

Research Proposal: University Labour movements, student activism, and partisan identity

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Objectives

The objectives of my research would broadly be to examine the interplay of partisan identities, policy preferences and political activities within the membership of university Labour associations (those organised as part of the Labour Students framework). Particularly, the research would seek to use interpretive research methods to examine the formulation of political identity and preferences within these associations, especially given the common but controversial perceptions of ‘radical’ student politics, as well as to whether there seems to be variation in the political cultures of these associations across different universities. Additionally, my research would examine the interplay between membership of official Labour organisations and involvement in open political activism such as non-affiliated public protests or those organised by Student Unions. Thus, my research would centre around the following questions:

- To what extent do members of organised university Labour movements represent particularly radical left-wing policy opinions and partisan identity and why?
- To what extent do members of organised university Labour movements and Labour-identifying students play a particularly important role as participants in open student union and general political activism?
- To what extent do the political cultures of university Labour associations vary across different universities, and what reasons for this might there be?

Ultimately, my research would have as its objective the production of a theory- and literature-based work which would attempt to generate working hypotheses on the research questions; this would be followed by a small-scale two-stage study of Labour associations at a small number of British universities which would attempt to test, evaluate and reformulate the working hypotheses based on the results.

Summer 1

My research during the first period would consist of a literature-based study examining the theory and history of university Labour movements, their ideological and identity relationship with the party at large, in order to generate a theoretical basis for the project and potentially generate working hypotheses in order to answer my research questions. This stage of the project might also, time and resources permitting, include a very small-scale pilot study of a single university Labour association (likely either Newcastle or Durham), consisting of interviews of members in order to supplement and adjust potential working hypotheses.

Summer 2

My research during the second period would consist of a small-scale exploratory study of university Labour movements at a number of British universities, in order to operationalise the literature-based work done during the previous summer. This would be likely to consist of a survey component which could be completed by members of Labour associations at around 5 universities, followed by a more detailed interview or focus group component which would be undertaken at one or two institutions using face-to-face or phone interviewing techniques for further data collection purposes. The working hypotheses and theory generated by the literature-based study the previous summer could then be tested, evaluated and reformulated in the light of the results of this study.