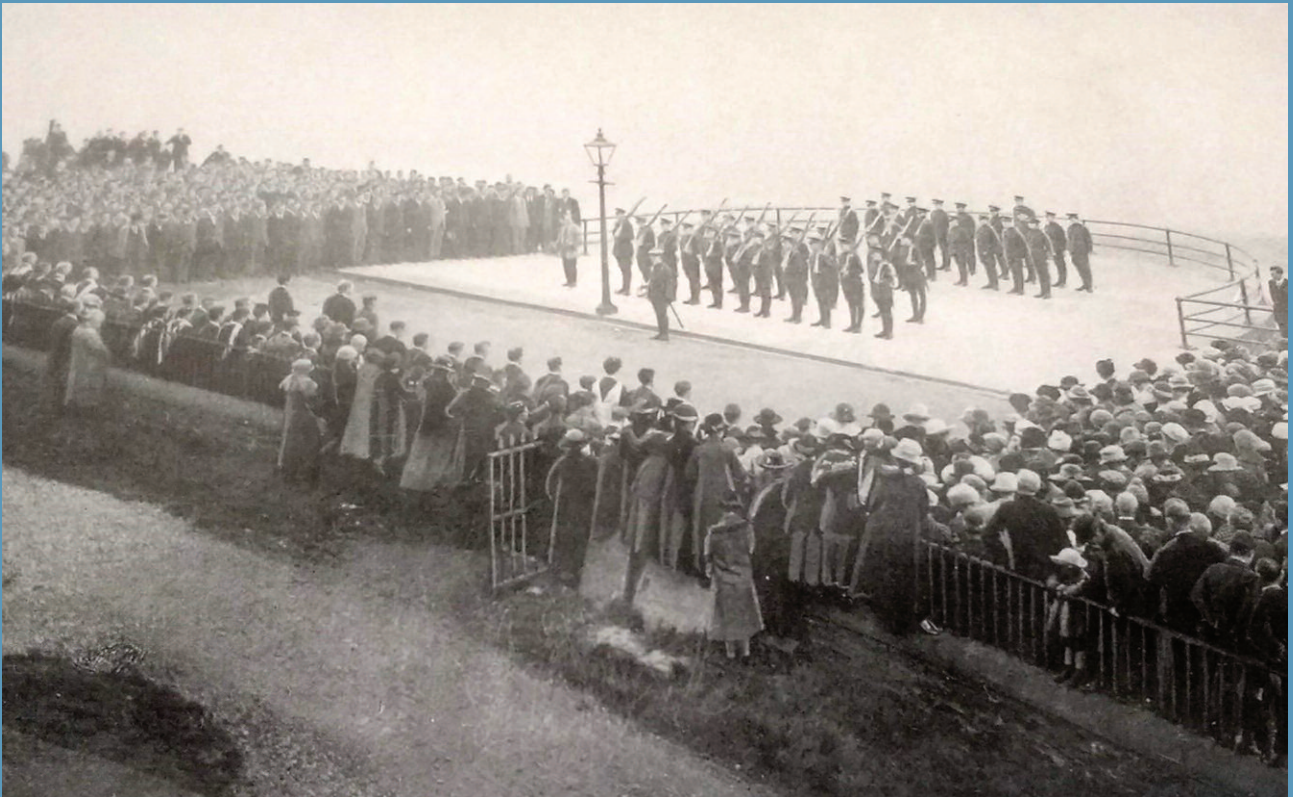


# Educational Access and Student Life in the Aftermath of the Great War



Rowan Thompson, Daniel Laqua and Georgina Brewis

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Design by David Grey, Kimmerston Design.

**Cover image:** celebration of Armistice Day in Aberystwyth, as depicted in the student magazine *The Dragon* in early 1921.

# Preface

**This brochure presents findings** from the project ‘Educational Access and Student Life in the Aftermath of the Great War’. Our research activities focused on the Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen’ (1918–1923), which we examined within the wider context of educational reform, with primary research at institutions in Aberystwyth, Liverpool and Oxford. We thank the Society for Educational Studies (SES) for funding our work through a 2020 Anniversary Grant.

Our project was a collaborative venture and, as such, the present pamphlet represents the fruit of our joint efforts. Dr Daniel Laqua at Northumbria University and Dr Georgina Brewis at University College London (UCL) were, respectively, the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator. A large part of the archival research was undertaken by Dr Lara Green, who is now based at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Dr Sophie Cooper (now at Queen’s University Belfast) further supported our work. Thanks to follow-on funding from the SES, Dr Rowan Thompson was appointed as Research Associate for the second phase of the project, with the preparation of this brochure as one key element.

Our SES project built upon an earlier venture, ‘British Ex-Service Students and the Rebuilding of Europe, 1919–1923’, which the AHRC World War One Engagement Centre at the University of Hertfordshire funded in 2019. With Dr Sarah

Hellawell (now at Sunderland University) as our Research Associate, we focused on archival material from institutions in London, Durham and Newcastle. We are grateful for the support we received both from the AHRC World War Engagement Centre (represented by Dr Sarah Lloyd and Anna Hammerin) and from our external partners, the National Union of Students (represented by Mike Day) and the Workers’ Educational Association (represented by Jude Murphy).

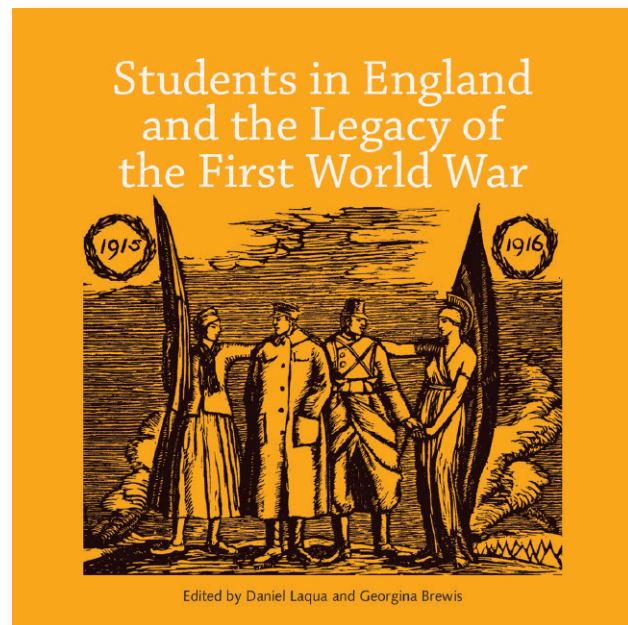


Figure 1: Pamphlet (2019) on earlier work by the project team.

Further information on our two projects and the associated findings is available via the following research publications:

- Lara Green, Daniel Laqua and Georgina Brewis, 'Student Funding and University Access after the Great War: The Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen at Aberystwyth, Liverpool, and Oxford', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 68, no. 5 (2020): 589–609.
- Georgina Brewis, Sarah Hellawell and Daniel Laqua, 'Rebuilding the Universities after the Great War: Ex-Service Students, Scholarships and the Reconstruction of Student Life in England', *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 105, no. 364 (2020): 82–106, available in open access via <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12926>.
- Daniel Laqua and Georgina Brewis, eds, *Students in England and the Legacy of the First World War* (Newcastle, 2019), 19 pp.

The following shorter pieces also share some findings relating to our work on students in the aftermath of the First World War:

- Georgina Brewis, 'IOE at 120: War and Peace, 1912–1922', *IOE Blog*, 24 February 2022, available at <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2022/02/24/ioe-at-120-war-and-peace-1912-1922/>.
- Georgina Brewis, Daniel Laqua and Rowan Thompson, 'Housing Shortages and Crowded Classes: How Life on Campus Changed after the First World War', *The Conversation*, 13 October 2021, available at <https://theconversation.com/housing-shortages-and-crowded-classes-how-life-on-campus-changed-after-the-first-world-war-168972>.

# Universities in a changing society

**British universities** experienced a massive growth in student numbers after the Great War. In November 1919, *The Dragon* – the main student periodical in Aberystwyth – declared that ‘Never in the previous history of the College have so many students foregathered to amass knowledge’. Around the same time, the *Gazette* at Wadham College, Oxford suggested that both Oxford and Cambridge were ‘full to overflowing ... and perhaps fuller than they have ever been’.

This unprecedented growth in the student population was, in part, due to vast numbers of returning students who had been forced to interrupt or suspend their studies due to wartime service. At the same time, the expansion in numbers reflected a wider vision regarding the role of higher education in the making of post-war Britain. The University of Liverpool Students’ Handbook for 1918–1919 argued that ‘in the future, more than in the past, the Universities are to play a larger part in the life of the nation’ – and similar predictions featured in government reports of the era. Importantly, expectations were not only directed at institutions and academic staff, but also at the students who would populate the

universities. As the Liverpool handbook put it, the future undergraduate had to ‘have wide sympathies, a broad outlook, and varied interests; he must be able to direct his fellow-men’s affairs’. At a time when university access remained confined to less than two per cent of the relevant age group, there was an anticipation that students would provide leadership in different fields and at different levels.

While such expectations of future leadership predated the war years, there was something distinct to the post-war student body: at most universities, more than half the cohort comprised ex-servicemen. In November 1919, *The Sphinx* – the student magazine at the University of Liverpool – argued that such men could ‘boast a grim knowledge of life’ and knew ‘the real meaning of suffering’. At Oxford, the periodical *The Isis* suggested in 1921 that the ‘advance guard of the soldier undergraduate’ had generated ‘an atmosphere of practical, worldly things’ as these students ‘had been at close grips with the realities of life, and their outlook necessarily altered the character of the University’.



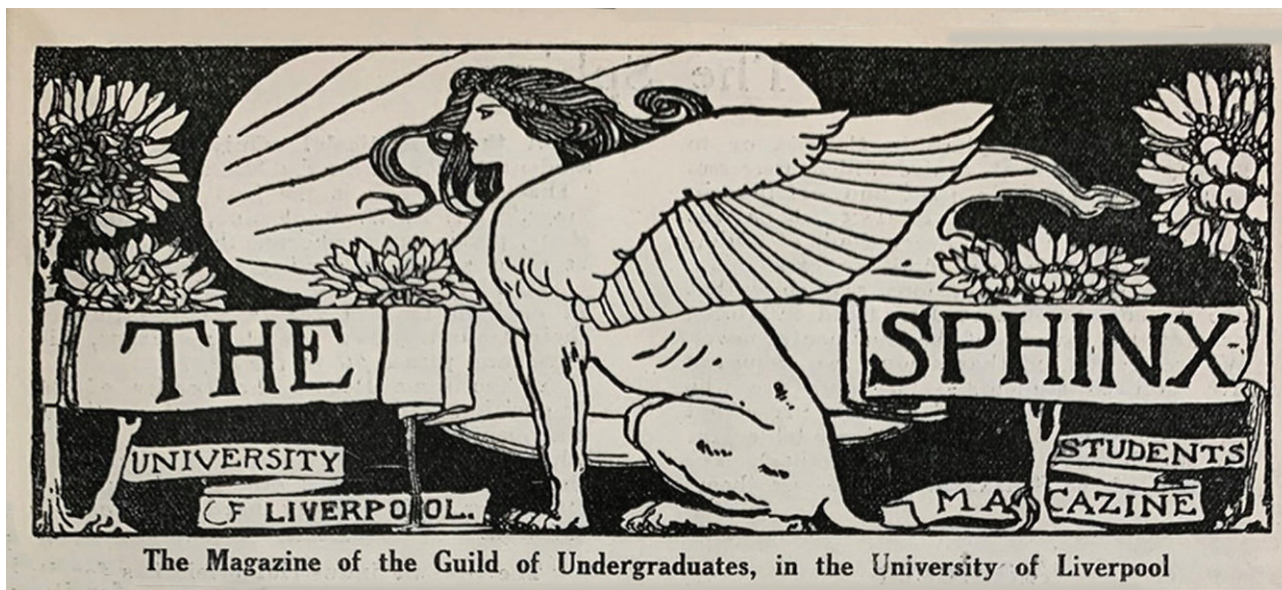


Figure 2: Extract from the cover of the Liverpool student magazine *The Sphinx*. Accessed via the Special Collections and Archives of the University of Liverpool.

Reflecting the legacies of war, a variety of university-based initiatives highlighted the importance of international cooperation. From 1919, students at the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth could take a course on international politics – the first of its kind, taught by the internationalist and classical scholar, Alfred E. Zimmern. Moreover, Aberystwyth was but one of many higher education institutions that had a student branch of the League of Nations Union – the mass membership organisation that promoted

internationalism among the British public. Across the country, student magazines and journals often reflected on the increasing commitment to internationalism among students; and university debating societies held various events dedicated to international affairs. While many stressed the importance of student citizenship in terms of post-war reconstruction, others hoped that students would recognise that they were ‘not only citizens of their own country, but also citizens of the world’, as *The Dragon* put it in June 1923.

# Student funding and university access

**The post-war era** was a period of major educational reform. Passed during the final weeks of the First World War, one major manifestation of this development was the 1918 Education Act, which covered England and Wales. Often known as the ‘Fisher Act’ – in honour of its progenitor H. A. L. Fisher, the then president of the Board of Education – its most important provision was in raising the school leaving age from 12 to 14. Moreover, the Act abolished fees in state elementary schools, promoted secondary education and appeared to offer teachers enhanced professional status through higher salaries and the creation of a pensions scheme. Cutbacks to government spending in the 1920s limited and delayed the implementation of many of these reforms. Yet the Act’s impact extended to the sphere of higher education: under Section 44, it allowed ‘substantive’ grants for various educational purposes to be paid by the Board of Education.

One result of these provisions was the creation of the Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen. Launched in 1918 and operative until 1923, this venture provided tuition fees and means-tested maintenance grants to almost 28,000 ex-service students in England and Wales. In Scotland, a similar initiative funded over 5,800 ex-service students. Although only available to men, the scope and scale of the ex-service scheme vastly exceeded all other sources of student funding in this period. In addition to financial assistance, various academic

arrangements assisted the university enrolment of ex-servicemen who might not have met normal matriculation requirements.

The ex-service scheme was overseen by the Board of Education and administered by local university authorities. Applicants had to outline their wartime service, financial circumstances and potential sources of assistance. Applications were rarely rejected outright. Where they were, short service was one reason for rejection, while the income of candidates occasionally exceeded annual fee and maintenance costs.

The scheme undoubtedly broadened the social composition of the student body. Many students who enrolled at university would have been unable to do so without financial assistance. A number of applicants for ex-service grants could not rely upon familial support, often because their parents did not have the financial means or had other dependents. Writing to the Registrar at Aberystwyth in October 1919, one applicant stressed that ‘I have nobody to support me – my parents being hard working people’. He added that one of his brothers had been ‘killed at Armentières in April 1918’, while his ‘remaining brother’ was ‘16 years old ... [and] a collier’. Similarly, commenting on a student at Christ Church, Oxford, a college report from June 1921 noted that his parents were ‘distinctly poor, and he would not have been able to continue at the University without assistance’.

Although some students were entirely dependent upon grants, others were able to fund their own

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<b>FOR OFFICIAL USE</b> Regd. No. _____ D.D. No. _____ Date _____ Recd. at Head Office _____	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CONFIDENTIAL</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">FORM D.L.A.D.-1</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>MINISTRY OF LABOUR</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>APPLICATION FOR MAINTENANCE AND TRAINING GRANTS.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>NOTES</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please write clearly and use block letters for all names.</li> <li>2. Make the statements as complete and explicit as possible. This will save inquiries and delay. Any unavoidable corrections must be initialled by the applicant and the Magistrate or Commissioner for Oaths.</li> <li>3. The form must be completed in duplicate and each copy signed by the Magistrate or Commissioner for Oaths who attends the declaration.</li> <li>4. The Government Department concerned reserves the right to make such further inquiries as may be necessary in considering this application, and may require the completion of a further form.</li> <li>5. The decision of the Department concerned will be final.</li> <li>6. The form when duly completed is to be returned to the District Director, Appointments Department.</li> <li>7. Your District Director's address is _____</li> </ol>
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**I.—STATEMENT OF APPLICANT.**

- (1) Surname Craggs, Christian Names Arnold  
 Substantive Rank Private, Present Acting Rank \_\_\_\_\_  
 Nationality British
- (2) Permanent address  
Butterknowle, Via Darlington, Co. Durham.
- (3) Temporary address (until \_\_\_\_\_)  
Maybank, 35 Anne's Road, Aigburth, Liverpool
- (4) State if married, single or widower Single
- (5) If married or widower give (a) date of marriage \_\_\_\_\_  
 (b) number of children living and dates of birth \_\_\_\_\_

I Arnold Craggs solemnly and sincerely declare that the statements contained in paragraphs I, II and III are to the best of my knowledge and belief correct in every respect, and I **MAKE THIS SOLEMN DECLARATION BELIEVING THE SAME TO BE TRUE.**

Signature of Applicant (in full) Arnold Craggs  
 Declared and subscribed before me at The University, Liverpool  
 this 7th day of June 1919

a. Signature of Magistrate or Commissioner for Oaths Alfred Dale  
 If a Magistrate, the place or County for which he acts The City of Liverpool

A.D. 62 (25776) W.L. 45278-710. 20000. G.D. D.S.A. G. 4.

**Figure 3:** Application to the grant scheme for ex-servicemen, 1919. Accessed via the Special Collections and Archives of the University of Liverpool.

studies or could claim additional support from other sources. This included scholarships from industries, academic bursaries, and parental support. Even the beneficiaries of such supplementary assistance still often received full fee coverage and generous maintenance grants. In short, the Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Servicemen supported those with financial

means and those without. Military service, rather than financial circumstances, was seemingly the key criterion in deciding who received grants.

While the ex-service scheme widened participation in higher education, it was not open to female applicants. Despite their significant contribution to the war effort – and their active role on campus both during and after the conflict – the Board of Education deemed women ineligible for the grant. In this respect, the construction of the scheme reflected limitations as to the way in which wartime service was being conceived, and it contrasted with shifts in the gender make-up of universities during the war years.

Grants were dependent upon academic promise and progression. Students could (and did) lose their funding if their academic progress was deemed to be unsatisfactory. By contrast, the kinds of courses that were being funded covered a considerable range. Certainly, many ex-service students studied subjects that were deemed essential for post-war economic and social reconstruction, such as science, medicine, engineering and teacher training. Yet there is no evidence that such courses were privileged in the distribution of funding. Fees and grants covered a range of subjects including law, architecture, archaeology, theology and the arts. In this respect, the grant scheme illustrates the wider value accorded to higher education in the rebuilding of British society after the war.



# Student life in the face of disruption

**The post-war influx** of students led to shortages in housing, facilities, and resources at a number of universities and colleges. At Aberystwyth, the Men's Hostel and Alexandra Hall – which housed women students – were frequently full or exceeding capacity. Overcrowding was the source of considerable anxiety for both university authorities and for students. In February 1919, a grant application from an ex-serviceman at Aberystwyth highlighted some of the personal difficulties that could ensue under such circumstances. He argued that owing to 'late demobilisation I have lost my place in the men's hostel which is now overcrowded. Through this I am obliged to stay in private lodgings where I cannot by any means afford to stay much longer.'

Both Liverpool and Oxford erected army huts to temporarily house students, with Liverpool lacking a men's hall of residence entirely.

Teaching space was also limited. As *The Sphinx* claimed in November 1919, medical students at Liverpool were being turned away 'from the pursuit of knowledge, there being no more room to seat them'.

Pressures on accommodation and teaching space were not the only sources of disruption faced by students. In late 1918, the Council of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth resolved to temporarily close the university owing to the 'prevalence of the influenza epidemic', with precautionary measures such as vaccinations and

isolation spaces later being recommended. At Oxford, the *Wadham College Gazette* noted that 'Death has visited our College. The influenza epidemic spared very few', although the journal recorded that 'only in one case among our own men was it fatal'.

Reminders of death and loss were present on campus in other forms. The commemoration of staff and students who lost their lives in the First World War was a notable feature of university life in the post-war period. Forms of commemoration included rolls of honour, 'In Memorium' sections in student journals, photographic displays, and other permanent memorials to the fallen, such as the Great Hall at University College London.

While there was a personal dimension to the celebration of Armistice Day for the immediate post-war generation, *The Dragon* seemed to concede in 1921 that some students might be 'revolted with its sentimentality or sickened by the hypocrisy of it'. Moreover, by November 1932 – at a time when pacifist sentiment gained currency among a new generation of students – Oxford magazine *The Cherwell* noted that, while the two minutes' silence to mark the fallen was both 'sacred and sad', 'the rest of the day is spent in militaristic demonstrations that would have been repugnant to the dead whom we commemorate'. In this context, it raised the question whether the overall character of the day amounted to a 'jingoistic celebration'.



**Figure 4:** The Great Hall at University College London, opened in 1927 as a memorial to the fallen of the Great War (subsequently destroyed during the Second World War). Image courtesy of UCL Special Collections.

Despite the desire to engage with post-war forms of remembrance and commemoration – alongside concerns surrounding the influenza epidemic – university life was by no means entirely solemn.

A range of student societies and clubs were formed or revived; sports and athletics resumed; while plays, concerts, dances, dinners, debates, and lectures were all well attended. The development of increasingly mixed social spaces on campus allowed for greater interaction between men and women students. However, at some institutions, such interactions remained heavily regulated.

In Aberystwyth, the university's 'Social Regulations' provoked student discontent. They prohibited men and women students from enjoying 'Refreshments together in public cafes & institutions of a like character without permission', banned women students from entering the lodgings of male students without permission, and stated that both male and female

students were to behave in a 'fitting manner' on all occasions.

In 1919/1920, the ex-service students at Aberystwyth set up their own association. Emphasising their independence and sense of responsibility, they successfully pushed for changes to these regulations, including the extension of boundaries where students of both sexes could interact. As *The Dragon* noted in February 1921, 'A considerable number of the most irksome regulations have been done away with; a fair amount of freedom had been conceded to the students; the atmosphere was less morbid'.

When the cohort of ex-service students left university, many reflected on the personal sacrifices they had made. In May 1922, the Chancellor of the University of Liverpool underlined this point: 'You were called upon at a time of stress to serve your Country, and in your ready response you sacrificed many of those years which under ordinary circumstances would have been employed in fitting you for a future career'.

Nevertheless, he hoped that the 'knowledge you have gained at the University and the part you played in the Great War, will be found sufficient guarantees for your future success'.



Figure 5: Cartoon from *The Dragon*, November 1919, highlighting gender relations at a time when university authorities in Aberystwyth regulated interactions between the sexes.



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