

## **Special Relations: The University of London and the University College of the West Indies**

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### **Introduction**

On 13<sup>th</sup> July 1943, in the midst of war, Mr Oliver Stanley, Secretary of State for the Colonies, announced that he was setting up a commission to enquire into higher education in the territories for which he was responsible. The commission of enquiry, chaired by Sir Cyril Asquith, clearly stated its aim of eventual full independent status for existing and new institutions, and for an interim period advised adapting the University of London external degree programme, alongside a system of colonial university colleges, based on three key principles – that the conduct of examinations should approximate as closely as possible the procedures associated with the internal colleges of the University of London; that the staffs of the colonial colleges should participate in the examination of their students, in a “genuine partnership between the external examiners appointed by the University of London and the members of the Colonial staffs”; and that the syllabuses for examinations “should as far as possible be adjusted to the geographical and other conditions of the Colonial colleges”.

Between 1947 and 1970 the University of London assisted eight institutions in Africa and the Caribbean to become independent universities. In an enterprise as unique in character as in magnitude the University’s partners were fully autonomous, with an intention to pave the way for full independence with high academic standards entitling them to respect in the international academic community. This paper will examine the background to and the early years of the relationship between the University of London and the University College of the West Indies. The paper draws largely upon University of London’s archives and records of the relationship and will concentrate on the British and University of London histories and perspectives.

Today I want to focus on some of the debates in scholarly literature on the “special relationship” and to examine some of the more fundamental questions that arose from the recommendations of the Asquith Commission.

## **Background**

### **Brief history of Caribbean higher education initiatives**

The history of higher education in the Caribbean did not begin with the Asquith Commission and the subsequent birth of the University College of the West Indies.

Several specialist tertiary institutions in the Caribbean existed before the establishment of the University College of the West Indies, many predating secondary schools. Apart from Codrington College in Barbados, which became operational as a college in 1830 and offered degrees in collaboration with Durham University from 1875, the earliest of these specialist institutions were the teachers colleges in Jamaica – Mico College (1836), Bethlehem College (1861), Shortwood College (1884) and St Joseph's Teachers College (1897). Guyana had the School of Nursing (1906) and Cyril Potter College of Education (1928), Trinidad the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (1922), and there were a number of early religious initiatives including West Indies College in Jamaica (1919), and the Caribbean Union College in Trinidad (1927) set up for religious and other education in association with Andrews University, Michigan, USA.

Codrington College had been established first as a grammar school in 1745, as a college in 1829 and affiliated to University of Durham in 1829 preparing students in theology, education and classics. In addition there had been several abortive attempts to establish universities and colleges in the British West Indies including the Baptist Calabar College in Jamaica established in 1844 to train ministers, Queen's Royal College in Trinidad (1857) and Queen's College of Spanish Town, in Jamaica (1873). The major obstacle to the establishment of institutions of higher education had been financial.<sup>1</sup>

Within the British West Indies the foundation of a university was one of items on agenda for the 1926 Standing Conference established by British Guiana, British Honduras, Bahamas, Bermuda and the British West Indies, and was supported by the Legislative Councils of Jamaica and Trinidad in 1927 and 1928, and by the First West Indian Conference in 1929. In 1938 the Jamaican government set up a committee in 1938 to consider the problem, a public meeting in 1942 led to formation of a Provisional Committee to make plans for a university college, and in 1943 the Legislative Council passed a resolution in favour of founding a university. In Barbados in the same year a committee was appointed to consider enlarging the curriculum of Codrington College, and the University of London

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts (2003), 34-37; Braithwaite (1958)

Association in British Guiana sent a memorandum to Colonial Office urging provision for higher education in the West Indies.<sup>2</sup>

While the British West Indies had no university of its own students studied for degrees overseas and in 1946-47 there were 275 West Indian students in British universities and even larger numbers studying in North America.<sup>3</sup> The traditional pattern of the upper classes had been to send children away for higher, and in some cases secondary, education, and the coloured middle classes inherited the tradition, reinforced by the creation of increased educational mobility based upon a scholarship system.<sup>4</sup>

Students also studied for the University of London external exams (of which more later), with the first person to register for these exams in the West Indies, dating 1871, Francis de Courcy Skeete, aged 19, and the first record of Matriculation passes dating from 1874, when there were five candidates and four passed, including Charles Charter Pilgrim Shepherd. Centres registered for examinations included those in Trinidad, Barbados, Jamaica and Demerara, and by the 1890s in Antigua, the Bahamas, and Bermuda.<sup>5</sup>

### **University of London**

The University of London had been approached early in the Colonial government's consideration of higher education in the colonies. It is worth reflecting on the background to the University of London's role in this initiative.

In 1858 the Charter of the University of London opened the London degree to all who could fulfil its entry requirements and pay its fees – without requirements that one had to study in a particular place or institution in order to graduate. Prior to 1858 there had been a system of affiliated colleges, including medical schools in Malta, Ceylon, Bengal, Canada and Bombay. In the mid 1860s came the first opportunities for students to sit the University's examinations outside the UK, with centres established in Mauritius in 1864 and Gibraltar in 1866.<sup>6</sup> Even before this expansion, in 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>2</sup> Pattison (1984), 12-13

<sup>3</sup> Kenyon-Jones (2008), 122

<sup>4</sup> Braithwaite (1965)

<sup>5</sup> Kenyon-Jones (2008), 44

<sup>6</sup> Kenyon-Jones (2008), 7-11

nearly all the early students who sat external exams had been born in the colonies and had probably never visited Britain at the time they sat their exams.

The University of London also had systems of special relations within England, with the university colleges of Southampton, Hull, Exeter, and Leicester.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Asquith Commission, the Irvine Committee, and the system of Special Relations**

The Asquith Commission of Enquiry was set up 1943, chaired by Sir Cyril Asquith, other members included Professor Channon and two members of his 1940 Advisory Committee in Education in the Colonies, Sir Fred Clarke and Miss Margery Perham, four members from the University of London (AM Carr-Saunders, Sir Fred Clarke, Professor Lillian Penson and Dr RV Southwell), three from Oxford, and one from Cambridge.<sup>8</sup>

Important background to the setting up of the committee were general economic and social events, including the depression of 1930s, described by Hugh Springer the first Registrar of the University College as the “midwife who ministered at the birth of the West Indian nation” along with other events leading to the policy of the ending of Empire.<sup>9</sup> The Colonial and Development Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945 were important parts of a wider programme of colonial development, partially triggered of course by labour disturbances in the West Indies.

The Commission had a West Indies Committee, under the chair of Sir James Irvine, which travelled through the West Indies. The Irvine Commissions five members included two West Indians and an additional two West Indian members in particular territories. The recommendations from the Committee largely accorded with the Asquith Commission’s decisions – a centralised university modelled on the British model, residential in nature, engaged in research as well as teaching and in special relations (described by the Irvine Committee as a period of apprenticeship) with the University of London.

The Irvine Committee made one recommendation not accepted by the Asquith Committee, finding medical services so undermined that the early establishment of a complete Faculty of Medicine need be given priority in any University of the West Indies the subcommittee recommended the

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<sup>7</sup> Kenyon-Jones (2008), 68

<sup>8</sup> Pattison (1984), 22

<sup>9</sup> Springer (1961), 10

immediate establishment of a medical school in Trinidad, with the assistance of McGill University Montreal. This recommendation failed due to the decision not to base the University College in Trinidad, hence any medical school would only be a temporary institute, and due to local desires that medical qualifications be recognised by the General Medical Council in London.<sup>10</sup>

The University modified its existing External System in four ways – special entrance requirements could be prescribed for the new colleges’ students; special syllabuses could be drawn up to suit their individual needs; special examination papers were set for each college; and the papers were set and the scripts were marked by special boards of examiners which were composed partly of teachers from the college concerned and partly of teachers of the University of London.<sup>11</sup> Not everyone in the UK had agreed with the relationship with the University of London, the Irvine Committee recommending an immediate medical school set up with McGill University, and an alternative proposal had been a one to one relationship with individual universities in Britain.<sup>12</sup>

The formal proposal for affiliation between the University College of the West Indies and the University of London was approved in June 1948 and the University College was established by Royal Charter in January 1949. The first 33 medical students were admitted in October 1948, although construction on the university did not begin until 1949 and library and laboratories were not complete until 1951. The speed of development was governed by the need to construct halls of residence for students, as the Asquith report had strongly urged that the new colleges should be residential. Courses in the University College faculty of science began in 1949 and in the faculty of arts in 1950.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than detail the operation of the Special Relationship, I want today to concentrate on some of the more fundamental questions that arose from the recommendations of the Asquith Commission.

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<sup>10</sup> Pattison (1984), 44; Springer (1961), 11

<sup>11</sup> Kenyon-Jones (2008), 115

<sup>12</sup> Thomson (1956), 367

<sup>13</sup> Kenyon-Jones (2008), 122

## The Official History

The official history of the scheme was written by Bruce Pattison (a lecturer in English, University College, London, 1936-1948, then Professor of Education, University of London Institute of Education, 1948-1976 and Emeritus) and published by the University of London

Bruce Pattison, Special Relations. *The University of London and New Universities Overseas, 1947-1970*, University of London, 1984

Pattison's official history of the scheme describes a success but describes how in a "unique enterprise" between 1947 and 1970 the University of London assisted eight institutions in Africa and the Caribbean to become universities.<sup>14</sup> His history notes some of the tensions between the University College of the West Indies and the University of London – including a dispute about the words "as an External student" on first diplomas sent out to the West Indies and some apprehension on the part of the University College before the first appointments of College examiners was made.<sup>15</sup> Pattison notes also that though the University received funds from the Colonial Office (from Colonial Development and Welfare funds) for the administration of the scheme (primarily to cover costs of travel for examiners), the amount given for administrative costs (£70600 in first ten years) bore no relation to real costs. He notes too the scale of the operation – at its peak in 1961-62, 691 appointments of London-based examiners had to be made and 280 teachers of the University accepted them, and over 1000 papers a session were printed.<sup>16</sup>

According to the Asquith Report,

"...universities serve the double purpose of refining and maintaining all that is best in local traditions and cultures and at the same time providing a means whereby those brought up under the influence of these traditions and cultures may enter on a footing of equality into the world-wide community of intellect..." (10-11)

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<sup>14</sup> Pattison (1984), v

<sup>15</sup> University of London Archives AC 11/16/1 Letter from H W Springer "shocked" to discover graduates described as external students, noting distinction important in relations with public of West Indies and returning certificates received 15 Dec, 1952; AC 11/6/3 Letter from Lillian M Penson to S J Worsley on need to avoid word 'external' since conveyed the wrong impression that not members of a university or college, Pattison (1984), 70-71

<sup>16</sup> Pattison (1984), 75-76

While there is no doubt that universities generated by the Special Relationship fulfilled the second purpose, Pattison questions how well they the former objective.

### **Local adaptation**

One key role of the University was to approve adaptations to syllabuses to suit local conditions. In relation to the University College of the West Indies early proposals in 1951 for Special degrees in both Arts and Sciences (as opposed to the BA and BSc (General) degrees held in lower esteem) was blocked by a conservative minority within the University. Only a few years later the General degree was abandoned. Modifications of syllabus depended largely on the nature of the discipline concerned. At the University College a BA General student had to study the history of the Caribbean area from 1604, and another paper could be history of Americas from 1492, with special emphasis on the period beginning in 1774. Special subjects included the reconstruction of the Confederate States of America, 1863-77 and Jamaica and the amelioration of the Slave Laws. The Sociology option in the BSc (Econ) had a paper on Caribbean Social Structure. Recognising creole varieties of English, the University College began a Linguistic Survey of the Caribbean in 1954, which informed a new subject The English Language with Special Reference to the Caribbean for the BA General.<sup>17</sup>

The degree of local adaptation (or lack of it) was one of the criticisms of the colonial universities. Generally, the University of London modified syllabuses as much as it could while remaining compatible with the principle that University of London degrees were the same (or of the same standard) wherever awarded. Pattison suggests that the University would have agreed to more modifications than was asked to make, and considers that initial requests were less radical due to the need to use existing textbooks, that many courses were of universal application (eg mathematics, chemistry), and due to insufficient local experience amongst staff (both indigenous and European), and a lack of research to base new teaching on.<sup>18</sup> L J Lewis, Professor of Education in Tropical Areas, University of London Institute of Education, in 1959 wrote "In the teaching work of the new universities and university colleges... disappointment may be expressed at the apparent lack of imagination in treatment of the content of the syllabuses and in exploring teaching techniques" blaming blamed in part "a conservative tendency arising largely from anxiety that the standards

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<sup>17</sup> Pattison (1984), 83-86, 90

<sup>18</sup> Pattison (1984), 162

attained should undoubtedly be related, and seen clearly to be related, to United Kingdom standards” .<sup>19</sup>

In the University College of the West Indies some local factors also impacted on which courses were offered. The University College made important contributions to promoting and enabling the teaching of West Indian history in primary and secondary schools.<sup>20</sup> Whilst a Diploma in Education was offered outside the University of London arrangement delays in Agriculture were due to the complication of the presence of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad, which had been established to support the administration of the tropical empire. Centralisation and residence worked against an early solution, which was only resolved in 1960, with the decision to more generally expand activity in Trinidad.

### **Elitism and the “colonial university”**

When the Irvine Committee met and consulted in the Caribbean one significant voice opposed the very nature of the university that should emerge from its findings.

Dr Eric Williams, “largely a voice crying in the wilderness”<sup>21</sup>, criticised secondary education in the British West Indies, describing it as focused on the intelligentsia and not adapted to the needs of the community, with this artificiality due to a large extent to the British colonial practice of taking the external examinations of Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising that he then states that despite the prestige in the region of Oxford and Cambridge “where... as in the British West Indies, there is room for only one university, in a social environment fundamentally different from that of Britain, it is to other universities and not to Oxford and Cambridge that it is necessary to look”.<sup>23</sup> Williams called for a university modelled on the United States land grant universities (such as the University of Puerto Rico) or the Negro universities like Howard and Fisk; established and controlled by the State, and therefore accountable to the State and therefore the people, but protected from State interference. Such a university would be centralised but non-residential (the residential requirement described as “a medieval survival in a bourgeois world”), with a curriculum designed for the British

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis (1959), 12

<sup>20</sup> Goveia (1969)

<sup>21</sup> Braithwaite (1965), 79

<sup>22</sup> Williams (1968), 11, 30-32

<sup>23</sup> Williams (1968), 62



West Indies, taking into account the social and economic needs of the islands, their geographical location and the chief fields of employment available to graduates – that is, in agriculture, teaching, social work, public service, nursing and sanitation.<sup>24</sup> Hilary Beckles suggests that while the colonial nature of the university did give rise to some concerns West Indians as a whole “knew that it was unintelligent to ‘cut off your nose to spite your face’, and protected, respected and cherished the university given to them in 1948”.<sup>25</sup>

As the university colleges became independent universities they were increasingly criticised in their own countries and the metropolises for being mere imitations of British universities.

Eric Ashby’s Godkin Lecture at Harvard University in 1964 on “African Universities and Western Tradition”<sup>26</sup> created a debate within scholarly journals about the elite system of university education that had been exported to Africa. Ashby criticised the elitist nature of the British model, describing what he describes as the Asquith doctrine as “a vivid expression of British cultural parochialism: its basic assumption was that a university system appropriate for Europeans brought up in London and Manchester and Hull was also appropriate for Africans brought up in Lagos and Kumasi and Kampala.”

In 1973 John Hargreaves discussed the concept of the “colonial university” citing Dr Onoge, a radical young sociology lecturer who defined a colonial university as one “which paid greater attention to its standing in the eyes of foreigners than to the relevance of its activities to the needs of its own country”. Hargreaves critiqued the assumptions of academic freedom and autonomy, of implied moral education, standards controlled by a system of external examination, and the importance given to research.<sup>27</sup>

Caribbean voices in the latter years also critiqued the British model. Dr M G Smith questioned the validity of a model based on “medieval Cambridge”, with an expectation of support from the community without any reciprocal obligation, though noted that in practice elements of elitist and populist organisation and procedure were generally combined in many different forms. Smith noted the financial dependency of the University on regional governments’ support and that limited

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<sup>24</sup> Williams (1968), 81-98

<sup>25</sup> In Howe (2000), xiii

<sup>26</sup> Ashby (1964)

<sup>27</sup> Hargreaves (1973)

financial support from the West Indian government in the 1950s and unavoidably small size may have entrenched elitist attitudes.<sup>28</sup>

Elitism was perhaps inevitable, reflecting a British system that was by international standards very elitist, and also in light of the nature of secondary schooling in the colonies. Secondary schooling in most of the British West Indies was elitist and of varying quality, few scholarships were available to allow students to move from primary to secondary school, and inadequate provision of scholarships and loans and the costs of residence in the University College of the West Indies barred access for some secondary students who had academic qualifications but lacked financial support.<sup>29</sup> A P Thomson, then Vice-Principal, University of Birmingham, noted slow progress with the colonial university colleges due to the “dearth of good primary and secondary schools”. He acknowledged that some argued it would have been better to establish more schools and delay university institutions for some years, but that this needed to be balanced against the need for trained teachers and the “intense desire in native colonial people for university education”.<sup>30</sup>

The Hon. Leslie Robinson, Pro Vice Chancellor, UWI and Principal, Mona Campus, in 1991 reflected on the charge of elitism, acknowledging that the residential and gowned student body at a single campus, with a relatively small intake of students “made it appear somewhat elitist”, but concludes that the logic behind these decisions was reasonable and based on West Indian desires for a “first class institution”. While slow growth attracted criticism, this was necessary for early consolidation.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Cato Committee and the move to independence**

In 1957 under the urging of Dr Eric Williams, the recently elected Premier of Trinidad and Tobago, the Standing Federation Committee appointed a committee of territorial representatives, led by Dr A S Cato, and including Dr Williams to examine the financial proposals put forward by the Council of the UCWI for the quinquennium running from 1958, and to make recommendations. The Cato Committee was specifically directed to examine the policy of the College and review it under four general headings: the appointment and promotion of West Indians on the staff; the nature and scope of the teaching provided, or which should be provided; the residential character of the

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<sup>28</sup> Carr (1962), 222, Smith (1965)

<sup>29</sup> Hall (1998), 17, 33-34

<sup>30</sup> Thomson (1956)

<sup>31</sup> Robinson (1991)

College; and the relationship of the UCWI with the University of London. The questions of teaching provided and relationship with the University of London carried a suggestion of political encroachment on academic policy direction. Hall noted that there was within the University College a growing impatience with the 'special relationship'.<sup>32</sup>

In a letter from then Principal, WW Grave, to University of London Vice-Chancellor 1948-51, Lillian Penson, Grave describes the proposal for the Committee coming from Williams "who has in the past been critical of this University College and has regarded it as 'dominated' by the University of London", and who it was rumoured was trying to set up a rival institution in Trinidad. He notes that the first he heard of the Committee was via the newspapers and discusses differences of opinion within the University College regarding the continuation of the Special Relationship, noting division among faculty lines (medical faculty being for example in less of a hurry) and that West Indian members of staff were more strongly in favour of independent status.<sup>33</sup> At the time about one third of staff were West Indian. Relationships between members of staff were described by D'Aeth as good but he hints at some conflict: "The spirit among the staff of UCWI's early pioneer years was bound to change as it grew larger; yet, although there have been a few misfits, the feeling of partnership between West Indians and overseas staff has continued."<sup>34</sup>

The Cato Commission recommended expansion and a move towards autonomy by 1963. Williams was a member of the Committee but was only able to attend one meeting in Trinidad, and under pressure of public business was unable to read the draft report. The report noted the rapid political, economic and social change in the region, and acknowledged the great value of the scheme to the colleges in the early years of their growth, and concluded sufficient progress had been made to review that status and move towards independence and full university status.

### **Development and decolonisation reconsidered**

The Asquith report made much of the move towards self-rule. Carr-Saunders reminds us though that self-rule and independence occurred more rapidly than expected across the former British empire,

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<sup>32</sup> Hall (1998), 35

<sup>33</sup> University of London Archives AC 11/6/3 Letter from WW Grave to Lillian Penson, November 1957

<sup>34</sup> D'Aeth (1961), 111

noting that Margery Perham, writing in 1951, thought it not bold to believe that self-governance would take place “by the end of the century”.<sup>35</sup>

The Colonial Development and Welfare Act 1940 can be considered as an “in principle” abandonment of the laissez-faire attitude towards colonial development, and idea that each colony should be self-supporting. The Act was also a statement that the development of human resources deserved the same consideration as material development.<sup>36</sup> The 1945 Act and Statement of purpose expanded on this change, increasing expenditure and including schemes for higher education, geodetic and topographical surveys, and research and training schemes for the Colonial Service. The notion of trusteeship was replaced by the word “partnership”<sup>37</sup>.

The Asquith Commission and subsequent activities were part of new range of strategies for dependent colonies designed to further development of their resources, promote of public services to increase welfare of their people and the “gradual emergence of well-educated elites to whom the British government could gradually transfer responsibility for the administration, the technical services and (more slowly perhaps) for the taking of political decisions” – part of a strategy of gradual and controlled decolonisation. The colonial universities would never have received the necessary financial support had they not been linked to the political objective of preparing decolonisation.<sup>38</sup>

But while British colonialism was on the defensive from the 1930s, it was not in retreat.<sup>39</sup> It has been argued that the stated goal of self-government and Colonial Development and Welfare was to make for good public relations and moral rearmament of the British Empire, to preserve the empire, rather than liquidate it and to tie an educated elite, and potential future leaders to Britain.<sup>40</sup> In relation to Africa it has been suggested that the colonial universities were in part a reaction to apprehension about the potentially disrupting effects of American education upon the colonial status quo.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Carr-Saunders (1965), 229

<sup>36</sup> Wicker (1958), 183

<sup>37</sup> Wicker (1958), 184

<sup>38</sup> Hargreaves (1973), 27, 29

<sup>39</sup> Constantine (1984), 264

<sup>40</sup> Pearce (1984), 85, 93

<sup>41</sup> Nwauwa (1993), 255

Cobley has described the projects overriding mission as “to ensure that the obligation of the British government to guide the colonies towards self-rule through the promotion of higher education was met without sacrificing continuing British interest and influence”, and as part of larger project to contain and to some extent co-opt rising anti-colonial elites – but points out the paradox that a single unitary institution was entirely in alignment with the agenda of West Indian nationalists.<sup>42</sup>

### **A retrospective view**

In his address to the graduating class of 1963 Eric Williams stated: “Your university came on the scene too late. In conception it was too narrow. It was too rapidly overtaken by the political evolution in the area that it served. It grew too slowly. Its period of tutelage lasted too long, but that chequered career... is behind us.”<sup>43</sup>

The Asquith Commission and subsequent system of Special Relations with the University of London was not without critics, but was successful in producing a university which was then able to adapt and develop to better meet local needs. The Irvine Committee was clear that the university was first to establish its reputation in the region by high standards, and then to move quickly to full academic independence and to work out its own solutions to local economic, social and cultural issues.<sup>44</sup> How well the University of the West Indies has accomplished this is outside the scope of this paper.

Pattison, in the University of London official history noted some failings in the early university college. The aim of graduates filling senior posts in administration, education and the professions was stymied by the lack of clear lines of advancement to senior posts, and higher remuneration and better chances of promotion went to local people who had managed to study abroad.<sup>45</sup> The University College also achieved only limited success in establishing itself as a natural destination for West Indian students, the entrance requirements turning away many potential students and with a continued preference by many for overseas universities and colleges, partially due to the limited course offering first provided.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cobley in Howe (2000), 13-14

<sup>43</sup> Williams (1963)

<sup>44</sup> D’Aeth (1961), 104

<sup>45</sup> Pattison (1984), 166

<sup>46</sup> Cobley in Howe (2000), 15

Meriting further study is the impact on the University of London. Pattison notes that London teachers learnt a great deal from thinking about their disciplines in new contexts, and that many of those who participated returned to work in the UK and brought these experiences to British academic life.<sup>47</sup> Hargreaves stated “I am convinced that the benefits to British universities... of their work for the colonial universities, has far more than repaid the cost to them. And the same is true, in my own experience, of individuals.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Pattison (1984), 166

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