

# **Student Funding and University Access after the Great War: The Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen at Aberystwyth, Liverpool and Oxford**

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## ABSTRACT

*This article makes a fresh contribution to the literature on student funding and its history by drawing attention to a pioneering government initiative, launched in the aftermath of the Great War. From the winter of 1918–1919 until 1923, the Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen provided grants to university students in England and Wales. We argue that it amounted to a major educational reform venture: it supported students on an unprecedented scale, covering fees and maintenance across a broad range of courses and institutions. In order to produce an in-depth analysis of this scheme and its local operation, we have drawn on archival evidence from the Board of Education, the University of Liverpool, the University of Oxford and the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. Our discussion addresses the application process, means-testing and funding decisions as well as the profiles and experiences of grant recipients. The scale and impact of the ex-service scheme raises wider questions about the societal value accorded to higher education within the context of reconstruction after the Great War.*

Keywords: student funding, grants, higher education, ex-servicemen, First World War, interwar Britain

## **1. Introduction**

The 1918 Education Act and the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act expanded educational provision at several levels and constitute milestones in the history of British educational reform. Gary McCulloch (2019, p. 1) has noted that these measures had an ‘immense impact on the nature of education in the UK’, ranking them alongside the 1988 Education Act and ‘the other two agenda-setting master-Acts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those of 1902 and 1944’. Passed in the final months of the Great War, the 1918 Education Act was the culmination of debates that predated the conflict (Sherington, 1976). At the same time, the legislation formed part of the planning for a post-war world, as education was seen as a cornerstone of reconstruction (Andrews, 1976; Dean, 1970; Sherington, 1981).

In homage to H. A. L. Fisher, the 1918 Education Act is also known as the ‘Fisher Act’. Fisher stressed the durability of the reforms that he had helped to launch as President of the Board of Education. As he noted, the legislation was ‘still, in substance, our educational code’ over twenty years later (Fisher, 1940, p. 110). Yet, in looking back on 1918–1919, he also highlighted innovations in the realm of higher education (Fisher, 1940, pp. 114–117). Efforts in this domain resulted in new arrangements for university funding via the creation of the University Grants Committee in 1919. Students were the direct beneficiaries of another initiative, the Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen. Operated by the Board of Education, this venture provided grants to 27,772 students in England and Wales between 1918 and 1923 (Board of Education, 1924, p. 142). Meanwhile, related measures in Scotland supported 5,848 individuals (Committee of the Privy Council on Education in Scotland, 1925, p. 25). These numbers are remarkable when compared to pre-war enrolments which, during the 1913–1914 academic year, had stood at around 26,700 (Taylor, 2018, p. 7).

Seen from one angle, the ex-service scheme contributed to a wider post-war process, namely the integration of veterans into British society (Swift and Wilkinson, 2019). Indeed,

the university grants co-existed with schemes through which the Ministry of Labour funded apprenticeships and other forms of training for veterans (Deakin, 1996, pp. 47–48). However, as we argue in this article, the ex-service scheme can also be treated as an educational reform initiative: well before the democratisation and massification of higher education, it supported large numbers of students across a range of courses and institutions.

Although open to men only, the scale of the ex-service scheme vastly exceeded any other funding measures in this period. Local Education Authorities had been awarding scholarships since 1902, yet awards were unevenly distributed and the number of maintained students was comparatively low: 1,327 in 1911–1912 and 2,423 in 1921–1922 (Ellis, 1925, pp. 25–26). While teachers in training were eligible for government funding from 1910 onwards (Dyhouse, 2004, p. 23), such provision remained confined to a specific constituency. Another post-war venture – the State Scholarships launched in 1920 – supported students from grant-aided secondary schools. However, only 200 awards were made in the initial rounds, followed by a two-year hiatus (Board of Education, 1923, p. 69).

It makes particular sense to analyse the ex-service grants within the context of educational reform for two reasons. Firstly, the 1918 Education Act provided the legal underpinning for the funding mechanisms of the ex-service scheme. While mostly aimed at schooling, Section 44 of the Fisher Act mentioned grants in areas ‘other than elementary education’. Accordingly, the regulations for the grant scheme explicitly cited Section 44’s requirements for parliamentary assent (Board of Education, 1919a). Secondly, the provision of ex-service grants raised wider questions about educational access. Fisher himself certainly believed that it helped to widen participation in higher education. Claiming to have ‘examined every dossier’ himself, he suggested that recipients overwhelmingly came ‘from families to whom the notion of a university career for one of their numbers would have seemed up to that time foreign, if not fantastic’ (Fisher, 1940, p. 114). By contrast, a recent book on British

veterans notes that ‘the number of soldiers who went to university remained a tiny percentage of the adult population’ and argues that ‘[m]any would have gone there anyway, being predominantly private-school-educated officers’ (Powell, 2019, p. 79). Our article uses a wealth of local sources to reveal a more complex picture than these conflicting assessments suggest.

Until now, the ex-service grants have largely eluded scholarly attention. A recent article has considered them within the context of post-war reconstruction, covering national measures as well as university life in London and the North East of England (Brewis *et al.*, 2020). The present piece adopts a different approach: it offers the first detailed analysis of the scheme’s local operation. A focus on local funding arrangements is apt in view of the Board of Education’s role in this period. Amherst Selby-Bigge, its Permanent Secretary from 1911 to 1925, stated that the Board had ‘no authority over universities, university colleges or university education’ (Selby-Bigge, 1927, p. 22). In the interwar period, responsibility for the ‘adequate provision of higher education’ (Selby-Bigge, 1927, p. 20) largely resided with Local Education Authorities. Even though the ex-service scheme operated across England and Wales, we can only understand it when considering local decision-making and implementation.

Our article draws on records from three institutions: the University of Oxford, the University of Liverpool and the University of College of Wales, Aberystwyth. Each represented a different type of establishment. Oxford was one of the two ‘ancient’ universities, Liverpool a nineteenth-century ‘redbrick’ and Aberystwyth a constituent part of the University of Wales. With respectively 1,519 and 1,475 grant recipients by the end of the 1919–1920 session, Oxford and Liverpool hosted more ex-service students than any other university bar Cambridge (Board of Education, 1921, p. 83). We have researched Oxford rather than Cambridge because of its longstanding links to the adult education movement, which contributed to the ex-service scheme’s genesis (Brewis *et al.*, 2020, pp. 89–90). With 439 grant

recipients by 1920, Aberystwyth's numbers were much lower than Oxford's or Liverpool's, yet larger than for any other Welsh institution. With Aberystwyth's student population amounting to 1,061 in early 1920, funded ex-servicemen constituted over 41 per cent of the student body (Council of University College Wales, 1920). Other colleges and universities had a similar ratio, indicating the considerable size of the ex-service cohort.

Our article examines several dimensions of the grant scheme's operation: the application process, funding decisions, academic arrangements as well as wider institutional implications. A discussion of these aspects can help to develop a specific research area, namely the history of student funding. Notwithstanding pioneering work by Carol Dyhouse (2004, pp. 13–33), the history of higher education tends to be dominated by issues such as the social profile of students (Anderson, 1995; Dyhouse, 2002; Perkin, 1983; Ringer, 2004; Ross, 2003) or state–university relations (Vernon, 2004). Moreover, a consideration of the scheme illuminates a period of major challenges for universities. The aftermath of the Great War saw significant demand for access, both because of the influx of students whose education had been interrupted or delayed by wartime service, and because of visions of reconstruction in which universities were to 'provide the personnel required for a more knowledge-based future' (Vernon, 2004, p. 184). The ex-service scheme thus allows us to understand how universities coped with an exceptional situation.

## **2. Assessing Applications**

Collaboration between universities and the Board of Education was central to operating the ex-service scheme. Early on, the Board of Education (1919e) concluded the need for 'some system of decentralisation ... in order to cope effectively with the large number of applicants'. Accordingly, a guidance note by Selby-Bigge (1919) noted the Board's intention 'to decentralise the administration of the Scheme as much as possible' (see also Board of

Education, 1919d). While Local Education Authorities were to tackle access to courses of ‘sub-university standard’, District University Committees were supposed to deal with ex-service grants for higher education (Board of Education, 1919e). These bodies were to advise and assess applications while liaising with other parties, including representatives from Local Education Authorities and the Appointments Department of the Ministry of Labour. The arrangement reflected the way in which the Board conceived of its role more generally, as it was concerned with ‘superintendence’ rather than detailed management (Selby-Bigge, 1927, p. 29).

The initial vetting of applications was carried out locally, as prospective students first submitted a form to the university that they hoped to attend. The Board of Education subsequently received recommendations from the universities and made a final decision, which it then announced to the applicant. Each university established a committee that received applications, checked eligibility, assessed the appropriate size of awards and monitored the academic progress of successful applicants. These committees were staffed by senior academics and university leaders, for instance the deans of Liverpool faculties and the heads of Oxford colleges. In line with the Board’s guidance, the remit of these bodies exceeded the narrow confines of their institutions. The Aberystwyth committee had a role in processing applications for the other constituent colleges of the University of Wales, namely Bangor, Cardiff and St. David’s at Lampeter (University College of Wales, 1919–1923a). Meanwhile, Liverpool’s committee also received submissions for St. Aidan’s, a theological college in Birkenhead (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921). At Oxford, the committee considered requests from ex-servicemen intending to study at Permanent Private Halls, theological colleges and ‘other educational institutions’, including the Ashmolean Museum, Banbury College of Art, Ruskin College and the Diploma Correspondence College at Wolsey Hall (Hebdomadal Council, 1920). The university-based committees thus served as regional funding hubs.

While the ex-service scheme operated until 1923, the committees undertook the bulk of their work from 1919 to 1921, when applications were most numerous. The committees at Oxford and Liverpool were established in the spring of 1919 (Hebdomadal Council, 1919; Liverpool Committee 1919–1921, meeting on 28 May 1919). Liverpool’s committee terminated its work in September 1921, following the Board of Education’s verdict that it had fulfilled its purpose (Liverpool Committee 1919–1921, meeting on 5 July 1921). The early terminus was probably linked to the requirement for applications to be lodged within three months of a candidate’s demobilisation. As a result, ex-servicemen who had been demobilised prior to October 1919 were ineligible for courses beginning after spring 1920.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, at the time of its dissolution, the Liverpool committee was receiving significantly fewer applications and was mostly concerned with monitoring the academic progress of grant recipients.

How did the application process work in practice? Following the scheme’s announcement in December 1918, it took some months to finalise arrangements through the ‘Application for Maintenance and Training Grants’ form. Prior to its release, applicants mostly used another document, entitled ‘Ex-Officer’s Application for Appointment and Training’. The very first steps were thus modelled after earlier programmes that enabled ex-servicemen of higher ranks to take special courses. By contrast, the new form explicitly covered ex-servicemen of all backgrounds. This development reflected the scheme’s evolution: it originated in discussions about the training of ex-officers, involving the Board of Education, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Reconstruction. Early documentation described it as a scheme for ‘officers and men of like educational promise’ (Board of Education, 1918a). By the spring of 1919, the language had shifted, reflecting its remit to cover all ex-servicemen who might benefit from higher education.

As part of their submission, applicants had to specify the nature of their wartime service as well as their financial position. Furthermore, they had to swear an oath that the information

was correct, either in front of a magistrate or a commissioner of oaths. The archival record suggests that administrators did not question the veracity of these declarations. On occasions, however, they solicited further details. For example, Liverpool officials asked about the financial position of an applicant's father before deciding to award a full maintenance grant (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meetings on 28 May and 4 June 1919). These arrangements reflected the scheme's embrace of means-testing as well as the intention to support a broad range of students. In retrospect, Selby-Bigge (1927, pp. 41–2) viewed the procedure as a considerable achievement: 'These allowances were assessed on the basis of the students' individual requirement, after taking account of his own financial resources, and demonstrated on a very large scale the possibility of assessing aid to students in relation to their means without the offensiveness usually attributed to "inquisitorial methods".'

Relatively few applications were rejected – across England and Wales, this only happened in 2,771 out of 30,755 cases (Board of Education, 1924, p. 142). Liverpool had a particularly high success rate: the committee minutes only specify nineteen out of 1,510 applicants being turned down. Short service was the cause of nine of these rejections. While it is difficult to determine the precise definition of 'short service', the Board of Education did note that it was unwilling to consider applications from those who had joined up after 1 July 1918. For example, the Board rejected the application for Clifford Thomas, who had been called up on 9 September 1918 (University College of Wales, 1919–1923c, letter of 15 September 1919). However, short service was not the only potential reason for a negative outcome. One Liverpool application was dismissed because the candidate's income exceeded the fees and maintenance costs. An applicant to Aberystwyth Theological College was turned down for already holding a B.A. (University College of Wales, 1919–23a, letter from Hilton Young, Board of Education, 2 September 1919). In this instance, the local interpretation was



stricter than the official guidance as the Board of Education (1919c) indicated a degree of flexibility regarding theology students with a prior degree.

The Board of Education occasionally overturned the recommendations of local committees. By early 1920, it had declined 103 Oxford-based applications. In seventy per cent of these cases, it endorsed the committee's conclusions – but this means that it also rejected around thirty applicants for whom the local committee had expressed support (Hebdomadal Council, 1920). By contrast, the Board seems to have confirmed all Liverpool outcomes. One potential explanation for Liverpool's apparent success is the involvement of several officials in the local committee: its early meetings were attended by the Assistant Director of Education for Liverpool or the Director of Education for Birkenhead as well as a representative of the Liverpool Branch of the Appointments Department of the Ministry of Labour (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meetings on 28 May, 11 June and 25 June 1919).

Students could appeal the outcome of decisions regarding their eligibility. To do so, they had to make their case to the Ex-Service Students Appeal Tribunal of the Board of Education. However, it seems that they rarely did so. Aberystwyth student William R. Jones, who had already entered the college, argued that financial support would ensure that he could complete his education. He stressed that he had enrolled in anticipation of a grant (University College of Wales, 1919–1923b, letter of 7 October 1919). His appeal was refused on the basis of short service (University College of Wales, 1919–1923b, notes and letter from Hilton Young, Board of Education, of 19 November 1919).

### **3. Student Finance**

The consideration of family income and of factors such as the number of family dependents indicates that the scheme supported students who would have otherwise been unable to enter higher education. Application forms and accompanying correspondence detail various cases of

applicants who could not draw on family support, either because their parents had died or because of the size of their family. The Liverpool records also show that the scheme was sufficiently flexible to cover part-time study, although full-time education was the predominant mode for grant recipients (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 11 June 1919). The Board was keen for grants to be reflective of needs. To this end, it asked institutions to report on ‘any signs of extravagance on the part of students or of a standard of living which is not compatible with the fact that the student applied for a grant on the ground that he could not otherwise afford to pursue his course’ (Board of Education, 1919b).

While the grants broadened educational access, one must not overstate this dimension. Funding also went to students who were able to finance their studies or parts thereof. Many applicants indicated that their families would provide significant resources to support their university education. For example, at Aberystwyth, Wilfrid Basil Ralph Jones was promised £40 p.a. by his father. Notes by the college administration show that his father’s income as a ‘commercial traveller’ was estimated at between £300 and £350 p.a., that his father had two dependents, that the applicant’s sister was already a student at the college (holding a £25 scholarship) and that his brother was expected to apply to Aberystwyth too (University College of Wales, 1919–1923b). This specific case illustrates that one cannot draw conclusions about a student’s socio-economic background based on the size of their grant. Jones received a substantial grant although his father had a fairly large income. In this instance, the existence of two co-dependents is likely to have been a factor.

Moreover, the grants were not always crucial for students’ entry into higher education. Indeed, many grant recipients resumed studies that they had begun prior to participating in the war effort. Jones, for example, had already spent a term at Aberystwyth before being called up for military service. Others applied or received awards after entering university. On some occasions, grants were backdated to benefit students who were already at university. This, for

instance, was the case for Rhys Thomas at Aberystwyth (University College of Wales, 1919–1923c) and Arnold Craggs at Liverpool (University of Liverpool, 1919–1921). Craggs's application seems to have been submitted in June 1919, approved in August but backdated to January 1919. As a teacher in training, he would have entered the university being eligible for other grants. The backdating of grants occurred in autumn 1919, when it appears that the large numbers of applications may have delayed decisions by the Board of Education.<sup>2</sup>

The existence of backdating indicates that ex-service students were keen to begin their studies as soon as possible, without waiting for notification from the Board of Education. Letters in individual student files at Balliol College, Oxford indicate the difficulties in obtaining a demobilisation date in advance as well as frequent delays to the actual point of demobilisation.<sup>3</sup> Faced with such uncertainties, administrators sought to make arrangements for students according to their circumstances. Yet, if some students commenced their studies prior to the funding announcement, it suggests that financial concerns were not decisive for them. That said, there were contrasting cases in which grant support was indeed vital. For instance, one student was forced to delay entering Aberystwyth from October 1920 to January 1921, because the Board of Education was late in processing his application (Senate of University College Wales, 1920).

At Liverpool, almost all recipients had their fees covered in full, regardless of their financial circumstances. Only on a small number of occasions was the fees coverage not designated as a 'normal case' or 'whole' – and in such instances, students either combined the ex-service grant with other scholarships or had already paid their fees in part. Approximately 1 to 2 per cent of recipients received other amounts for fees paid. Such special cases are, for instance, illustrated by the case of a Liverpool-based medical student who had already paid fees in full for the current year and who was awarded a full fees grant for the subsequent years of his studies. (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 4 June 1919). Applicants to

teacher training programmes often left the ‘fees’ section of their applications blank, suggesting that training grants covered these costs.

The ex-service scheme not only covered fees but also maintenance. In this domain, means-testing played a larger role. The contribution to students’ living costs could be substantial. The Board of Education mandated that the maximum maintenance grant would be £ 150 p.a. for a single student and £ 200 if the student was married, with an additional £ 24 p.a. for each dependent child, up to a maximum of £ 96 p.a. (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 28 May 1919). Each university then established its own maximum within these limits. The evidence from northern universities, including Liverpool, suggests that most institutions elected to set the maximum at the highest level (Northern Counties’ Ex-Service Students’ Association, 1920). Corresponding amounts for Aberystwyth or Oxford are difficult to identify. It appears that married students at Aberystwyth could receive up to £200 p.a. – although the largest grant for a single student in the surviving files is £120 p.a.<sup>4</sup> Based on the existing records, a total of 609 Liverpool students could be identified as receiving the full maintenance grant – a significant number when set against the total of 1,475 recipients at Liverpool during the programme’s lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, many of those who did not get the full grant were close to receiving the maximum, in some instances falling short by just £1. This, for example, was the case with Liverpool student J. M. McEntegart, who received an annual maintenance grant of £199 (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 20 August 1919).

Whereas Liverpool gave out many high-value grants, the average grant size across England and Wales was much lower: calculations from the third and fourth quarters of 1919 put them at £ 105 and 109 p.a. (Board of Education, 1919g). Officials from the Board of Education (1919e) expressed their frustration that the Treasury’s cost projections had been based on the maximum grant size of £ 200 p.a., rather than the average value of the grants

made. This distinction was crucial as the Board was keen to prevent the Treasury's cost-related concerns from resulting in a cap on the overall number of beneficiaries.

The exact relationship between the maintenance grant and the financial position of the applicant or his family is difficult to determine. For example, some students who declared additional income received larger grants than those not listing access to other funds. Calculations of the grant size do not appear to have had a direct negative linear relationship to the amount of personal or other income declared. That said, grant levels could be reassessed if the student's circumstances changed, for example as a result of marriage (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 26 May 1920). When Liverpool student E. H. Brashier and his wife separated, their legal agreement stipulated that he would pay her £2 per week. The committee therefore decided to keep his maintenance award unchanged for as long as he continued to make these payments (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meetings on 26 May and 8 June 1920). The existence of institutional committees appears to have made the system responsive to student needs. Grants could be revised on an individual basis but could also apply to entire cohorts, as exemplified by a reassessment of grants for all students at St Aidan's Theological College (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 26 May 1919).

According to Lord Haldane – who had been active in the sphere of higher education throughout his political career – the 'English scholarship system' was 'a medley of things very old and very new, national and local, rational and sometimes, perhaps, the reverse' (Foreword to Ellis, 1925, p. v). This situation was highlighted by the way in which maintenance grants under the ex-service scheme were sometimes combined with other awards. The grants for teacher training have already been mentioned, and the archival record also contain examples of academic awards such as Liverpool's City Scholarships complementing the ex-service grants. Vickers Engineering contributed a grant towards the maintenance of one Liverpool

student (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 28 May 1919). However, the awards made under the ex-service scheme tended to be more generous than local scholarships.

When considered as a whole, the wide-ranging provisions of the ex-service scheme are striking. It funded students in need, but also covered those with financial means.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, some individuals whose funding applications to Aberystwyth had been rejected later re-appeared in the university's student records – indicating that their access to higher education had not depended on funding from the ex-service scheme. The generous sizes of the grants, the numbers receiving levels of support as well as the role of the 'short service' criterion all suggest that wartime service was deemed more important than financial circumstances.

#### **4. Academic Arrangements**

The ex-service scheme went together with special academic arrangements for students whose education had been interrupted or delayed by military service. Ex-service students at Aberystwyth could obtain exemptions from matriculation examinations if they had passed other exams, such as the Oxford and Cambridge Senior Local or the Senior Central Welsh Board. This, for instance, was the case for applicants Stanley Jones and T. J. Jones (University College of Wales, 1919–1923b). At Liverpool, ex-service students were only required to present three subjects in the ordinary matriculation examination (Senate of the University of Liverpool, 1918–1920, meeting on 15 October 1919). Moreover, the university offered alternative matriculation examinations in December 1919 and September 1920 (Senate of the University of Liverpool, 1918–1920, meetings on 15 October 1919 and 11 February 1920). Such efforts complemented measures that helped ex-service students make up for time spent outside education. An initial step was the confirmation that students could count wartime service towards their education requirements (Council of University of Liverpool, 1914). Furthermore, in April 1919, Aberystwyth added an extra course for elementary training

students, and in the summer of that year, it ran a special vacation term (Council of University College Wales, 1919).

While these examples highlight a concern for integrating the war generation into universities, academic potential remained a key criterion. An early draft from the Board of Education (1918b) stressed that ‘[m]en who are not capable of making good use of opportunities for education or training’ would remain ‘outside the scope of the Scheme’. A note from January 1919 stated that ‘educational promise and length of service should receive due attention’ (Board of Education, 1919f). At the same time, there was some flexibility as applicants without leaving certificates or completed matriculation examinations could be considered if they showed other signs of academic achievement, for instance the completion of University Tutorial Classes (Board of Education, 1918b).

The archival evidence allows us to trace the course choices of the ex-service students. Grant recipients took a variety of subjects, as illustrated by our analysis of the Liverpool records, as presented in Table 1. The data shows that engineering was the most popular course, closely followed by a combination of the medical and dental sciences.

TABLE 1: Subjects studied by recipients of ex-service grants at the University of Liverpool  
(Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921).

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Grant recipients</b>
Arts	107
Arts – Architecture	92
Arts – Archaeology	1
Arts – Commerce	126
Arts – M.A.	2
Dental	217

Engineering	444
Law	12
Medicine	195
Oceanography	1
Science	198
St Aidan's (Theology)	24
Training College	90

Many applicants listed teaching as their intended profession.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the ex-service scheme supplemented existing measures to support teacher training. At the same time, such funding helped to meet the anticipated demand for teachers, as the 1918 Education Act led to an expansion of schooling by raising the school-leaving age. Moreover, this strand of funding resonated with other initiatives aimed at ex-servicemen. As noted by the Board of Education (1924, p. 128), a range of ‘schemes for training ex-service men to become teachers’ had originated in wartime discussions ‘when the nation was considering its duty towards those men who had been discharged from the forces as unfit on account of wounds, or other disablements for further service’.

Local evidence illustrates these developments. At Aberystwyth, special courses enabling ex-servicemen to train as teachers provided access for applicants who might not have met the regular matriculation requirements (Senate of University College Wales, 1917). Such courses were launched in 1917; it seems that the Aberystwyth scheme predated similar initiatives elsewhere (Ellis, 1972, p. 196). The college registrar noted that Aberystwyth’s course for discharged soldiers was intended for those who were ‘not qualified for admission to a Residential Training College’ and that ‘[p]reference is given to men who owing to wounds in the war are unable to follow their chosen occupations, and are desirous of becoming teachers’



(University College of Wales, 1919–1923c, letters to R. Thomas of 21 June and 2 July 1919). The records testify to the high demand for this type of course and for teacher training more generally.

The scheme clearly fitted into the jigsaw of economic and social reconstruction envisaged by the government. Tomás Irish (2015, p. 166) has described the war as effecting ‘a break between old intellectual styles and new ones’. The grants were certainly responsible for according significant funds to future engineers and scientists. This aspect was important because national scholarships for engineering and sciences had been limited: annually 4 senior and 30 smaller Whitworth Scholarships for engineering, and 20 Royal and Free Scholarships for sciences (Board of Education, 1915, pp. 177–8). After applications to the Whitworth Scholarships in 1918–1919 had been ‘the lowest on record’, an amendment allowed ex-servicemen to ‘deduct from ... [their] age a period equivalent in length to such service’ to meet the eligibility criteria (Board of Education 1920, p. 84).

The post-war context seemed to favour subjects deemed vital to reconstructing the nation, whereas the teaching of Classics at Oxford and Cambridge had come under attack (Irish, 2015, p. 165). Yet recipients of ex-service grants were not confined to a narrow set of subjects, with the arts attracting significant numbers. Moreover, the grants had a significant impact on theological education – even though guidance from the Board stressed that only ‘academical study’ in theology would qualify for funding, unlike courses that were ‘confined or mainly devoted to pastoral work and training in the work and duties of a Minister of Religion’ (Board of Education, 1919c). Institutions such as St Aidan’s College in Birkenhead, St David’s College in Lampeter, Aberystwyth Theological College and Mansfield College, Oxford benefitted from students funded under the ex-service scheme. The first two trained individuals for the Anglican ministry and the latter two for other nonconformist Protestant ministries. Fees paid for theology students appear to have been an important source of income for these

institutions. At Mansfield, grant recipients constituted a large number of the post-war student body. According to a list of college alumni, nineteen students entered the college for theological or arts study in 1919 and the college had welcomed eight grant recipients by early 1920 (Council of Mansfield College, p. 18; see also Hebdomadal Council, 1920). Indeed, externally funded ex-service students seem to have been important for sustaining the college's finances at a difficult time (Mansfield College, 1919, 1920a and 1920b). At £100 p.a., St Aidan's fees were higher than those at Liverpool University (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921 meeting on 25 June 1919). As the maintenance grants received by St Aidan's students were similar to those for other students, the overall cost to the Board of Education was comparatively high.<sup>8</sup>

To some extent, the ex-service scheme also reflected the growing emphasis on postgraduate education in this era. The Liverpool and Aberystwyth records show that some students were awarded grants for two years' research towards postgraduate degrees in arts, sciences and law. The future of postgraduate education in Britain received significant attention in the immediate post-war years, exemplified by the adoption of the PhD degree at British universities in this period. Oxford was first to introduce such provisions in 1917. Other universities followed shortly, as exemplified by discussions at Liverpool a month after the Armistice (Senate of the University of Liverpool, 1918–1920, meeting on 11 December 1918). Such measures were connected to the legacies of war: they were intended to help make British universities an attractive destination for scholars who would have traditionally looked towards Germany (Anderson, 2006, p. 108; Simpson, 1983).

Universities placed some emphasis on monitoring the academic progress of grant recipients. Oxford forwarded tutors' reports on individual students to the Board of Education (Christ Church, 1920–1921). Awards could be cancelled if the students did not perform adequately. At Liverpool, students who failed their first attempt at an exam often received a

second chance before their award was cancelled. The local grant committee sometimes interceded on their behalf. For example, in 1920 it supported three science students who requested that they be allowed to continue into the second year while retaking the subject they had failed at the same time (Liverpool Committee, 1919–1921, meetings on 26 May and 12 October 1920). Approximately five per cent of grant recipients at Liverpool were either threatened with or had their grants terminated as a result of failing to meet the academic progress requirements. Nationally, the cancellation rate for students with ‘unsatisfactory attendance, conduct, or progress’ was around 10 per cent (Board of Education, 1924, p. 124). The good progress of most students is particularly striking when bearing in mind that many bore physical and psychological scars of their wartime service.

## **5. Impacts on the Universities**

The ex-service scheme operated at a time when universities were facing the legacies of war. Keith Vernon (2004, p. 176) has described the conflict’s ‘immediate impact on the universities’ as ‘a catastrophe’. Indeed, the war had confronted them with manifold challenges – from the requisitioning of buildings to a drastic drop in student numbers. Lower receipts from fees were a major issue, although it has been noted that the ‘material deprivation [of universities] during wartime extended well beyond the lack of direct income from student fees’ (Irish, 2015, p. 109). The overall situation forced institutions ‘to look for savings in departmental expenses and general running costs, to freeze staff recruitment and to turn to their local supporters and benefactors’ (Taylor, 2018, p. 93).

Our local case studies confirm this overall picture. Aberystwyth’s income had never been enough to meet its everyday expenditure, let alone set aside funds for the development of new buildings (Anthony, 1928, p. 223). Meanwhile, Liverpool’s situation was exacerbated by debts from pre-war building projects (Taylor, 2018, p. 92). The particular problems faced by

Oxford and Cambridge have been acknowledged in the wider literature (Irish, 2015, p. 64; Vernon, 2004, p. 195). Alongside the drop in fees, Oxford colleges suffered from the declining values of rents, which had been a major source of income (Dunbabin, 1994, p. 663; Winter, 1994, pp. 11–12). One response to such constraints was the decision not to award prizes or appoint to fellowships (Irish, 2015, p. 65). Oxford continued to struggle in the early 1920s: Laurence Brockliss (2016, p. 434) has noted the ‘limited response to appeals for funds’ from potential donors.

These problems ultimately triggered a reconfiguration in relations between the two ancient universities and the British state. The Royal Commission on the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge – also known as the Asquith Commission – was appointed in 1920 and presented its findings in 1922. It recommended that the universities (although not their colleges) be given government grants to organise lectures and practical teaching, while the colleges retained responsibility for tutorials (Prest, 1994, p. 30). The Asquith Commission was not the first royal commission emerging from the war context. In 1916, the Royal Commission on University Education in Wales was launched under Lord Haldane’s chairmanship, issuing its final report in 1918 (Ellis 1972, pp. 191–192).

While these enquiries suggest a specific focus on Oxford, Cambridge and the University of Wales, the war and its legacies produced much wider changes in state–university relations, particularly with regard to financial arrangements. As John Taylor (2018, p. 165) has noted, ‘the War had underlined the need to move away from multiple pots of funding towards a block grant’, giving universities ‘more discretion and flexibility in determining precise expenditure’. Founded in 1919, the University Grants Committee played an important role in the introduction and management of the block grants (Vernon, 2004, pp. 187–195). Nonetheless, many universities continued to struggle, as highlighted by Liverpool’s decision to increase its fees by a third (Council of the University of Liverpool, 1920). The situation at Liverpool reflected

specific experiences by the ‘redbricks’ in this period which, on the one hand ‘were growing and thriving and becoming increasingly important’ but on the other hand ‘suffering from growing pains’ (Whyte, 2015, p. 183).

When viewed within the context of university funding, the Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provided an injection of funds through the arrival of students whose fees were covered by the Board of Education. On the other hand, the influx of large student cohorts placed further pressure on stretched resources. These constraints were illustrated by the case of medical students at Liverpool, for whom there were not enough seats in lectures at the start of the 1919–1920 academic year (J.G.L., 1919, p. 18). The university also struggled with a shortage of sports facilities, with the bursar arguing that the war had highlighted the need for regular physical exercise (Gettins, 1920, p. 94). At Aberystwyth, the pressures resulting from the arrival of new students compounded efforts to modernise the university estate (Ellis, 1972, p. 205). The college was required to add toilet facilities and bathrooms to various buildings (Accommodation Committee, Aberystwyth, meetings on 7 December 1920 and 21 March 1921).

Student accommodation was a particularly pressing issue associated with the arrival of ex-service students. As a temporary solution, the University of Liverpool erected army huts to house students (University of Liverpool, 1981, section 12). Indeed, at the time, the university had no hall of residence for men (Guild of Students, Liverpool, 1918, p. 9). In Aberystwyth, both the Men’s Hostel and Alexandra Hall, which housed women students, were consistently full – causing ongoing concern among college officials (Accommodation Committee, Aberystwyth, 1919–1921, meetings on 11 July 1920, 7 December 1920 and 17 January 1921). Providing residential accommodation for students was expensive, and administrators discussed

the need to save money in everyday running costs and a potential hike in accommodation fees (Men's Hostel Committee, Aberystwyth, 1920).

One applicant to Aberystwyth, Thomas John Thomas, cited the higher cost of privately rented accommodation as a reason for seeking an ex-service grant (University College of Wales, 1919–1923c, form of 17 February 1919). Thomas was already undertaking teacher training at Aberystwyth and gave late demobilisation as the reason for the timing of his application. In the end, he received £74 p.a., in addition to the grants payable under the scheme for teacher training (University College of Wales, 1919–1923c, announcement dated 26 September 1919).

The arrival of ex-service students caused challenges even beyond the pressure on facilities. In looking back, the editor of Aberystwyth's student magazine *The Dragon* (1925, p. 159) described the post-war years as 'a kind of interregnum in the placid annals of College life' and acknowledged 'dissonances' in this period. At the same time, however, ex-service students made many positive contributions to university life. Indeed, the very same *Dragon* article noted 'accelerated interests and an increased sense of student responsibility' following their arrival. Such views were echoed at Oxford, where student magazine *Isis* stressed the new students' commitment to 'practical, worldly things'. In doing so, it noted approvingly that political clubs had expanded in size and scope after 'the advance guard of the soldier undergraduate' had arrived (*Isis* editor, 1921, p. 1). Such local examples confirm arguments about the active engagement of ex-service students in voluntary action, as highlighted by developments in the realm of student social service (Brewis, 2014, p. 53).

If the arrival of ex-service students had major institutional impacts, so did their departure. As early November 1921, Harold Heathcote-Williams (1921, p. 1) noted a 'parting of ways', with 'the undergraduates who have seen war service ... gradually but more quickly disappearing from Oxford life'. As a war veteran who had played an active role in student

societies and *Isis* magazine, Heathcote-Williams himself formed part of this cohort. The subsequent years saw a general decline in Britain's student population: in 1925, G. S. M. Ellis (p. 16) noted that, excluding Oxford and Cambridge, the number of male university students had fallen by 3,266 since 1923, 'an effect which is obviously due to the gradual lapsing of the government scheme for granting a university education to ex-servicemen'. At Aberystwyth and the other colleges of the University of Wales, 'a slump [in admissions] took place which was not arrested until the year 1925-6' (Anthony, 1928, p. 225). At Liverpool, some observers expressed a sense of apprehension as the ex-service generation moved on: the Guild of Students noted the 'exodus of the majority of the ex-service men who had guided the activities of the Guild during the post-war years', meaning not only that 'the average age of the University became lower' but also that the 'Guild Council lacked the administrative experience, which previous ones had possessed' (Guild of Students, Liverpool, 1923, p. 7).

## **6. Conclusion**

The devolved system of administering the Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen in England and Wales meant that staff at the individual institutions played an important role in its management. In direct contact with applicants, they responded to individual circumstances and offered targeted advice. The grants were generous and many applicants received sums that greatly exceeded the value of institutional or local authority scholarships. While the process of determining the size of maintenance grants remains somewhat unclear, it appears that the institutional committees operating the scheme focused on wartime service as eligibility, while family income was a secondary consideration.

The awards for ex-servicemen were part of a mixed economy of scholarships and other training grants, and their creation coincided with a wider reassessment of university funding in the context of post-war reconstruction. Robert Anderson (2006, p. 116) has argued that during

the interwar years, a ‘lack of dynamism in [higher education] policy reflected a very limited demand for university education’. The case of the ex-service scheme offers a somewhat contrasting picture: its provisions were certainly ambitious. An unprecedented number of students received full coverage of their fees, irrespective of parental income and subject choice. Moreover, a means-tested maintenance grant offered support to students with limited or no prior resources. As a whole, the scheme thus highlighted the value attributed to higher education – based on the assumption that a variety of people might benefit from a university education and, in turn, that their higher education would yield wider societal benefits. The Board of Education (1920, p. 84) noted this aspect when commenting on the scheme’s role in ‘making good the nation’s losses in the supply of trained and educated men due to the war’. The initiative formed part of a broader suite of post-war educational reform measures and thus offers a fresh angle on better-known instruments such as the 1918 Education Act.

The short-lived nature of the ex-service scheme explains why it is often overlooked. Veterans passed through the university gates in the aftermath of the Great War and, in most cases, had left again by 1923. As we have argued, the initiative nonetheless deserves recognition as a pioneering step for broad-ranging coverage, albeit one that remained limited to men. In considering ‘financial assistance to needy students’ within the context of the ‘democratization of higher education’, it has been suggested that the ‘G.I. Bill in the United States and the ex-servicemen benefits in the United Kingdom set the tone after the Second World War’ (Bereday, 1979, p. 16). However, that tone in some ways echoed the pioneering measures launched in the aftermath of the Great War. Our analysis suggests potential avenues for future research: both with regard to placing the British venture in an international comparative context, and in terms of links between the interwar scheme and post-1945 funding developments.



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## **9. Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For instance, on 27 August 1920, a rejection notification for Aberystwyth applicant John W. Thompson cited the requirements surrounding the demobilisation date (University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1919–1923c).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in late October and November 1919, Owen E. Thomas and Reginald Thomas at Aberystwyth and Stanley Philip Donkin at Liverpool received announcements of awards that had been backdated to the start of the term (University College of Wales, 1919–23a; University of Liverpool, 1919–21).

<sup>3</sup> Late mobilisation cases included the students Harold Tetley Burt, Alfred Mackenzie Clarke and Isidore Tenen (Individual Student Dossiers, Balliol College Archives, Oxford). Unfortunately, it is unclear if these students were among the forty-two students in receipt of grants by early 1920 to study at Balliol (Hebdomadal Council, 1920). The Aberystwyth records (University College of Wales, 1919–23a and b) feature similar cases.

<sup>4</sup> This data is based on a sample of forty-four Aberystwyth applicants whose grants were approved by the Board of Education (University College of Wales, 1919–23a and b).

<sup>5</sup> This figure is a total of Liverpool applicants who were awarded the full, round amount of either £150, £200, £224, £248, or £272 (521, 57, 29, 1, and 1 students respectively).

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<sup>6</sup> The availability of funds for students with financial means is further indicated by the award of fees to the level of the balance or ‘those not paid’ (Liverpool committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 18 June 1919).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Aberystwyth student Trefor Lloyd Jones listed his preferred occupation as ‘An appointment in a Higher or Intermediate School’ (University College of Wales, 1919–23a, form of 28 February 1919).

<sup>8</sup> The relatively high expenditure associated with St Aidan’s students is illustrated by the case of A. Walls who, with a maintenance grant of £ 150, was funded to the amount of £ 250 p.a. (Liverpool committee, 1919–1921, meeting on 3 December 1919).

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