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'Unity in struggle is our strength': Sheffield University's Overseas Students' Bureau and international activism at a local level

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the 1970s, the Overseas Students' Bureau (OSB), a working group within the Sheffield University Students' Union (SUSU), supported overseas students studying in Sheffield. Through a range of actions and activities it encouraged overseas students to become more involved in the students' union and to build friendships and 'integrate' with British students in Sheffield. By the second half of the 1970s, however, these activities were placed within the national and international context of political Blackness, anti-imperialism and anti-racism. This group put forward a vision of internationalism that had personal networks at its heart and encouraged solidarity with a range of movements fighting for independence around the world. Drawing on the archives of this organisation, interviews and the writing of international students themselves, this article emphasises the perspective of students, often from the Global South, who articulated their own lives and conceived of political activism as a way of helping to create a world of solidarity. It also highlights how ideas of political Blackness were being taken up in medium-sized industrial towns outside of the capital, challenging the London-centric understanding of anti-racism in this period.

KEYWORDS

Overseas students; student fees; anti-racism

In 1967, overseas students at the University of Sheffield created their own organisation, the Overseas Students' Bureau (OSB), to support international students studying in Sheffield. It was to act as a 'co-ordination centre for information' for overseas students and facilitate interaction between overseas students and British students with an aim to promote 'mixing' and combat prejudice. The main issue, around which the article revolves, is the changing internationalist practice of the OSB. Overseas students became increasingly radical during the 1970s, drawing on ideas of political Blackness to highlight the discrimination they faced and connect this to the legacy of colonialism and international movements for independence. In so doing, their notion of internationalism shifted as well. In the late 1960s

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and early 1970s, the OSB promoted and developed an idea of international unity that focused on education, promotion of displays of cultural difference and the ‘mixing’ of people with the underlying expectation that these social or ‘soft’ forms of multi-culturalism would create friendships, solidarities and a sense of connection across national borders.¹ However, by the middle of the 1970s, this perception had shifted. While still promoting ideas of unity, the OSB increasingly articulated an anti-imperialist and anti-racist view of internationalism, which sought unity among people of colour within Britain and wider diasporas. This view of internationalism was premised much more on a belief that structures of inequality and racism needed to be changed if unity across and within nations was going to be achieved.

Focusing on the OSB, a small organisation at a medium-sized, urban, civic university outside of London, this article helps nuance the literature about the development of the Black Power movement in Britain, which has largely concentrated on actions and activities in London.² Some of these studies have discussed, if briefly, that these ideas did circulate around the country to different cities, including Sheffield.³ For example, members of the London Black Panther movement visited Sheffield in 1971 and spoke at a conference organised in opposition to the Immigration Bill going through parliament that year.⁴ It is also striking that many of those at the forefront of the Black Power movement in Britain had come to Britain as overseas students. These include Locksley Comrie, Richard Small, Ansel Wong, Antheia Jones-Leconte and others.⁵ Yet the specific and crucial role of overseas students has largely been overlooked within these discussions. This article aims to highlight the significance of overseas students in articulating, enacting and developing these ideas in their practice within and beyond their campuses. That said, in the case of Sheffield and the OSB, it was not until later in the 1970s that their activities became more clearly informed by ideas of Black Power and the concept of political Blackness, which united all people of minority ethnic backgrounds to fight oppression.⁶

¹For a discussion of attitudes towards integration in this period, see S.E. Hackett, ‘From rags to restaurants: self-determination, entrepreneurship and integration among Muslim immigrants in Newcastle upon Tyne in comparative perspective, 1960s–1990s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25, 1 (2014), 132–54; R. Waters, ‘Integration or Black Power?’, *The Political Quarterly*, 89, 3 (2018), 409–16.

²There are many excellent works that explore these issues in London, including: K. Hammond Perry, ‘Black Britain and the politics of race in the 20th century’, *History Compass*, 12, 8 (2014), 651–63; A.-M. Angelo, ‘The Black Panthers in London, 1967–1972: a diasporic struggle navigates the Black Atlantic’, *Radical History Review*, 103 (2009), 17–35.

³R. Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985* (Oakland, CA, 2019), 22.

⁴*Ibid.*, 35. See also The Sheffield University Archives (hereafter SUA), ‘Conference attacks racism’, *Darts*, 335, 18 March 1971, 12.

⁵Waters, *Thinking Black*, *op. cit.*, 36ff.

⁶*Ibid.* For a wider discussion of political Blackness, see K. Andrews, ‘The problem of political blackness: lessons from the Black Supplementary School Movement’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39, 1 (2016), 2060–78; J. Narayan, ‘British Black Power: the anti-imperialism of political blackness and the problem of nativist socialism’, *The Sociological Review*, 67, 5 (2019), 945–67.

Thus, the article challenges the dominant understanding of the chronologies of ideas of political Blackness in the UK, showing that outside London it was not necessarily the late 1960s when these ideas were most relevant. It also showcases a different perspective to the established and understood patterns of migration and diasporic networks of Pan-Africanism and anti-imperial and anti-racist thought. It argues that overseas students played a central role in the development of thinking about race and anti-racism in England and that this was particularly the case outside the capital in places such as Sheffield where overseas students brought together student political activism with work in immigrant communities where these were smaller and less well organised.

Simultaneously, this article concentrates on students, understood as a subset of youth. While some scholars, like Richard Ivan Jobs, have used the term 'youth' to discuss groups of young people made up mainly of students, it is important to be more precise about their demographic profile to understand their positionality and experience.⁷ In this period most students, particularly overseas students, had middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds, and high proportions, particularly in certain disciplines and institutions, were male.⁸ The activism of these students is broadly conceived in this article. It includes any activity whose aim was advocacy, political change or the improvement of individuals' lives. The OSB's activism aimed to create and foster international networks, collaboration and unity on several fronts.

The article treats overseas students as agents of internationalism who not only reacted to racialising ascriptions against them in Britain, but also connected political struggles in Sheffield with those taking place in other parts of the world. Reinisch has argued that there is no clear distinction between the 'harsh colonial and colonizing relationships on the one hand' and the softer and more 'benign "transnational" connections on the other'.⁹ This article explores how persistent imperial connections continued to operate in both capacities. It was colonial relationships that both facilitated, and sometimes necessitated, student movement from former colonies to the metropole. Yet lingering imperial mindsets, particularly the understanding of racial hierarchies, fomented tension between overseas students and some home students, and informed policies towards overseas students.

There is a long history of overseas students in the United Kingdom.¹⁰ This history is intimately bound to Britain's imperial project and continued

⁷R.I. Jobs, 'Youth movements: travel, protest, and Europe in 1968', *The American Historical Review*, 114, 2, (2009), 376–404.

⁸W. Whyte, *Redbrick: A social and architectural history of Britain's civic universities* (Oxford, 2015); C. Dyhouse, *Students: A gendered history* (London, 2005).

⁹J. Reinisch, 'Introduction: agents of internationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 25, 2 (2016), 195–205, here 197.

¹⁰For a full picture of this history, see H. Perraton, *A History of Foreign Students in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2014).

to be understood in this way by overseas students well into the late 1970s.¹¹ International networks of students and scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were crucially important for Britain's imperial goals and its higher education institutions.¹² During the 1960s, as the formal British empire was dismantled, overseas students became an important image around which some of the lasting paradoxes of colonialism coalesced.¹³ The renaming of colonial students as overseas students was a key marker of their changed position as 'outsiders' within Britain.¹⁴

In looking at the example of the OSB in Sheffield during the 1970s, this article explores some of the complicated and contradictory ways in which internationalism was understood and practiced. These imperial mindsets also served to characterise and stereotype overseas students in ways that were not always helpful. Significantly, the category of 'overseas student' was itself being racialised in this period. While the term did officially include many students from the north and west, including those from the United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland and continental Europe, its common usage referred specifically to overseas students of colour.¹⁵ Public understanding of this division between 'home' and 'overseas' students was racialised so that 'home' students were largely understood as white, while overseas students were understood as being Black.¹⁶ The racialisation of overseas students was an important aspect of the debate about the differentiation of fees and its opposition, and was reinforced by the activity of overseas students, as we will see throughout this article.¹⁷ In these ways overseas students were both the beneficiaries and the victims of persisting imperial connections and mindsets while also being at the forefront of Britain's attempt to establish new international relationships as a post-imperial nation.

Meanwhile, overseas students were not simply recipients of imperialist residues in Britain, but inherently and deliberately international, and they transformed the institutions they joined into international spaces. While international history emerged as a field exploring links and interactions between states at the highest levels, I am using it more generously to include people who cross national boundaries – the overseas students themselves – as well as the organisations of which they were a part – universities, the

¹¹The Grubb Institute, *Freedom to Study: Requirements of Overseas Students in the UK* (London, 1978), 51.

¹²J.M. Lee, 'Overseas students in Britain: how their presence was politicised in 1966–1967', *Minerva*, 36, 4 (1998), 305–21, here 313; T. Pietsch, *Empire of Scholars: Universities, networks and the British academic world 1850–1939* (Manchester, 2013), 10.

¹³Pietsch, *op. cit.*, 95–96.

¹⁴A.J. Stockwell, 'Leaders, dissidents and the disappointed: colonial students in Britain as empire ended', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36, 3 (2008), 487–507.

¹⁵J. Burkett, 'Boundaries of belonging: differential fees for overseas students in Britain, c. 1967' in S. Ward and C. Damm Pedersen (eds), *The Break-Up of Greater Britain* (Manchester, 2021).

¹⁶Here I am using the term 'Black' as it would have been understood at the time to include people from Africa, Asia, the West Indies, and their children. See Angelo, *op. cit.*, 18.

¹⁷For a discussion of how this racialisation took place in 1967, see Burkett, *op. cit.* and The Grubb Institute, *op. cit.*

students' union and other clubs and societies. Universities in the 1970s, and up to the present day, imagined themselves as cosmopolitan, global and international organisations, but it was overseas students who made this a day-to-day reality.¹⁸ As J.M. Lee has shown, between the end of the Second World War and the 1960s, governments and university officials had contradictory attitudes towards overseas students – both wanting them and welcoming them, but also fearing them.¹⁹ Overseas students were both needed and criticised for coming. As Jessica Reinisch has highlighted, Europeans 'brought their intellectual baggage and political projects to other parts of the world'.²⁰ This article seeks to show that this is also the case in the other direction. It follows Paul Gilroy's assertion that Black people who arrived in Britain 'as fugitives from colonial underdevelopment', as was the case for many overseas students, 'brought with them legacies of their political, ideological and economic struggles'.²¹

This article is divided into two main sections. The first explores the initial phase of the OSB from its creation in 1968 until the middle of the 1970s. It examines the work of the organisation to create unity through educational and social activities. The aims of the OSB in this period were to better 'integrate' overseas students with British students so that they could develop friendships. This fitted into existing popular discourses of integration at the time which saw the onus of integrating to be on the shoulders of those coming into Britain to 'fit in'. In the second section, the article will examine how the activity of the OSB shifted in the late 1970s towards a more radical, anti-imperialist and anti-racist stance.

Unity through education and cultural mixing, c. 1968–1975

The OSB was created in 1968 in the wake of research conducted by overseas students at Sheffield that had identified deficiencies within the local students' union. This research highlighted a lack of social 'mixing' between overseas and home students. It found that there was prejudice towards overseas students, which it suggested was no longer coming from the 'public' but had morphed into 'a more subtle and dangerous form', which, it was suggested, emanated from fellow students within the university and union. The research also identified a lack of interest from British students towards other parts of the world.²² The OSB was a 'working committee' within the students' union. It was run by overseas students, had its own

¹⁸S. Blaxland, *Swansea University: Campus and community in a post-war world, 1945–2020* (Cardiff, 2020), 62.

¹⁹J.M. Lee, 'Commonwealth students in the United Kingdom, 1940–1960: student welfare and world status', *Minerva*, 44, 1 (2006), 1–24; H. Adi, *West Africans in Britain 1900–1960: Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and Communism* (London, 1998), 3.

²⁰Reinisch, *op. cit.*, 205.

²¹P. Gilroy, 'You can't fool the youths . . . Race and class formation in the 1980s', *Race & Class*, 23 (1981–82), 209.

²²SUA, OSB, 'UKCOSA weekend 1972'.

office and received funds from the union, which were supplemented by a grant from the Overseas Students Trust.²³ While based at the university, the OSB extended its facilities to assist overseas students in Sheffield at all institutions of higher education, including the Polytechnic (now Sheffield Hallam University) and local colleges. At the end of the 1960s, there were 238 overseas students at Sheffield University and 46 at Sheffield City Polytechnic.²⁴ By the middle of the 1970s, the number at the university had more than doubled to 486 while the number at the polytechnic remained stable at 42.²⁵ After looking at the organisation itself in more detail, this section will examine its early work first within the university and secondly within the wider Sheffield community.

The formation of the OSB took place within the context of widespread student activism around the world.²⁶ For Britain, this year marked the beginning rather than the height of radical student activism that lasted throughout much of the following decade.²⁷ Debates within the British student movement about the social role of students and the political role of their main organisation, the National Union of Students (NUS), was bound up with the issue of overseas students when the government first introduced higher fees for overseas students than ‘home’ students to take effect in the academic year 1967–1968.²⁸

With the changing of the NUS constitution in 1969, it became a much more political organisation and was dominated by a Broad Left coalition of Labour and Communist students, among others, into the early 1980s. Histories of the 1970s have often focused on the labour unrest of the decade and seen it as a period of ‘crisis’ or ‘decline’, although many scholars now question this characterisation.²⁹ The decade has long been seen as a key transitory moment when the ‘consensus’ that was established during the Second World War irretrievably broke down.³⁰ Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton have argued that the 1970s was a decade of possibility rather than one that led inexorably towards Thatcherism.³¹

²³H. Mathers, *Standing Up for Students: One hundred years of the University of Sheffield Union of Students* (Sheffield, 2007), 135.

²⁴The British Council, *Statistics of Overseas students in the United Kingdom, 1969–70* (London, 1970), 10.

²⁵The British Council, *Statistics of Overseas students in the United Kingdom, 1973–74* (London, 1974).

²⁶There is an extensive literature about 1968. For an introduction in relation to student activism, see R. Fraser, *1968: A student generation in revolt* (London, 1998); M. Klimke and J. Scharloth (eds), *1968 in Europe: A history of protest and activism, 1956–1977* (Basingstoke, 2008); C. Hoeffler, *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties* (London, 2013).

²⁷S. Webster, ‘Protest Activity in the British Student Movement, 1945 to 2011’ (PhD, Manchester, 2015).

²⁸Burkett, *op. cit.*; Hoeffler, *op. cit.*, 70.

²⁹For example, see N. Papadogiannis and S. Gehrig, ‘“The personal is political”: sexuality, gender and the left in Europe during the 1970s’, *European Review of History*, 22, 1 (2015), 1–15.

³⁰Indeed, even research that questions the idea of a consensus talks about the 1970s as a transitional decade: H. Jones and M. Kandiah (eds), *The Myth of Consensus: New views on British history, 1945–1964* (Basingstoke, 1996).

³¹L. Black and H. Pemberton, ‘Introduction: The benighted decade? Reassessing the 1970s’ in L. Black and H. Pemberton (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), 124.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were also important for the development of Black radicalism in the United States and Britain. Rob Waters has identified the late 1960s and early 1970s as a crucial period for people of colour in Britain, a time when ‘Blackness’ became a key personal and political identity.³² Stuart Hall and others have identified this moment in 1968–1969 as a ‘watershed’ when British society entered a ‘prolonged and continuous state of semi-siege’ when social conflict, particularly around the issue of race, came into being.³³ The sense of ‘becoming Black’ that Waters identifies encompassed a range of ideas and behaviours including the embracing of the beauty of the Black body and Black socialist internationalism, alignment with ‘Third World’ liberation movements, revolutionary anti-colonialism, opposition to Englishness, and confrontational, or even violent, resistance to authorities.³⁴ While it is certainly the case that members of the OSB, as will be shown in more detail below, were interested in promoting information about a range of issues in other countries, for many this was about their home country. The discussion of this as ‘Third Worldism’ assumes a Western perspective that sits uncomfortably alongside the identity of some overseas students as visitors from the ‘Third World’.

In analysing OSB in the context of such growing radicalism, it is difficult to get a full picture of its leadership and membership. Only the names of a few office holders remain in the archive and their background is often unclear. It is possible to identify 15 officers who led the organisation through the 1970s. Of these 15, the background of four is unclear, five were of South Asian heritage, two were from the Middle East, two were from the West Indies, one was from Cyprus, and one was most likely from Hong Kong.³⁵ However, at least some of those of South Asian heritage were not technically overseas students. For example, Aneez Esmail, who was chairman of the OSB in 1976–1977, was from East Africa and had migrated with his family more than three years before starting his studies. He was, therefore, for fees purposes classed as a ‘home’ student.³⁶ This shows that there was at least some overlap between overseas students and home students from immigrant backgrounds and families.³⁷ Exploring the activity and debates around the issues of overseas students, therefore, not only tells us about these

³²Waters, *Thinking Black*, *op. cit.*, 4.

³³S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke and B. Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order* (London, 1978), 251.

³⁴Waters, *Thinking Black*, *op. cit.*, 32–34. See also R. Wild, ‘“Black was the colour of our fight”: Black Power in Britain, 1955–1976’ (PhD, Sheffield, 2008), 4.

³⁵SUA, OSB Files, 1969–1981.

³⁶Interview with Dr Aneez Esmail, 28 March 2019.

³⁷We do not have statistics about the numbers of ethnic minority ‘home’ students in England before the mid-1990s. Statistics at the turn of the twenty-first century show around 16% of students were classed as ethnic minorities. HESA, ‘Students 2000/1’, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications/students-2000-01/introduction>, (accessed 12 March 2021).

important migrant and diasporic communities but also reveals the politics of race taking place on university campuses in this period.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence within the archives regarding the wider membership of the OSB and the extent to which the nationality and background of the organisation's leaders reflected the membership. There is some evidence that it was largely overseas students of colour who actively participated in the organisation.³⁸ While we know the overall number of overseas students at Sheffield, we do not know specifically which country they originated from. Nationally, in the early 1970s the single largest number of overseas students at universities in the UK came from the United States, followed by Canada and Malaysia, with Pakistan and India the fourth and fifth largest senders of overseas students, respectively.³⁹ By the middle of the 1970s, this picture had changed, with India and Pakistan no longer in the top eight sending countries and students from Malaysia far outstripping those from any other single country.⁴⁰ However, the leadership of the OSB does not seem to reflect this pattern, but rather more closely reflects the background of immigrant communities to the Sheffield area, where there is a long history of settlement from South Asia.⁴¹ Students had been coming from India to study in Sheffield throughout the twentieth century, including large cohorts in the 1920s.⁴² In the early 1970s, the OSB offered translation and interpreting services to local hospitals and courts in a wide range of languages including Urdu, Arabic, Chinese, German, French, Portuguese, Greek, Italian and Russian. This could indicate a much wider range of backgrounds within the membership of the organisation than the leadership would suggest.⁴³

Like most student organisations, the activity and outlook of the OSB was dependent on the particular view of its leadership. Until the middle of the 1970s, the activities of the OSB were united around the idea of the organisation as a 'bridge' between the separate communities of British and overseas students.⁴⁴ Sport became an important mechanism for this interaction.⁴⁵ The position of Sports Secretary was created within the OSB during the 1970–1971 academic year.⁴⁶ The OSB believed that participation in sports was 'important to establish a feeling of friendship . . . and to instill [*sic*]

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Perraton, *op. cit.*, 86.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹D. Holland, 'The social networks of South Asian migrants in the Sheffield area during the early twentieth century', *Past & Present*, 236 (2017), 243–79; Runnymede Trust, 'Sheffield migration stories' (London, 2012).

⁴²Mathers, *op. cit.*, 134.

⁴³SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1972–3', 2.

⁴⁴SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1972–3', 1; OSB, 'Annual report 1973–4', 1; OSB, 'Annual report 1975–6', 1; OSB, 'Annual report 1978–9', 1.

⁴⁵For examples of sport as an important site of internationalism, see M. Kruger, 'Global perspectives on sports and movement cultures: from past to present – Modern sports between nationalism, internationalism and cultural imperialism' *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32, 4 (2015), 518–34.

⁴⁶SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1971–2', 2.

a sense of international goodwill'.⁴⁷ The other main area of 'mixing' between overseas and home students was through the many 'discos and socials' organised by the OSB both on its own and with a range of other student groups. For example, in the spring of 1973 it held a disco in 'conjunction with the Pan African Association'.⁴⁸ The OSB also worked with a range of 'internationally minded' societies including the 'United Nations, The International Club, local British Council and Overseas Students Wives Club'.⁴⁹ It identified activities such as debates, seminars, political discussions and exhibitions as means to build bridges between different groups of students.⁵⁰ It promoted the integration of overseas students by holding social events such as 'informal parties with a complete bias to overseas students' environment and atmosphere and inviting many British students'.⁵¹ In 1973, the OSB decided to take responsibility for organising the national societies 'in a co-ordinated manner' and organised all of their 'cultural evenings and lectures . . . in co-ordination with the national societies bringing in more life to O.S.B'.⁵²

In running these activities in the early 1970s, the OSB was positive about the relationships that it had built with officers of the students' union and university staff. The OSB believed that 'all the parties concerned appreciate the positive contribution of the O.S.B. to the University life in Sheffield'.⁵³ During this period, two of the Sheffield Students' Union presidents were overseas students. In 1971 Abdul Gani, who was later described by a fellow student as 'an Indian South African [who was] as left wing as you could get', was elected president.⁵⁴ Gani strongly supported the idea that overseas students should 'mix' with British students, criticising the majority of overseas students who, he argued, had 'a tendency to isolate themselves'.⁵⁵ Other overseas students were critical of this position. For example, the editor of the overseas student magazine *Target*, Mohammed Bujarami, claimed that 'isolation is imposed on us. We do not want it, and we struggle against it'.⁵⁶ Yet the OSB maintained a good working relationship with the students' union throughout these years. In 1974 a second overseas student, the OSB nominee Patrick Hughes, 'an Irishman', was elected students' union president with an overwhelming majority.⁵⁷ OSB collaboration with the students' union was also supported by the work of the NUS nationally on behalf of

⁴⁷SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1980-1', 1.

⁴⁸SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1972-3', 1.

⁴⁹SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1973-4', 4.

⁵⁰SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1972-3', 2.

⁵¹SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1974-5', 2.

⁵²SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1973-4', 3.

⁵³*ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁴Quoted in Mathers, *op. cit.*, 45.

⁵⁵A. Gani, 'Overseas Students Bureau', *Target*, March-18 April 1972.

⁵⁶M. Bujarami, 'TARGET replies', *Target*, March-19 April 1972.

⁵⁷*ibid.*, 3; Mathers, *op. cit.*, 48.

overseas students. Also in 1974, the NUS passed a motion on ‘Racialism and Overseas’ Students’ which included the very controversial ‘No Platform’ policy.⁵⁸

A significant part of the OSB’s role as a ‘bridge’ concerned educating British students about international issues. Its magazine *Target* was a means of addressing what was seen as the indifference towards political issues of the ‘average’ British student.⁵⁹ The OSB argued that the ‘disinterest’ of British students was ‘merely the result of lack of information’. Abdul Ilah Tawfik, chairman of the OSB in 1972–1973 and editor of *Target* in 1974, argued that ‘once the injustices faced by overseas students are made widely known, an important step forward will have been achieved’.⁶⁰ The OSB used ‘films, forums and publications’ as ways to make ‘people more aware of the problems of the world around them’.⁶¹ Film showings functioned as both a social and educational event and were used extensively by the OSB. In the early 1970s, these film showings largely served as places where overseas students from ‘diverse social and cultural backgrounds’ with ‘basic differences in the approach for entertainment, when compared to the British students’ could come together. This rather euphemistic phrasing most likely referred to different attitudes to alcohol and drinking culture between Muslim and non-Muslim students. Films from around the world were shown with English subtitles, with the implied intention to give some overseas students a taste of home while teaching British students about those countries.⁶² Such showings were an important aspect of left-wing culture during this period. This was the height of the art film tours in which a van would tour the country between September and March, to coincide with the academic year, and show independent films at colleges and universities.⁶³ Margaret Dickinson argues that student activism in the 1960s was an important driver of independent film distributors and was accompanied by ‘a growing interest in fiction from third world countries’.⁶⁴

The OSB also held other, perhaps more typical, educational events on occasion, such as a ‘teach-in’ on the Caribbean during the academic year 1969–1970. These sorts of events were infrequent, although important. In the early 1970s the OSB organised seminars ‘on some of the Third World countries’ which were addressed ‘in the main by Embassy personnel or

⁵⁸Modern Records Centre, MSS/280/87/22, NUS, ‘Minutes and Summary of Proceedings: April Conference’, Liverpool, April 1974, 78. For more information about the ‘No Platform’ policy, see E. Smith, *No Platform: A history of anti-fascism, universities and the limits of free speech* (London, 2020).

⁵⁹M. Bujarami, ‘Editorial’, *Target*, March–April 1972.

⁶⁰A. Ilah Tawfik, ‘Editorial’, *Target*, Easter 1974, 3–4.

⁶¹SUA, OSB, ‘Annual report 1980–1’, 1.

⁶²SUA, OSB, ‘Annual report 1973–4’, 2.

⁶³K. Loukopoulou, ‘“Films bring art to the people”: the art film tour in Britain (1950–1980)’, *Film History*, 19, 4 (2007), 414–22, here 418.

⁶⁴M. Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional film in Britain, 1945–90* (London, 1999), 39.

correspondents and writers'.⁶⁵ It also invited outside speakers to give talks to students. For example, during the 1972–1973 academic year, former local Labour Member of Parliament (MP) Frank Hooley was invited to speak about 'the future of the Commonwealth', while authors and activists Chris Mullard and Colin Talbot spoke about 'The Growth of Racism in the U.K'.⁶⁶ There were also invited speakers from a range of single-issue campaigns such as Anti-Apartheid.⁶⁷ Altogether, the OSB's activity on campus in this period sought to bring overseas and British students together and was based on an understanding that more education and integration would solve any problems that overseas students encountered.

The second main area of OSB activity in this period was within the local community beyond the university. Through such activity, the OSB occupied the position of what Reinisch has termed 'the liberal international elite' as it worked with government authorities to provide services for immigrant communities.⁶⁸ The OSB worked with local groups to organise events to raise either money or awareness of particular issues. In 1972 it organised two discos in the 'Hemswell Resettlement Centre' for Ugandan Asians which, it reported, were a 'tremendous success'.⁶⁹ In November 1972, the Heath government agreed to airlift and settle approximately 27,000 British passport holders who had been expelled by Idi Amin's Ugandan government.⁷⁰ Also that year, the OSB worked with the Sheffield Committee for Community Relations to organise an 'International Citizens Week' during which it set up an Arab Food stall at the food bazaar in a local school. The purpose of this project was 'to give school children and their families an opportunity to know about other countries, their culture, food and background'. In 1974, it reported that all of its cultural evenings and film showings had been 'enthusiastically attended by the local community'.⁷¹ It also held a disco in the middle term and an international evening which, it reported, 'had an attendance well over 450 and 750 respectively and 60% of them were from the public'. The international evening included seven food stalls featuring foods from different areas and aimed to 'bring people from such diverse social and cultural backgrounds to a common floor for mutual understanding and dissemination'.⁷²

The OSB provided a range of services for local immigrant communities. In October 1968, when the OSB was in its infancy, it put forward a proposal to offer English lessons to immigrant children. This fits into wider movements

⁶⁵SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1971–2', 2.

⁶⁶SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1972–3', 3.

⁶⁷OSB, 'Annual report 1971–2', 2–3.

⁶⁸Reinisch, *op. cit.*, 196.

⁶⁹SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1972–3', 4.

⁷⁰Y. Hamai, "'Imperial burden" or "Jews of Africa"?: an analysis of political and media discourse in the Ugandan Asian crisis (1972)', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22, 2 (2011), 415–36, here 416.

⁷¹SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1972–3', 4.

⁷²SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1973–4', 3.

across Britain at the time to create 'Saturday schools' for Black children, including immigrant ones, to overcome the perceived shortfalls of the state education system.⁷³ According to the OSB's public relations officer at the time, A.C. Dugar, the aim of the OSB was to provide 'a very valuable service to the community in helping to promote good relations between people of all nationalities'.⁷⁴ During the 1969–1970 academic year, the OSB created a role for a Community Relations Secretary, in recognition of the importance it placed on this activity. In 1970, it planned a series of summer English teaching projects 'in the high immigrant areas in Sheffield' in cooperation with the Local Education Authority Youth Office.⁷⁵ It also worked with Student Community Action, the Sheffield Community Relations Office and the Sheffield Electoral Office during the 1970 election campaign 'amongst the immigrant communities in Sheffield'.⁷⁶ The OSB translated and distributed electoral registration materials in Urdu, Bengali, Arabic and Hindi. It was also involved in 'explaining the purpose as far as possible' of electoral registration and assisted people in 'filling in the accompanying forms'.⁷⁷

The OSB also engaged in issues that related to both local immigrant communities and overseas students. At times, the latter were also dependent on the former. This was particularly the case in housing where overseas students struggled enormously throughout the decade. Helping overseas students to find accommodation was a significant aspect of the OSB's role and in 1975 it conducted a study which found that 'more than half the [overseas] students living in private accommodation live in property owned by immigrant landlords'. 'This', the authors said, was 'remarkable considering most of them are not even registered with the University' and highlighted the importance of relations between overseas students and the local community which, the OSB felt, 'ha[d] been overlooked'.⁷⁸ The OSB also developed other forms of synergies between local immigrant communities and students. It provided a 'Speakers service' through which local community groups could find students to help educate their members about their home countries. In the late 1960s requests for speakers were received from Rotary Clubs, the Round Table and the Federation of Townswomen's Guild.⁷⁹ The OSB estimated in 1970 that it received on average one or two requests for overseas students to speak to local community organisations each fortnight and that it was sending students out to speak or to translate in the local community 'on a day to day basis'.⁸⁰

⁷³K. Andrews, 'The problem of political blackness: lessons from the Black Supplementary School Movement', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, 11 (2015), 2060–78.

⁷⁴SUA, 'O.S.B. to teach immigrant children', *Darts*, 299, 17 October 1968, 3.

⁷⁵SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1969–70', 2.

⁷⁶N. Deakin and J. Bourne, 'Powell, the minorities, and the 1970s election', *The Political Quarterly*, 41, 4 (1970), 399–415.

⁷⁷SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1971–72', 2.

⁷⁸SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1974–5', 1.

⁷⁹SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1969–70', 1.

⁸⁰*ibid.*, 1–2.

The first years of OSB activity saw it working hard to support overseas students, to encourage them to ‘mix’ socially with British students and to encourage British students to be more internationally minded. As mentioned, the underlying ethos of these activities placed the onus on overseas students to adapt and change to ‘fit in’ to student life in Sheffield, fulfilling popular notions of racial tolerance which prioritised cultural displays of ‘otherness’ and perpetuated the exoticisation of overseas students. While the OSB provided important support for local immigrant communities in this period, this was largely undertaken from a position of superiority. Overseas students did not see themselves as immigrants and were not classed as such within official statistics as the vast majority of them intended to, and did, return home once they had completed their studies.⁸¹ More importantly, they did not identify with the dominant public discourse about ‘immigrants’ that dominated Britain in this period and which focused on those coming from what was termed ‘New Commonwealth’ countries, and tended to be used as a catch-all for all Black and Asian people living in the UK.⁸² That said, the OSB’s understanding of British and overseas student groups and its role as a ‘bridge’ did help to underpin racialised, and inaccurate, notions that overseas students were Black or Asian and predominantly from ‘Third World’ countries.

Unity through political Blackness, c. 1976–1981

The year 1976 was a crucial one for overseas students in Britain. In July of that year, the Callaghan government announced that there would be new tuition fee levels for all students and further increased the fee differential between ‘home’ and overseas students. Starting in the academic year 1976–1977, tuition fees for overseas students on advanced courses would be more than double that of home students and one-third higher than they had been the previous year.⁸³ Many overseas students saw this policy as particularly alienating. In a study undertaken by the Grubb Institute on behalf of the Overseas Students Trust in 1975–1976, many of the students interviewed saw this fee increase as a message from the British government that they were different and unwanted.⁸⁴ We will discuss the response of the OSB to this increase in fees later in this section.

Within the wider historiography, 1976 is also seen as a pivotal year in the history of race relations in the UK. Satnam Virdee has pointed to the period between 1976 and 1979 as ‘the moment when collective action against

⁸¹Perraton, *op. cit.*, 94.

⁸²K. Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and citizenship in the post-war era* (Ithaca, NY, 1997); C. Waters, ‘“Dark strangers” in our midst: discourses of race and nation in Britain, 1947–1963’, *Journal of British Studies* 36, 2 (1997), 207–38.

⁸³T. Devlin, ‘Students as scapegoats’, *The Times*, 1 June 1976, 4.

⁸⁴The Grubb Institute, *op. cit.*, 41–42.

racism and class exploitation in Britain partially entwined'.⁸⁵ Benjamin Bland, too, highlights 1976 as the year of change in racial discourse and anti-racist activity in England.⁸⁶ In 1976 a new Race Relations Act was passed, setting up the Commission for Racial Equality, extending and strengthening prohibitions against discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity and national background, and allowing for some positive forms of discrimination.⁸⁷ However, this came after a decade of increasingly restrictive immigration legislation and needs to be viewed as part of the same political understanding that saw the presence of people of colour in Britain as the source of social problems and poor race relations.⁸⁸ In the late 1970s the National Front was continuing to increase its popularity with a racist and anti-immigrant message, and violence against people of colour on British streets was high.⁸⁹

The OSB was aware of this violence, citing the murders of two overseas students in London. Dinesh Chondhry, a 19-year-old overseas student and son of a United Nations diplomat, and Ribhi Sughri Alhadidi, a 22-year-old Jordanian overseas student, were both studying engineering at Queen Mary University when they were killed by four white youths on 22 May 1976. It also highlighted the murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar, an 18-year-old student in London who was killed in June 1976.⁹⁰ It argued that this violence, and the fees campaign which will be discussed below, had transformed the organisation into 'an active body' whose membership recognised that the fate of overseas students 'is the fate of the immigrant community'.⁹¹ The transnational solidarity and unity that the OSB was attempting to build no longer focused on building bridges between home and overseas students, but increasingly focused on uniting overseas students, immigrants and people of colour across the 'Third World'. Anandi Ramamurthy has shown that the emergence of Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) in cities including Sheffield in the mid-1970s was underpinned by these same values

⁸⁵S. Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialised Outsider* (Basingstoke, 2014), 123. See also M. Higgs, 'From the street to the state: making anti-fascism anti-racist in 1970s Britain', *Race & Class*, 58, 1 (2016), 66–84.

⁸⁶Benjamin Bland, "'Publish and be damned?'" Race, crisis, and the press in England during the long, hot summer of 1976', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 37, 3 (2000), 163–83.

⁸⁷For a discussion of race relations legislation and practice in the 1970s, see B. Bebbler, 'Model migrants? Sikh activism and race relations organisations in Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 31, 4 (2017), 568–92; A. Lester, 'The politics of the Race Relations Act 1976' in M. Anwar, P. Roach and R. Sondhi (eds), *From Legislation to Integration? Race relations in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2000), 24–39.

⁸⁸For a discussion of the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of the 1960s, see Paul, *op. cit.*; E. Buettner, "'This is Staffordshire not Alabama": racial geographies of Commonwealth immigration in early 1960s Britain', *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History*, 42, 4 (2014), 710–40; K. Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, citizenship and the politics of race* (Oxford, 2015). For a discussion of legislation in the 1970s, see E. Consterdine, 'Community versus commonwealth: reappraising the 1971 Immigration Act', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 35, 1 (2017), 1–20; E. Smith, 'The myth of sovereignty: British immigration control in policy and practice in the nineteen-seventies', *Historical Research*, 87, 236 (2014), 344–69. For a discussion of ideas around British citizenship at the end of the Second World War, see R. Hansen, 'The politics of citizenship in 1940s Britain: the British Nationality Act', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10, 1 (1999), 67–95.

⁸⁹R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London, 1998).

⁹⁰I. Mather, 'Students "murdered by racists"', *The Observer*, 23 May 1976, 1; Higgs, *op. cit.*

⁹¹SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1975–6', 1.

of internationalism, which involved support for anti-colonial struggles around the world.⁹² These ideas formed the basis of the activity of the OSB from the middle of the 1970s.

Within historiographical discussions of the 1970s, the decade has increasingly been seen as one of growing individualism, when the seeds of the Thatcher revolution were sown. As Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson have shown, this individualism intersected with the ‘race relations’ project of the decade to re-organise the ways in which people of colour understood their experiences of inequality.⁹³ Groups, including the OSB, were developing a greater sense of their individual ‘rights’, which informed their activism.⁹⁴ This coming together of class- and race-based activism is of particular importance for a city such as Sheffield. Sheffield is a large industrial city in the north of England. It had been the centre of Britain’s steel industry since the nineteenth century, and suffered heavy bombing during the Second World War. By the 1970s, the steel industry was in decline and the city’s infrastructure, particularly housing, had still not fully recovered.⁹⁵ Daisy Payling has argued that in the 1980s, Sheffield was ‘predominantly white and working class’, and that while Sheffield City Council prided itself on creating and promoting ‘local socialism’, it predominantly did so from the perspective, and to the betterment, of the white working class.⁹⁶ The coming together of activism against class- and race-based exploitation, Payling argues, was not at the level of the local council, but in grassroots organisations and trade unions which flourished in Sheffield in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹⁷ The work of the OSB helps to elucidate the intersectionality between race- and class-based activism taking place locally in cities such as Sheffield – that is, middle-sized northern cities with a large working-class population – as middle- and upper-class students worked to articulate their common cause with working-class immigrant communities.

As outlined above, increasing fees for overseas students in 1976 sparked a national campaign and significant local activity by the OSB. There had been efforts by the government to limit the number of overseas students entering the country, but these had not been successful. Numbers of

⁹²A. Ramamurthy, ‘The Asian Youth Movements: racism and resistance’, *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 63 (2016), 73–85.

⁹³E. Robinson, C. Schofield, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and N. Thomlinson, ‘Telling stories about post-war Britain: popular individualism and the “crisis” of the 1970s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 28, 2 (2017), 268–304, here 297. For a discussion of policymakers’ attitudes towards race relations, see S. Saggarr, ‘Re-examining the 1964–70 Labour Government’s Race Relations Strategy’, *Contemporary British History*, 7, 2 (1993), 253–81; S. Peplow, ‘The “Linchpin for Success”? The problematic establishment of the 1965 Race Relations Act and its Conciliation Board’, *Contemporary British History*, 31, 3 (2017), 430–51.

⁹⁴Robinson et al., *op. cit.*

⁹⁵J. Pratt, *The Polytechnic Experiment 1965–1992* (London, 1997), 2.

⁹⁶D. Payling, ‘“Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire”: grassroots activism and left-wing solidarity in 1980s Sheffield’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25, 4 (2014), 602–27, here 604.

⁹⁷*ibid.*

overseas students in 1976 had nearly tripled from their 1969 levels.⁹⁸ In Sheffield the number of overseas students had increased to just under 800 in 1976 and there were almost as many again at the polytechnic and colleges in the city.⁹⁹ Faced with growing overseas student numbers and a worsening economic situation, fees for overseas and home students increased throughout the second half of the 1970s.¹⁰⁰ The OSB described itself as ‘one of the first bodies of overseas students to organise a campaign against discriminatory fees’ and it did so without the support of, and sometimes in direct opposition to, its local student union executive.¹⁰¹ In November 1976, the OSB occupied the University Council Chamber in a move that was described by the student newspaper, *Darts*, as an ‘OSB Occupation’ rather than a student occupation, suggesting division between the OSB and the students’ union executive. The OSB was highly critical of a statement from the University Finance Committee that ‘the abolition of fees for overseas students alone would upset racial harmony at the University’, saying that this wrongly characterised their intentions: ‘we are not looking for sympathy, but merely the right to an education’.¹⁰² The occupation highlighted a significant rift between the leadership of the OSB and the student union President Bob Hamilton, although there seemed to be widespread support for its activity among students themselves.¹⁰³ The OSB saw its fight as opposing ‘the moral principle violated by the concept of discriminatory fees’. Its concern was not individual financial hardship of overseas students who, it argued, were ‘far from being financially distraught’. For their part, students’ union and university officials suggested a ‘hardship fund’ would address the OSB’s concerns.¹⁰⁴

A second occupation was held in February 1977 with the strong support of the students’ union.¹⁰⁵ When the occupation ended – with an agreement from the university to work towards a settlement – the OSB was included in the working party set up to look at the fees issue. The OSB was disappointed that ‘the committee . . . refused to consider any form of opposition to the inbuilt discrimination against overseas students’. OSB chairman Annez Esmail argued that ‘the university [had] . . . shown no interest in removing the discrimination between home and overseas students’.¹⁰⁶ This refusal to address the ‘punitive and discriminatory fee structure’ was seen as giving ‘tacit support to racism’.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁸The British Council, *Statistics of Overseas Students in Britain, 1976–77* (London, 1977).

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰Perraton, *op. cit.*, 110–11.

¹⁰¹SUA, OSB, ‘Annual report 1975–6’, 1.

¹⁰²SUA, *Darts*, 409, 26 November 1976, 3.

¹⁰³SUA, ‘OSB Campaign continues’, *Darts*, 413, 19 February 1977.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*; BPP, 740, *Overseas Students (Fees)*, 1967 (1748).

¹⁰⁵SUA, *Darts*, 414, 5 March 1977, 1. ‘Two UGM’s back sit-in’, *Darts*, 414, 5 March 1977, 1.

¹⁰⁶SUA, ‘Fees deadlock’, *Darts*, 416, 7 May 1977; 1. R. Wilkinson, ‘Fees peace just’, *Darts*, 417, 21 May 1977, 3.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

Such activity occurred in the context of significant political developments in Britain. In January 1978 Margaret Thatcher, leader of the Conservative Party, gave an interview on Granada TV's *World in Action* which signalled the Conservatives' move to the right to entice back National Front supporters.¹⁰⁸ Within a few months of coming to power, Thatcher and the Conservatives announced in November 1979 the imposition of 'full-cost' fees from the autumn of 1980.¹⁰⁹ The rise in tuition fees had the desired result as the number of overseas students in 1979–1980 had stabilised and slightly decreased from their 1976 numbers to 108,685. Of these, just under 900 overseas students were enrolled at Sheffield University.¹¹⁰ The OSB saw the increase in fees as one form of a sustained attack on overseas students, calling the increases 'essentially racist, especially if seen in the wider context of attacks by the state on home blacks and other minorities'. It organised a 'massive campaign', asking the university not to impose the increases on students already enrolled. This was unsuccessful, so a further occupation in November 1979 was held, after which university authorities conceded and set up a hardship fund for new students. The OSB said that most of the credit 'must go to the students themselves – home and overseas as, without whom none of the above would have been possible'.¹¹¹

In the early 1980s, the OSB saw the fee increases and 'their implications' as the 'primary concern' of the organisation.¹¹² It was highly critical of the NUS for 'passively letting the authorities continue to attack a large section of its membership (i.e. overseas students) with impunity', saying that its resistance to government attacks was poor 'even by European standards'. In a funding environment increasingly hostile to overseas students, the OSB saw its role as both lobbying to improve the situation and supporting individuals to alleviate immediate suffering.

While the fees campaign dominated OSB activity in the second half of the decade, the association nevertheless continued to undertake social activities to integrate British and overseas students. However, the goal of these activities was now politically oriented and demonstrated attitudes of international solidarity. In June 1977, the OSB organised an 'International Cultural Evening' whose central theme was 'Anti-Racist and Anti-Imperialist' and implored the students' union executive to 'come and be educated'.¹¹³ The OSB continued to see these sorts of events as an opportunity to 'demonstrate their respective cultures', but the main emphasis was

¹⁰⁸M. Francis, 'Mrs Thatcher's peacock blue sari: ethnic minorities, electoral politics and the Conservative Party, c. 1974–86', *Contemporary British History*, 31, 2 (2017), 274–93.

¹⁰⁹OSB, 'Annual report 1979–80', 4; W. Berliner, 'Overseas fees rise biting – NUS leader', *The Guardian*, 8 December 1979, 3.

¹¹⁰The British Council, *Statistics of Overseas Students in the United Kingdom, 1979–80* (London, 1980).

¹¹¹SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1979–80', 1–2.

¹¹²SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1980–1', 1.

¹¹³SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1976–7', 2.

to ‘promote more understanding of the common bonds that link most peoples in their struggle against imperialism and exploitation’.¹¹⁴ The OSB also showed specific films in this period to highlight global struggles and build solidarity around issues which did not directly affect overseas students themselves.¹¹⁵ For example, during the 1978–1979 academic year, it showed the film *Nicaragua – Free Country or Death*, followed by a talk from a member of the Sandinista Front, which aimed to educate students about the liberation struggle there.¹¹⁶

OSB also used film screenings as a means of combining anti-racism and anti-imperialism. In this vein, in February 1979, the OSB showed two ‘important films’, *Blacks Britannica* about ‘the state of racism in Britain’, and a second film about ‘the role of multi-nationals in the third world’. *Blacks Britannica* was directed and produced by David Koff and co-produced by Musindo Mwinyipembe, with the US Public Broadcasting Service affiliate in Boston. They broadcast a heavily censored version and the original was banned from being shown to audiences of more than 20.¹¹⁷ The explicit aim of this OSB-run event was to educate students ‘as far as possible [so] that we can achieve a greater understanding of the problems of racism and imperialism and the way these manifest themselves’. The OSB was disappointed that more members of the students’ union executive had not attended the showing of *Blacks Britannica* which, it thought, ‘would have helped clear up their present woolly attitudes and complacency towards racism in this country’.¹¹⁸ During the following academic year, the OSB once again showed *Blacks Britannica* alongside other educational films and those on Nicaragua, Brazil, and Chile, the latter being the subject of a national NUS campaign.¹¹⁹ The stated purpose of these film showings was to ‘increase the political cohesion of overseas students’ and to ‘promote a common awareness of the nature of the Anti-Imperialist struggle’.¹²⁰ This seems to typify the interest in the ‘Third World’ that Waters, Wild, Ramamurthy and others identify as a key aspect of pan-African and Black political thought in Britain. In May 1979 the OSB also helped to organise

¹¹⁴SUA, OSB, ‘Annual report 1979–80’, 2.

¹¹⁵While it is impossible to say definitively that there were no overseas students from Latin America at Sheffield, no Latin American countries figure in the top eight sending countries of overseas students between 1946 and 2010. Perraton, *op. cit.*, 84, 107.

¹¹⁶SUA, OSB, ‘3rd term report 1978–9’, 1–2. For a discussion of European solidarity with Sandinista Nicaragua, see K. Christiaens, ‘Between diplomacy and solidarity: Western European support networks for Sandinista Nicaragua’, *European Review of History*, 21, 4 (2014), 617–34.

¹¹⁷The Black Scholar Interviews: David Koff & Musindo Mwinyipembe’, *The Black Scholar*, 10, 8/9 (1979), 68–80.

¹¹⁸SUA, OSB, ‘2nd term report 1978–9’, 1.

¹¹⁹For a discussion of Chile solidarity activity in Britain, see A. Bowen, ‘“Taking in the broad spectrum”: human rights and anti-politics in the Chile Solidarity Campaign (UK) of the 1970s’, *Journal of Social History*, 54, 2 (2020), 623–43; G. Livingstone, ‘British campaigns for solidarity with Argentina and Chile’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 39, 5 (2020), 614–28.

¹²⁰SUA, OSB, ‘Annual report 1979–80’, 4. For a discussion of the importance of film and TV to understandings of race and Black power in Britain, see R. Waters, ‘Black Power on the telly: America, television, and race in 1960s and 1970s Britain’, *Journal of British Studies*, 54, 4 (2015), 947–70; C. Grandy, ‘“The show is not about race”: custom, screen culture and the Black and White Minstrel Show’, *Journal of British Studies*, 59, 4 (2020), 857–84.

a conference in Sheffield on the 'Eritrean issue' and sought to raise 'the social awareness of local overseas students about imperialism and fascism'.¹²¹

In the early 1980s, some of this activity was taking on a much more practical and immediate tenor. For example, during the 1980–1981 academic year, the OSB helped to organise 'self-defence classes mainly to cater for overseas and ethnic minority students' due to the 'recent upsurge of racist and sexist violence' in Sheffield and around the country.¹²² The stated aims of these activities show a shift in focus and understanding of overseas students within the OSB. Rather than supporting overseas students to better 'integrate' into student life, the OSB was working to politicise overseas students and encourage them to see their own treatment, particularly their fees, as connected to anti-racist activity of Britain's Black populations and to liberation struggles around the world.

The OSB continued to work with the local community in the late 1970s, usually in the role of service provider. Its language bank continued to offer interpreters and it continued to send speakers 'all over Sheffield' to talk about 'the traditions and culture of their own countries'.¹²³ Yet it was also keen to point out that it 'realise[d] the importance of uniting with Black immigrants in its fight against racism'.¹²⁴ In the early 1980s, the OSB continued 'the tradition of the International Cultural Evening' and 'introduced Afro-Caribbean evenings', using them to reach out to local immigrant communities as well. The OSB aimed to 'improve the O.S.B.'s relations with black students and the black community of Sheffield'.¹²⁵ This is the first suggestion by the OSB that there were Black students at Sheffield who were not overseas students and suggests that there may have been a shift taking place around the understanding of Black and overseas students as synonymous. The OSB's support for Black communities in Britain was not confined to the immediate area. Equally of note, it also supported important national campaigns including the campaign to reunite Anwar Ditta, a British citizen of Pakistani heritage, with her children, and the New Cross Massacre Campaign.¹²⁶

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the OSB's work to support overseas students in Sheffield was only one aspect of what it saw as a wider mission. All of its varied activities, it argued, worked together to create a 'strong National Campaign against racism, fee increases, quotas and the Immigration Acts'.¹²⁷ The OSB used the terminology of political

¹²¹SUA, OSB, '3rd term report 1978–9', 2.

¹²²SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1980–1', 2.

¹²³SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1976–7', 3.

¹²⁴SUA, OSB, '3rd term report 1978–9', 1.

¹²⁵SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1980–1', 1.

¹²⁶*ibid.*, 2. For a discussion of the Anwar Ditta campaign, see A. Ramamurthy, 'The politics of Britain's Asian Youth Movements', *Race & Class*, 48, 38 (2006), 38–60, here 49–50. For more information about the New Cross Fire and the response of the Black community, see C. Pierre, 'The New Cross Fire of 1981 and its aftermath' in H. Adi (ed.), *Black British History: New perspectives* (London, 2019), 162–75.

¹²⁷SUA, OSB, 'Annual report 1978–9', 1.

Blackness and devoted its work to ‘strengthening and establishing OSBs in other colleges and universities to increase contacts with black immigrants’, including sending speakers to Leeds, York, Hull, Nottingham ‘and various other colleges’.¹²⁸ Instead of focusing on educating British students about the rest of the world, at the end of the 1970s an important part of its work was raising ‘the social awareness of local overseas students about imperialism and fascism’.¹²⁹ In the early 1980s, the OSB still saw itself as a social, welfare and educational organisation, but also saw itself as inherently political.¹³⁰ To fight racism, it argued, it could not ‘perceive Racism through the perspective of attacks on students but rather perceive attacks on students through the perspective of Racism’.¹³¹

Conclusion

During the 1970s the make-up of overseas students underwent significant changes, with implications for associations such as the OSB. Numbers of overseas students, particularly in polytechnics and colleges, went up substantially, as did their fees. What is more, the gulf between overseas and home fees widened. The OSB was set up in 1968 to ‘bridge’ the divide between home and overseas students. It continued to work to bring the two groups together, but its goals for doing so in the late 1970s were significantly different to those in the earlier period. Whereas, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the intention was to create opportunities for British and overseas students to form friendships and for British students to learn more about the world, by the end of the decade the aim was rather to educate both about the interconnections of anti-imperialist and anti-racist struggles in Britain and internationally.

The OSB was created during a period when ideas of political Blackness and Black power were gaining ground in London, but these were not the ideas that fuelled its activities and approach in these years. This exploration of the work of activists in Sheffield, a city in northern England, helps to nuance understandings and chronologies that tend to be based on evidence from the capital. The students involved in the OSB in these early years continued to see the main problem facing overseas students as one of integration and assimilation. They understood their role as a ‘bridge’ between entirely separate, but equal, communities of Black overseas students and white British students. They understood all students, overseas and British alike, as part of an upper- or middle-class international elite. When

¹²⁸SUA, OSB, ‘3rd term report 1978–9’, 1.

¹²⁹*ibid.*

¹³⁰SUA, ‘Sheffield Council for Racial Equality application for affiliated membership from Sheffield University Students Union’, 1 August 1986.

¹³¹SUA, OSB, ‘Annual report 1979–80’, 5. Capitalisation in the original.

they interacted with the local community, which they did by providing invaluable help to local immigrant communities, it was from a position of authority and superiority. However, from the middle of the 1970s, there were clear changes in the approach of the OSB towards both their fellow students and local immigrant communities. The fee increase was a catalyst for greater political activity, but it was supported by an altered understanding of the ways in which Black and Asian overseas students were perceived by wider British society and treated by the British state. The fees campaign served as the focus around which the OSB radicalised, but it was carried out within a context of increasingly blatant, and violent, racial discrimination on British streets and the recognition by students that despite their status as educational and socio-economic elites, on the streets most British people judged them solely by the colour of their skin.

In exploring this small organisation in detail, this article encourages a critical assessment of how overseas students were conceptualised. The example of the OSB in Sheffield highlights the pervasiveness of imperial mindsets which understood overseas students as poor, needy, Black students from the 'Third World'. As the authors of the Grubb Institute's report found, the background and experiences of overseas students varied widely. Yet, they were often discussed, and publicly understood, as a uniform group and as 'symbols' rather than individuals. As students, they were seen as 'primitive or dull-witted', as clients they were treated with either 'condescension to the poor student' or 'aggression towards the rich', and as visitors to the UK they evoked 'suspicion and physical attack'.¹³² Unpicking the ways in which these 'symbols' about overseas students were understood and perpetuated helps us better understand how ideas about race were circulating in 1970s Britain. The discussion of overseas students, by authorities and students themselves, reinforced rather than challenged the linkage between overseas students and Blackness which, in turn, reinforced the linkage between colour and belonging, entirely erasing the existence of Black British students. Both the OSB and the government were, in this way, contributing to the racialisation of overseas students as Black, and British students as white. While 'unity in our struggle' continued to be the strength of the OSB, the question of whom they attempted to unify changed over the course of the long 1970s. Instead of being unified solely along the lines of its student identity, the OSB now sought to create unity on the basis of skin colour and patterns of discrimination.

¹³²The Grubb Institute, *op. cit.*, 66.

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