed.⁵ A reading of other catalogued and uncatalogued archival sources in the institutional archive informs interpretation of the main sequences of correspondence by providing additional insight into institutional and individual actions and attitudes.⁶

These actions and attitudes are examined separately by type of refugee and by date, partly because of the survival of archival sources and partly because there was a change in personnel in 1938 when Charles Grant Robertson retired and Raymond Priestley was appointed as his successor. Grant Robertson's correspondence discusses help offered to displaced academics in the 1930s but does not mention refugee students. In contrast, the correspondence of both Priestley and Milne contains evidence of help offered to refugee students during the 1939–1945 period with only occasional references to displaced academics. This difference may be explained simply by the fact that it was very difficult to escape Nazi-occupied Europe by 1939 or to secure an entry visa to a safe country before that date. Most of the students who were helped by Birmingham were already living in Britain by 1939 and had left as children or teenagers before the start of the Second World War according to evidence in the university archive.⁷

The article will therefore begin with a brief overview of the existing scholarship on the general response of the higher education sector to the displacement of scholars from 1933 before shifting emphasis to a detailed case study of the University of Birmingham, with separate sections exploring the help offered to academic refugees in the 1930s and to refugee students between 1939 and 1945. It will argue that actions of individuals may have been more important than institutional policy in influencing the university's response to the refugee crisis and the level of support that refugees were offered.

Albert Mayer-Reinach, whose correspondence is cited above, probably contacted Charles Grant Robertson at Birmingham through the Academic Assistance Council (AAC), renamed the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) in

1936.⁸ The majority of those helped by the organisation were male scientists and academics from Nazi Germany and other Nazi-occupied or fascist-led countries in Europe which disenfranchised citizens because of their race, religion, or political beliefs. In the summer of 1939 2,226 refugee scholars had registered with the SPSL, with 2,541 by 1945.⁹ Many of them were dependent on individual universities and their staff for the offer of a job, hospitality, or other assistance. The majority of these refugees were Jewish.

Recent scholarship has focused primarily on the work of the SPSL, though attention has also been paid to the role of the British Federation of University Women (BFUW), one of the organisations which worked closely with the SPSL to offer help to displaced women scholars.¹⁰ Some of this work also considers the collective response of universities to appeals by these bodies. Scholars have focused in more depth on interactions between the university community and refugee academics and students, particularly in the arts and humanities, at the University of Oxford. As much of this work acknowledges, however, Oxford's decentralised structure allowed some of the wealthier colleges in particular to act with relative autonomy in providing funding for refugees.¹¹ In addition, some Oxford academics, who included prominent figures in the SPSL's committee, had a professional or personal interest in helping refugees and were able to use their influence to create posts or provide hospitality. These factors probably explain why Oxford was attracting more refugee academics than any other British university by 1938.¹² Work on women refugee academics at the University of London suggests that comparatively more displaced scholars were attracted to the university and its affiliated colleges than to institutions in other towns and cities, possibly for similar reasons, though a study of the response of Imperial College, London, suggests that at least some colleges offered only limited help to refugees.¹³ The emphasis of this study now turns to a provincial institution.

Displaced Academics at Birmingham, 1930s

The earliest evidence of Birmingham's involvement in assisting German Jewish refugees appears in copies of letters sent by Grant Robertson in spring 1933 which mention the formation of the SPSL, the need for Vice-Chancellors of universities to agree to a common plan for the admission of German medical students with Jewish backgrounds, and for broader acceptance of German Jewish students and academics to British universities.¹⁴ However, University Senate discussed the admission of refugee staff and students in June 1933 and the minutes make clear that there would be no funds from the institution for any posts or places.¹⁵ By November 1933, there were German refugee doctors working at Birmingham in the Faculty of Medicine, and [Siegfried E.] Michael, a German chemist, had been given a research scholarship.¹⁶ Letters also mention that the Vice-Chancellors Committee [Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals] was discussing fund-raising for the maintenance of refugee German students.¹⁷ It is not clear from the Birmingham records how Michael's scholarship was funded, but it does not appear to have been via the SPSL.¹⁸

The SPSL did fund Otto Lowenstein, a zoologist who was able to leave Germany in 1933 on its recommendation and, crucially, through the influence of Harold Munro Fox, Professor of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy, find a position at Birmingham. Letters between Munro Fox and Grant Robertson reveal elements of this process, and the precarity of positions for refugee scholars. Munro Fox wrote to Grant Robertson on 28 June 1933 to ask whether he could employ an "exiled German zoologist" in his

department. He explained that he would welcome such a research worker “both because I feel a deep sympathy for those who have been expelled from German universities and because to receive one of the refugees here would materially strengthen the research side of my personnel.”¹⁹ Subsequent letters assured Grant Robertson that he would make sure that any zoologist proposed by the SPSL had sufficient research qualifications, and that he would ask to see a list of published work before making an appointment. He also addressed Grant Robertson’s queries about the duration of such a position.²⁰ Correspondence from Munro Fox in the papers of Otto Lowenstein suggest that he was driven by a mixture of his own professional and personal concerns regardless of any institutional policy in place in 1933. In testimonials for Lowenstein he explained that he offered a place in his laboratory to a displaced zoologist as soon as the SPSL had compiled a list, and he repeatedly made the case for the extension of Lowenstein’s grant until 1936 when he was awarded a two-year grant by the local Birmingham Academic Assistance Committee which had by then been set up. It helped that Lowenstein, as well as having an excellent research record, had an “attractive personality” which “immediately made him a favourite with staff and students.”²¹

As at Oxford, academics taking action to secure posts and funding for displaced scholars at Birmingham were in the minority. It is difficult to tell from the correspondence how far Charles Grant Robertson himself was prepared to go in helping refugees. He disclosed his unease about the growing number of authoritarian regimes in mainland Europe in articles published in 1936–1937, and in university correspondence.²² He had also invited A. V. Hill, one of the founders of the SPSL and a supporter of the broadening of its agenda to make academic freedom a core value, to give the T. H. Huxley memorial lecture in Birmingham in November 1933.²³ However, though Grant Robertson may have supported the aims of the SPSL, it is uncertain whether Birmingham had a coherent policy on finding places for displaced academics. Munro Fox hints that there was an institutional position towards refugees in 1933 in a letter to Lowenstein which states that the university “while welcoming Germans in your position, make it a condition to their working here that no University posts or grants can be given later on to any of them.”²⁴ In fact, there does not seem to have been a uniform response or, if there was one, it evolved over time and was patchily applied. The likely reasons for this will now be examined.

Though some staff were sympathetic to their colleagues in Nazi Germany and other countries under threat of Nazi occupation, the selection of refugee scholars for positions was driven primarily by their research reputation and potential. This is spelt out in Munro Fox’s correspondence about Lowenstein, and these concerns were not unique to Birmingham. Correspondence of the Vice-Chancellor at the University of Manchester reveals similar priorities, suggesting that all British universities wanted to appoint those likely to enhance their status and to strengthen areas of academic life for which they already had a reputation.²⁵

Economic factors were also involved. The financial crisis of the early 1930s and resulting unemployment made it difficult for both the SPSL and individual institutions and local associations to raise money to fund positions for displaced academics, and the arrival of refugee scholars and professionals contributed to unease amongst the academic community and the wider public about competition with British citizens for jobs. Both Paul Weindling and David Zimmerman have highlighted the impact of lobbying by professional organisations on government policy which resulted in qualified refugees

being prevented from being able to practise in Britain.²⁶ Public opinion was monitored, and the hostility expressed in newspapers like the *Daily Express* which published anti-refugee propaganda in the autumn of 1933 claiming that German scholars were “stealing” jobs from British workers, reinforced the government’s position that asylum should only be given to refugees whose employment would not prevent a British citizen from being appointed. This meant that the SPSL found it harder to give permanent placements to younger, less well established academic refugees.²⁷

Grant Robertson’s letters to the General Secretary of the SPSL convey similar concerns. He explained on 17 June 1935 that a public appeal for displaced academics was unlikely to succeed in Birmingham because local people were more concerned with fund-raising for unemployed people or for voluntary youth organisations and that most Birmingham citizens were “not particularly impressed with the renewed claims of refugee German Jews, or political rebels.”²⁸ Other letters refer to concerns of members of the Association of University Teachers that refugees might be offered posts that would otherwise have been given to existing academic staff, and that grants made to refugees might be more than the income of existing academics. The SPSL archive also documents opposition among some members of junior academic staff at Birmingham to the support of “German scientists” which were raised at a public meeting later that year.²⁹ Grant Robertson reassured staff that most posts were temporary fellowships, that the aim of the SPSL scheme was to avoid competition with non-refugee staff, and that the grants did not come from university funds.³⁰

Grant Robertson’s description of displaced academics as “German Jews or political rebels” reflects both the latent antisemitism that was widespread in Britain in the 1930s and the desire of the SPSL and university officials not to politicise fund raising campaigns for refugee scholars, or to draw attention to the fact that the majority of them were Jewish. The organisation’s early policy was to avoid political controversy and public criticism of the Nazi regime which might affect its ability to help those hoping to leave Germany. The implementation of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 prompted a change of direction including the name change to the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, and a more assertive policy emphasising the importance of academic freedom.³¹ Beveridge had reluctantly agreed with the SPSL’s early decision not to draw attention to the “Jewishness” of the majority of academic refugees both to avoid a public antisemitic backlash and to win the broad support needed for its scheme.³² But, in October 1935, in a speech given in Birmingham, he described the Nuremberg Laws as unleashing relentless persecution, demonstrating the SPSL’s shift to more open criticism of the Nazi regime.³³ This event was organised by academic staff at Birmingham and was followed by a public meeting at the University to inaugurate the local assistance fund, at which A. V. Hill spoke.³⁴ Tony Kushner has analysed British public opinion across the political spectrum on the Nazi persecution of Jews in the 1930s, and argues that the superficial view of British refugee policy as compassionate and generous is not accurate. The dominant view in society was that Jewish people, even those who were British born, were still foreign, and should assimilate completely into British society. If antisemitism persisted then this was the Jewish person’s own fault, and this view influenced Britain’s selective immigration policy which was determined by refusing entry to the “wrong type” of refugee, or those who could not assimilate well enough.³⁵ Research on attitudes within the academic community at Oxford suggests that refugees experienced xenophobia and

anti-Jewish and anti-German prejudice and that this residual antisemitism was shared in large sections of British society. However, this was set against the university's tradition of liberality and open-mindedness, especially among those academics who had personal and professional contacts with colleagues in Germany.³⁶

It is likely that these views were also prevalent at Birmingham, even though Grant Robertson's correspondence does not directly comment on attitudes to Jewish refugees within the university. It is difficult to assess how the university responded to the national SPSL campaign or to reconstruct how local initiatives operated because little evidence exists in the university archive. The SPSL archive includes some correspondence with staff on the Birmingham Academic Assistance Committee from 1935 onwards, which shows that it struggled to meet its fundraising targets.³⁷ By contrast, records at Manchester show that the Vice-Chancellor's Fund was used to provide financial aid to refugees but emphasised supporting those who had been displaced for political reasons rather than the fact that most were Jewish.³⁸ Manchester also set up a local scheme to provide funding for Honorary Research Fellowships from 1933.³⁹ According to the records, at least 34 scholars went to Manchester between 1933 and 1939, though financial policy was to prioritise spending of funds raised on improving the institution's buildings and supporting local hospitals and industry. Birmingham had a very similar policy during the 1930s, with most fund-raising directed towards building a new hospital and university medical school and improving science laboratories and much less attention on providing funded positions for refugee academics.⁴⁰

Despite the relative absence of records directly documenting Birmingham's actions, there are references in Grant Robertson's correspondence and in other papers to the local scheme at Birmingham, the Birmingham Academic Assistance Committee. This is the body which awarded a two-year grant to Otto Lowenstein in 1936 funded by public subscriptions. One printed report of the Birmingham Academic Assistance Committee survives among Grant Robertson's papers. It states that, by late 1937, Birmingham had offered temporary positions not only to Otto Lowenstein but also to Helena von Reybekiel, David Baumgardt and Egon Orowan.⁴¹ According to the fourth SPSL annual report of November 1938, eight scholars had been placed at Birmingham compared with nine at Manchester. These two institutions were fifth and sixth in the list of universities that had taken displaced academics but were far behind Oxford, with 37, and Cambridge, with 25. The third and fourth institutions on the list, University College London and the London School of Economics, had taken 12 and 11.⁴²

As with Otto Lowenstein, personal connections and existing academic networks had probably driven Birmingham's decision and ability to find positions for the other displaced scholars. The evidence is strong in the case of both Reybekiel and Baumgardt. Helena von Reybekiel had arrived in Birmingham in June 1934 with assistance from the SPSL and the Polish Legation, but also with the support of Sergey Aleksandrovich Konovalov, Professor of Russian at the university.⁴³ Konovalov was contacted by the SPSL in February 1934 about Reybekiel's dismissal from her post in Hamburg where she had been teaching Russian and some Polish. Konovalov clearly used his influence to find her a post at Birmingham but it seems to have been an uncertain one, and letters to him in 1935 from both the University Librarian and Grant Robertson made clear that she had no official university appointment.⁴⁴ She was eventually appointed lecturer in Slavic Studies at Birmingham and, although it is not mentioned in the

university archives, she was also a visiting lecturer in Polish at the Birmingham & Midland Institute. This post was funded by donations from the Birmingham branch of the British Federation of University Women (BFUW).⁴⁵

Baumgardt was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Berlin and left Germany in 1935 to go on a lecture tour in Spain while at the same time making efforts to find a post in Britain. His correspondence suggests that the initial offer of help came via contacts that Rosa Hobhouse, the social activist and Quaker, had with the Birmingham Quaker community. She got Woodbrooke College to make an offer of hospitality and got in touch with Leonard Russell, Professor of Philosophy at Birmingham, to discuss Baumgardt's case. There is evidence that Russell was personally sympathetic to Baumgardt's situation and tried both to secure him an official invitation to Birmingham and to intervene in existing local efforts to raise money by subscription to fund a research fellowship. The SPSL eventually provided funds for a one-year research fellowship which was renewed through the local Birmingham Academic Assistance Committee. Baumgardt left for a post in the United States in 1939, again thanks to help from Quaker networks.⁴⁶ It is not clear whether Baumgardt and Russell already knew one another, but Russell was another British academic who had travelled and studied in Germany before the First World War and retained an interest in discussion between English-speaking philosophers and those of mainland Europe.⁴⁷ Egon Orowan was a Hungarian physicist and metallurgist who had studied in Vienna and Berlin and returned to Hungary in 1933. He went to Birmingham in 1937 following an invitation by Rudolf Peierls, the German Jewish physicist who had left Germany himself before 1933 and worked in the Physics Department at Birmingham from 1937. Orowan worked with Peierls before moving to Cambridge in 1939.⁴⁸

Although the circumstances of Lowenstein, Baumgardt, Reybekiel, and Orowan were different, there are some common factors. Each of them obtained a position at Birmingham, primarily through the personal influence of senior academics at the university. Although the evidence is not explicit for Orowan, Peierls had been recruited by Mark Oliphant, Professor of Physics from 1937 and it is likely that Oliphant was involved in securing a position for Orowan. Another factor was the availability of funds raised by local organisations to supplement initial grants by the SPSL. This financial support from the Birmingham Academic Assistance Committee enabled Lowenstein and Baumgardt to stay at Birmingham beyond their initial fellowships and the Birmingham branch of the BFUW funded a post for Reybekiel to supplement her temporary salary at the university. A final factor, clearly seen in Baumgardt's case and probably also relevant for Reybekiel, is the existence of local networks outside the university which provided separate additional support. Institutional policy does not seem to have been a major feature in decision-making in these cases, though it seems to have played a role in the failure to offer a position to Walter Zehden, a German Jewish scientist who had left Berlin for a post at the Physical Institute of Moscow State University in 1932 and in early 1938 was forced to leave the Soviet Union when his visa expired. Oliphant offered him a post at Birmingham but when he asked for permission to use funds from an endowment for his salary, he was refused on the grounds that the institution had "already done as much as they could for refugees."⁴⁹

Reybekiel is the only woman academic refugee recorded as obtaining a position at Birmingham before 1939. This is not that surprising given that women academics were

less well regarded, and it was more difficult for women refugees to gain positions at institutions primarily concerned with strengthening their research profile. It is likely that these factors also affected their chances of using existing academic networks or personal contacts with colleagues at institutions outside Germany in the same way that men could. There is evidence that the International Federation of University Women (IFUW) transnational membership and conferences provided opportunities for making personal connections, which could later be instrumental in appeals for assistance.⁵⁰ However, the SPSL archive makes it clear that men, especially those with families, were prioritised for help, and often the only way that women academic refugees could obtain work permits for Britain was not to continue their professional career but to work as domestic servants to address the shortage in the labour market.⁵¹

Women are absent from the history of the SPSL written by its founder, William Beveridge, and he did not mention the relationship between the Society and the BFUW though the two organisations worked closely together.⁵² Members of the BFUW met in early 1933 to discuss how to help German members of the IFUW whose lives and careers were immediately affected when the Nazis came to power. After the Anschluss and a new wave of appeals for help from academic women in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, an ad hoc Sub Committee for Refugees was inaugurated.⁵³ This committee helped to fund several women refugee students at Birmingham, working largely through Jane Johnston Milne, Senior Tutor to Women Students, as discussed below. As well as Reybekiel, the BFUW also helped another academic, Dora Kulka, a Jewish chemist and microbiologist born in Austrian Silesia. Kulka's case is not discussed in the Birmingham University archive but according to the BFUW archive the Sub Committee for Refugees, working with the Quakers and with the assistance of Miss [Emma] Cadbury, met Kulka in Vienna in mid-1938 and arranged a Home Office permit for her with the help of the SPSL. She was able to get to Birmingham before the outbreak of war and obtained laboratory work at the School of Malting and Brewing at the university.⁵⁴

However, the BFUW was not successful in finding an academic post for Cecilia Korn, a Polish-born Jew with a PhD in Romance Languages who had gone to England from Vienna in 1938 and worked in domestic service and then in teaching jobs in schools. Her case was discussed in correspondence of Jane Johnston Milne.⁵⁵ It was difficult to find posts at universities for displaced academics with specialisms that were not taught at those institutions. It also seems likely that Milne was not powerful enough at Birmingham to use her influence to find Korn a position, despite being a lecturer in the French Department as well as being Senior Tutor to Women Students. As we have seen, most academic refugees offered posts at Birmingham were scientists and were supported by male professors. As well as being less numerous, women academic refugees also suffered from gender bias. Personal connections and local networks, some of which might now be invisible or obscure from the surviving records, are likely to have made the difference in some cases between whether a refugee was accepted at a university or not.

Links between the BFUW and Quaker organisations are evident in the cases of Dora Kulka and David Baumgardt, and there were non-academic networks active in Birmingham which were helping refugees in the 1930s. Though there were not necessarily overt links with the university, there was some overlap. A number of members of the Quaker Cadbury family were members of University committees, for example, and there is evidence that university staff or their families were active in organisations like the

Birmingham Council for Peace and Liberty, which helped refugees during the Spanish Civil War.⁵⁶ The university was still partly based in Birmingham city centre in the 1930s and 1940s, with the Faculty of Arts in the Victorian buildings of the institution's predecessor, Mason Science College, in Edmund Street, and the Faculties of Science and Commerce in the new buildings on a landscaped campus in the suburb of Edgbaston. Staff and students based at Edmund Street would know of non-academic refugee organisations in the city centre, while those at Edgbaston were not far from the Quaker Woodbrooke College at Selly Oak.⁵⁷

By the outbreak of war in 1939 there were several academic refugees at the University of Birmingham. As Tony Kushner has argued, hostility towards refugees was evident across wide sections of British society and government, and this increased as fear of a German invasion of Britain grew in the spring of 1940. Newspaper coverage of “enemy aliens,” many of whom were also Jewish, incited further antagonism. Invasion panic was evident at Oxford and prompted the university initially to support mass internment, though it quickly changed its response and worked with the Home Office to convene a committee to consider cases of interned academics who had been living in Oxford. The SPSL and Society of Friends also collected information about academic internees and petitioned for their release.⁵⁸ One of the limitations of the archival sources is that we know very little about the lived experience of academic refugees who went to Birmingham. Very few of the displaced academics or refugee students discussed in this article were interned, though it is likely that they had to cope with anti-German and anti-Jewish feelings expressed by the local population, and even by some of their colleagues at the university.⁵⁹ Once the Second World War had begun, the work of the SPSL, BFUW and other organisations assisting academic refugees was redirected to providing financial support for study and re-training. Many of those helped during the 1939–1945 period were refugee students, and this group are the focus of the second section of this article.

Refugee Students at Birmingham, 1939–1945

There is some evidence for the presence of refugee students at Birmingham before 1939. Correspondence files of Jane Johnston Milne discuss the cases of two refugee students, Beate Ruhm von Oppen, who had been at the university since 1936,⁶⁰ and Hildegard Nothmann, who began studying for a Grouped Honours degree in October 1939 but had arrived in the country in 1938 on a domestic permit.⁶¹ Karl Heinz Spalt, a political refugee, also studied at Birmingham between 1934 and 1937. He was given a free place at the university and lived at Woodbrooke College in his third year.⁶²

The International Student Service (ISS) acted like the SPSL during the 1930s in providing information to potential refugees about entry to universities outside Germany and negotiating on behalf of individual students without financial resources. Student newspapers and magazines at Birmingham regularly carried pieces about ISS fund-raising for student scholarships for German refugees, which had broadened to include Chinese, Austrian and Sudeten students by late 1938. A report published in *Guild News* on 1 December included a statement from “Fritz Spitzer, one of our own students” about the persecution of German-speaking students in Czechoslovakia and Hungarian Jewish students, and the following week a report on the ISS Appeal which had raised over £200, mostly from

university staff and the Court of Governors, noted that the student response had been “rather erratic.”⁶³ The university’s corporate response also appears to have been variable. Manchester agreed to take in six refugee students in response to an ISS invitation in 1938 to contribute to a scheme offering free places or scholarships but, according to Manchester’s Vice-Chancellor, Birmingham had done “nothing so far” by spring 1939.⁶⁴ In fact, Birmingham did agree to offer up to six free places to refugee students in February 1939.⁶⁵

Raymond Priestley’s correspondence and articles in *Guild News* also indicate that Birmingham participated in ISS work to help refugee students from Germany and Eastern Europe between 1939 and 1941. Priestley’s papers contain discussion about students recommended for free places and include progress reports, as well as correspondence with ISS representatives. Birmingham also worked with the British Council, which sponsored students at the university.⁶⁶ University staff and students took part in appeals to help Polish refugees in the spring of 1940, organised by Helena von Reybekiel and Jane Johnston Milne, and later that year raised funds for refugee students who had been interned and released and for textbooks, artists’ materials and musical instruments for those still in internment camps.⁶⁷

Birmingham was asked by the British Council to organise a one-year course in “English and English History” for refugee students of “friendly or allied nations” in the summer of 1940, jointly funded by the British Council and the International Committee for War Refugees. Priestley’s annual report to University Council for 1939–1940 gives details about the course and states that the university was “indebted to many friends who have gone out of their way to help, either by taking the students into their homes, or by taking an interest in them in other ways.”⁶⁸ Of 35 students on the course in November 1940, 16 were Belgian, eight were Czech, five Polish, five Spanish and one French.⁶⁹ This file also contains correspondence with the Chief Constable of the City of Birmingham Police concerning the involvement of the refugee students in fire watching duties in November 1940. Priestley’s annual report as Vice-Chancellor and Principal for 1940–1941 refers to the success of the course and mentions that several students had been financed to continue their university studies. His 1942–1943 report includes statistics for the number of refugee students taking the course, which had declined from 36 in 1940, to 30 in 1941, and then to nine in 1942.⁷⁰

Student life for refugees who were designated “enemy aliens” was more difficult. Aside from the threat of internment, there were restrictions on employment and ambivalence about whether Jewish refugees could be trusted with Civil Defence work like fire watching, Home Guard and Warden duties.⁷¹ Refugee students who wanted to serve in British military units also faced barriers, and Priestley was involved in efforts by both Karl Spalt and David Strauss to transfer from the Auxiliary Pioneer Corps in 1941. Both wanted to make what they felt were better uses of their skills, and Spalt commented on his “wasteful employment” as a Pioneer and his wish to take work “in which I could use my brain, whether it be as an officer or not.”⁷² Keith Hancock, Professor of History at Birmingham, was working at the Offices of the War Cabinet, and was contacted by Priestley on their behalf, but was unsuccessful in his intervention.⁷³ Priestley also provided references for another student, Nicholas A. H. Szecsi, for his application to transfer from the Pioneer Corps, and for Air Raid Precautions work in Warwickshire in 1943–1944. Szecsi also applied for a job at Solihull District Council, and Priestley’s references mention

contributions he was making towards his maintenance, either from the Vice-Chancellor's Fund or as a personal donation, while he was being sponsored by the British Council for a BSc in Economics.⁷⁴

Advised by Helena von Reybekiel, Priestley also assisted Polish Jewish students from Łódź – Aron Elia Szulman, studying Medicine, and a student for whom we only have the surname Apt, studying Commerce – who were conscientious objectors to military service and were worried about being called up for the Polish Legion in France in 1939. He also helped to secure financial assistance for students who had lost contact with relatives following the invasion of Poland and, in particular, to get a deferral from military service to allow Szulman to complete his medical training between 1940 and 1942.⁷⁵

Many of the women refugee students at Birmingham also needed financial help. Jane Johnston Milne worked with Priestley to apply for grants from the Vice-Chancellor's Fund and from other university funds to supplement grants available from the ISS, BFUW, British Council, and local refugee associations. Milne's role as Senior Tutor to Women Students included a welfare element and her papers routinely record cases of financial hardship. In refugee student cases, Milne appears to have worked closely with the administrative staff at the ISS and BFUW, particularly Iris M. Harris, ISS Advisory and Relief Secretary, and Erna Hollitscher, secretary of the BFUW Sub-Committee on Refugees. Hollitscher was herself an academic refugee who had worked as an au pair when she first fled to Britain, and her personal experience gave her additional insight. She understood the importance of networks, and regularly attended the Annual Conference of Refugee Workers and worked with members of the refugee committee of the Society of Friends.⁷⁶

Much of the relevant correspondence in Milne's papers concern a younger group of refugees, some of whom had gone to the Midlands as children and attended school there.⁷⁷ By this point, the main focus of the BFUW was in providing financial support for young refugee women in their studies.⁷⁸ BFUW funds helped Marika/Maria Kramer and Theresa Lazar to attend the University of Birmingham, supplemented with grants from the women students' loan fund and, in the case of Lazar, money from the Midland Bureau for Educated Women, a "local refugee committee," the ISS, and the British Council.⁷⁹ The ISS supported Vera Natalia Ladan, a niece of Rudolf Peierls, to study at Birmingham, and towards the end of the war granted a scholarship to Maria Sepesiova, a Czech refugee who was given additional help by the British Council and the BFUW when the Czech government stopped paying her maintenance grant.⁸⁰

These examples show that Milne took an active role in helping refugee students to complete their academic studies and in their wider welfare. Such support could continue for several years, as in the case of Marianne Bauer, an Austrian Jewish refugee who had fled to England in November 1938 and had been working as a domestic servant. On the basis of testimonials from teachers at her schools in Vienna she was offered financial support for her studies in biology by the BFUW, the ISS, and the Birmingham Co-ordinating Committee for Refugees. Erna Hollitscher and the Birmingham Co-ordinating Committee for Refugees lobbied Milne to get the university to provide free tuition for her studies from autumn 1940, with subsidised accommodation at University House, the hall of residence for women students, thanks to an additional grant by the National Union of Students. The BFUW continued to fund her studies until 1942, and

Milne suggested that she would be prepared to support her in future training for either teaching or laboratory work provided she passed her examinations.⁸¹

Another student whom Milne helped over a long period of time was Hildegarde Nothmann, mentioned above. Milne provided testimonials to the Chief Constable before her case was discussed at the “Aliens Tribunal” in October 1939. She was hoping to be able to travel to the United States to continue her studies at Berkeley, California, and Milne provided academic testimonials and wrote to the Warden of International House, Berkeley, in April 1940. By May 1941 she had a US visa but could not travel. In addition, financial support from her family must have stopped. Her father, who had been a judge in Germany, was stuck in occupied Holland while waiting for a US visa, and relatives in the US were not able to provide funding. Nothmann had been doing domestic work in university vacations to support herself but needed help to allow her to complete her studies. Milne wrote to Iris M. Harris of the ISS and Erna Hollitscher of the BFUW, and the organisations co-funded her for the rest of her degree and probably also for her Diploma in Education 1942–1943. The university gave her free tuition and Milne secured an additional maintenance grant via the Vice-Chancellor’s fund to allow her to live at Woodbrooke. Finally, she provided Nothmann with testimonials for teaching jobs in 1943 and supported her naturalisation in 1946.⁸²

Hollitscher and Milne’s concern for the welfare of both Bauer and Nothmann is evident from their correspondence, and this obviously went beyond the transactional responsibilities of their roles. Their correspondence about Bauer expresses their worries about the effect that the news that her fiancé was missing after fighting in France for the Allies would have on her, and Milne made sure that Nothmann was allowed to use a bicycle while living at University House so that she did not have to pay the tram fare from Edgbaston to the city centre to attend classes for her degree course.⁸³

From reading their correspondence it appears that Raymond Priestley and Jane Johnston Milne were the main advocates for refugee students within the University of Birmingham during the Second World War; Priestley because he was Vice-Chancellor and had decision-making powers and funds to administer, and Milne because her role included responsibility for the welfare of women students and because she had access to networks of other academic women. Milne’s association with the BFUW is obvious, and she and Helena von Reybekiel clearly worked together to help Polish refugees. Milne’s effectiveness in helping several refugee students contrasts with her less successful efforts to help displaced academics. It seems that her personal influence within the university and her contacts with academic networks outside the institution put her in a position strong enough to enable refugee students to study and train for professional work but not one powerful enough to secure academic posts for refugee scholars. However, the perception that it was Priestley and Milne driving university policy on refugee students during this period may well be a misleading one, based as it is on their own correspondence. It is possible that examination of other uncatalogued record series, particularly correspondence of the Registrar and the Secretary, might change this assessment.

Conclusion

Archival sources examined to date show that Birmingham helped both refugee academics and students during the period between the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in 1933

and the end of the Second World War in 1945. However, they also suggest that there was not a coherent university level refugee policy. Several factors may have combined to prevent university management forming such a policy, among them the economic situation, anxieties about appointing scholars without proven research reputations and creating competition with British born academics for jobs and cultural antisemitism. Birmingham was clearly less active than Oxford, Cambridge and London if comparing numbers of staff who found refuge at each institution but otherwise there was not much difference between Birmingham and Oxford in the response to the academic refugee crisis, even though Birmingham was a provincial university which was much less wealthy or prestigious. There are also resonances with responses at Manchester, another civic university which, according to the 1938 SPSL report, helped similar numbers of academic refugees before the outbreak of war in 1939. Birmingham, like Manchester, also had a Vice-Chancellor's Fund and a local academic assistance committee which raised and administered funds. At all three institutions the personal influence of individual academic staff and their use of local and national academic and humanitarian networks seems to have been the most important factor determining whether refugees could be helped, and it was individual staff, usually male professors, who seem to have made most effective use of these funds to set up or extend posts for displaced scholars, probably because they were powerful enough within the institution to do so. Individual staff would probably not have been as free to act without the general support of Charles Grant Robertson as Vice-Chancellor, but there is no reason to think that his successor, Raymond Priestley, would have had a different view towards academic refugees.

Comparisons between the experiences of men and women refugees at Birmingham also reveal similarities with responses at other institutions. Fewer women academics than men were helped at Birmingham, as elsewhere, but, through the survival and accessibility of the papers of Jane Johnston Milne, we know that several women refugee students who were at Birmingham during the 1939–1945 period were helped to take a degree or to re-train. It would be useful to explore the extent to which the gender of refugee staff and students affected the assistance offered by individual universities, the different experiences of men and women refugees at other universities, and the different treatment of refugee academics and refugee students. The involvement of academic organisations like the BFUW and the ISS is particularly notable in the cases of the women refugee students that Milne helped, but so is the role played by local organisations like the Birmingham Co-ordinating Committee for Refugees and Quaker groups linked with Woodbrooke College. Local and non-university organisations also sometimes provided additional funding or accommodation for refugee academics before 1939.

These conclusions are based on analysis of the catalogued sections of the rich institutional archive and reference to associated sets of personal papers of academics, most of which have not been studied before. Other parts of the University of Birmingham archive remain uncatalogued, particularly the correspondence of the Registrar and the Secretary, and these parts of the archive may reveal different evidence about financial help offered to refugees, for example, or may change our understanding of the institution's activities during the 1933–1945 period. It would also be useful to explore the role that local networks played in Birmingham and in other provincial cities in assisting refugees, and the links they had with university staff. Our understanding of the issues discussed in this article would benefit from

comparative study using records of other universities. It is not clear whether there is a gap in the body of research on this topic because relevant records in university archives at other institutions are not catalogued or because they do not survive. A survey to determine this would be a useful starting point.⁸⁴ Further research may also reveal that some universities did not assist refugees at all. Despite the remaining questions, this article has demonstrated how and why Birmingham assisted refugee scholars and contributes to a better understanding of British universities' responses to refugees from National Socialism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Notes

1. Correspondence and papers of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/49/12, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham(CRL).
2. For the context in which Nazi policies against Jewish people developed, see Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*.
3. Albert Michael Mayer-Reinach, 1876–1954, was not offered a position at Birmingham but was able to emigrate to Scandinavia in 1936, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Mayer-Reinach, accessed July 16, 2020.
4. Williams, “Displaced Scholars,” 3.
5. Existing histories of the University of Birmingham only address the subject in brief references. These were primarily institutional histories and provided chronological overviews of the development of the university. A history of the institution published in 1947 contains occasional references to the presence of refugee students at Birmingham during the Second World War: Vincent and Hinton, *The University of Birmingham*. Even the most recent history, published in 2000, only contains a paragraph on the institution's participation in the SPSL scheme. See Ives, Drummond, and Schwarz, *The First Civic University*, 210–11.
6. For example, records of the Guild of Students, UB/GUILD, and papers of displaced academics Otto Lowenstein, US42, and David Baumgardt, DA64, CRL.
7. According to digitised government records held by The National Archives, and available online, it does not appear that any of the students helped by Birmingham had arrived as part of the organised Kindertransport rescue effort.
8. This article refers to the organisation as the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, using the title used in the catalogue for the Archives of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning held at Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS SPSL Files are cited, and direct quotes reproduced by kind permission of Cara (the Council for At-Risk Academics).
9. Brinson, “Science in Exile,” 150; Cohen, “In Defence of Academic Women Refugees,” 166.
10. For the work of the SPSL see Marks, Weindling, and Wintour, eds., *In Defence of Learning*; Crawford, Ulmschneider, and Elsner, eds., *Ark of Civilisation*. For the work of the BFUW see Cohen, “Crossing borders”; Cohen, “In Defence of Academic Women Refugees”; for the work of the BFUW and International Federation of University Women see von Oertzen, *Science, Gender, and Internationalism*.
11. Davies, “Out of the Archives,” 82.
12. Crawford, Ulmschneider, and Elsner eds., *Ark of Civilisation*, 1.
13. See Starr-Egger, “Women Refugee Academics”; Brinson, “Science in Exile.”
14. UB/VC/2/2/27 Letterbook of Charles Grant Robertson, March–September 1933, UB/VC/2/2/27, CRL.
15. June 27, 1933, UB/SEN/1/11, CRL. See also correspondence from Charles Grant Robertson MS SPSL 51/1.
16. UB/VC/2/2/28 Letterbook of Charles Grant Robertson, October 1933–February 1934, CRL. There is correspondence with S. Michael at MS SPSL 369/1-7.

17. UB/VC/2/2/28, Letterbook of Charles Grant Robertson, October 1933–February 1934, CRL. Although the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals discussed responses to the issue of the increasing number of academic refugees from Central Europe, it is not obvious that it ever took collective action. See Vernon, “We Alone are Passive’.”
18. See MS SPSL 127/1 which mentions Michael and other German refugee scholars at Birmingham in 1935 who the SPSL were not assisting financially.
19. Correspondence of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/27/14, CRL.
20. Correspondence of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/27/15, CRL.
21. Correspondence of Harold Munro Fox in Papers of Otto Lowenstein, US42, Carton 4 Box 1, CRL.
22. Grant Robertson, *Religion and the Totalitarian State* which considers dictatorships in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Soviet Russia. He wrote the Foreword to the “Friends of Europe” pamphlet, *The Racial Conception of the World by Adolf Hitler*. See correspondence between Grant Robertson and Keith Hancock, Professor of History at Birmingham, for his views about the Spanish Civil War, Japanese aggression in China, and the likelihood of another European war: miscellaneous correspondence of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/35, CRL.
23. Correspondence of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/9/37-39, CRL. See also Weindling, “From Refugee Assistance to Freedom of Learning,” 68.
24. Correspondence of Harold Munro Fox in Papers of Otto Lowenstein, US42, Carton 4 Box 1, CRL.
25. Williams, “Displaced Scholars,” 3.
26. Weindling, “The Impact of German Medical Scientists,” 99; Zimmerman, “Protests Butter No Parsnips,” 36–8.
27. Zimmerman, “Protests Butter No Parsnips,” 36, 38.
28. Correspondence and papers of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/49/1, CRL.
29. MS SPSL 127/1.
30. Correspondence and papers of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/49, CRL.
31. Zimmerman, “Protests Butter No Parsnips,” 34–6.
32. *Ibid.*, 34–5.
33. Zimmerman, “The Society for the Protection of Science and Learning,” 40.
34. E. R. Dodds correspondence with Walter Adams, October 1935 MS SPSL 127/1; correspondence and papers of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/49/4, CRL.
35. Kushner, “Beyond the Pale?,” 145, 154.
36. Grenville, “Academic Refugees in Wartime Oxford,” 64.
37. MS SPSL 127/1.
38. Williams, “Displaced Scholars,” 4–5.
39. *Ibid.*, 6–8.
40. *Ibid.*, 10–1. For Birmingham’s policy during this period, see printed annual Reports of the Principal to the Council UB/P/2, CRL.
41. Correspondence and papers of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/49, CRL.
42. MS SPSL 1/4.
43. Letterbook of Charles Grant Robertson, February–July 1934, UB/VC/2/2/29, CRL.
44. Smith, *A Novelty: Russian at Birmingham University*, 26–7, quoting from Konovalov’s uncatalogued papers at Oxford, Bodleian Libraries.
45. von Oertzen, *Science, Gender, and Internationalism*, 132.
46. See DA64, Papers of David Baumgart, CRL.
47. Memoir of Leonard James Russell, British Academy, 1972, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1112/57p513.pdf>, accessed March 10, 2021.
48. Egon Orowan, 1902–1989, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egon_Orowan, accessed July 10, 2020.
49. For a discussion of Walter Zehden, see Zimmerman, *Ensnared between Hitler and Stalin*, 116–17, 156, 230. Zimmerman suggests that Zehden’s rejection illustrates the increasingly

- restrictive attitude of British universities by 1938. No references have been found in the University Archive to Oliphant's efforts to find a post for Zehden.
50. von Oertzen, *Science, Gender, and Internationalism*, 137.
 51. Marks introduction to Marks, Weindling, and Wintour, eds., *In Defence of Learning*, 15; Crawford, Ulmschneider, and Elsner, "Oxford's Ark," 12. See also Kushner, "Politics and Race, Gender and Class."
 52. Marks, introduction to Marks, Weindling, and Wintour, eds., *In Defence of Learning*, 12.
 53. Cohen, "In Defence of Academic Women Refugees," 161.
 54. *Ibid.*, 170–1. Dora Kulka taught microbiology in the School of Malting and Brewing into the 1950s. See University of Birmingham Calendars, UB/P/1, CRL.
 55. See Cohen, "Crossing Borders," 180–1. Cecilia Korn's case is discussed in Correspondence of Senior Tutor to Women Students, F-L, UB/STW/1/3/150-154, CRL.
 56. Roberts, *Place, Life Histories and the Politics of Relief*, 324. See also *The Mermaid*, June 1937 for a report by Helen Grant, Assistant Lecturer in Spanish, about her time in Spain in March–April 1937 as an interpreter for a group sent by the Society of Friends to help refugee children: UB/GUILD/F/3/34, 133–135, CRL.
 57. There were other German Jewish refugees living in Birmingham in the 1930s who were helped by Quakers and Jewish organisations. Some refugees were academics but were unable to get university positions. See Roberts, "Place, Life Histories and the Politics of Relief," 147, 151, for information about Eva Rothman, and Josephs, *Survivors*, 117 for information about Hermann Kober, a research mathematician who taught at King Edward's school, Camp Hill. Kober had been offered an Honorary Research Fellowship in November 1938 only if funds could be found from other sources to enable him to stay in the country, see UB/SEN/1/12, CRL. Nikolaus Pevsner, the German Jewish art historian, was also in Birmingham in 1934–1935, on a temporary research fellowship which was partly funded by the SPSL, see Correspondence of Charles Grant Robertson, UB/VC/2/1/17/54-55; Letterbook of Charles Grant Robertson, February–July 1934, UB/VC/2/2/29, CRL.
 58. Kushner, "Beyond the Pale," 156; Grenville, "Academic Refugees in Wartime Oxford," 56; Mytum, "Networks of Association," 98.
 59. See Home Office HO 396 WW2 Internees (Aliens) Index Cards 1939–1947, The National Archives. Of those for whom there are records, only Karl Spalt was interned.
 60. Correspondence of Senior Tutor to Women Students, UB/STW/1/5/37 and UB/STW/1/5/110, CRL. Beate Ruhm von Oppen worked as Art Librarian at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts after graduating. She had studied in the Netherlands, at the International Quaker School, Eerde, before moving to Birmingham: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/sep/20/guardianobituaries.obituaries>, accessed October 15, 2020.
 61. Correspondence of Senior Tutor to Women Students, UB/STW/1/5/7-32, CRL.
 62. Spalt was a member of Deutscher Verein, the student German society. The student newspaper *Guild News*, February 10, 1937, contains a report about a Deutscher Verein event at which Spalt spoke about his experiences of the February uprising in Vienna in February 1934: Deutscher Verein minutes 1933–1938 UA35; *Guild News* 1936–1938, UB/GUILD/F/4/1, CRL. See also obituary in *The Times*, December 13, 2002 for Spalt, who changed his name to Keith Spalding in 1943.
 63. See *Guild News*, December 1 and December 8, UB/GUILD/F/4/2, CRL.
 64. Williams, "Displaced Scholars," 21–2.
 65. University Senate minutes, February 15, 1939. Five refugee students were named in the Senate minutes, October 18, 1939, though not all of them appear to have taken up the free places. Of the students who could be further identified, most were Polish. UB/SEN/1/13, CRL.
 66. Papers of Raymond Priestley, UB/VC/3/2/8, CRL.
 67. *Guild News*, February 22, and April 25, 1940, UB/GUILD/F/4/2; *Guild News*, November 14, 1940, UB/GUILD/F/4/2, CRL.
 68. Report of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal to the Council, 1939–1940, 25–6, UB/P/2, CRL.

69. Papers of Raymond Priestley, UB/VC/3/2/33, CRL.
70. Report of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal to the Council, 1941–1942, 14–15, UB/P/2; Report of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal to the Council 1942–1943, 12, UB/P/2, CRL.
71. Schaffer, “Re-Thinking the History of Blame,” 411–12.
72. Correspondence of Raymond Priestley, S, UB/VC/3/1/16/111, CRL.
73. Correspondence of Raymond Priestley, S, UB/VC/3/1/16/112–121, CRL.
74. Papers of Raymond Priestley, UB/VC/3/2/8, CRL.
75. Papers of Raymond Priestley, UB/VC/3/2/8, CRL. There is a reference in *Guild News*, January 16, to the death of a Polish refugee student, Waclaw Walewski, in an air raid in December 1940. *Guild News* published a tribute to him by another Polish student, one of his closest friends, “Z.S.” which mentions “friends at the Settlement,” possibly Birmingham Settlement, UB/GUILD/F/4/2, CRL.
76. Cohen, “In Defence of Academic Women Refugees,” 169–70.
77. Correspondence of Jane Johnston Milne A-Z sequence UB/STW/1 discusses the cases of Susanne Marx, Suzi Müller and Hedwig/Renate Ostberg who had attended schools in Birmingham, Warwick and Rugby, CRL.
78. von Oertzen, *Science, Gender, and Internationalism*, 142.
79. Correspondence of Senior Tutor to Women Students, UB/STW/1/3, and UB/STW/1/5 for the cases of Marika/Maria Kramer and Theresa Lazar, CRL.
80. Correspondence of Senior Tutor to Women Students, UB/STW/1/4/1–13 and UB/STW/1/6/3–14, CRL.
81. Correspondence of Senior Tutor to Women Students, UB/STW/1/1/70–81, CRL.
82. Correspondence of Senior Tutor to Women Students, UB/STW/1/5/7/32, CRL.
83. Correspondence of Senior Tutor to Women Students, UB/STW/1/1/75 and UB/STW/1/5/11, CRL.
84. For example, the University of Leeds Archive includes papers of the Leeds Academic Assistance Committee: <https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/405852>.

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