# ‘The New England is Knocking on the Door’[1]

# Developing University Education in Devon, 1917–22

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In August 1922 a new organisation came into being: the University College of the South West (UCSW). Based in Exeter, it was incorporated under the Companies Act and superseded what had originally been Exeter City Council’s Royal Albert Memorial College (RAMC). It was not, as had once been hoped, a full university with the power of granting its own degrees, but it had the capacity to prepare its undergraduate students for courses leading to degrees awarded by the University of London. Its new status, no longer part of a local education authority, meant that it could be admitted to the list of institutions to which the University Grants Committee (UGC) could make financial grants. It became a ‘university in waiting’, though the wait for the full charter, which was not granted until 1955, was probably longer than anyone involved in 1922 imagined. Its recognition on the UGC list in 1922 was a major achievement and the result of exceptional effort by a small group of Devonians.

In this article accounts of the origin of the UCSW are examined and set in the context of recent research on the development of universities in England after the First World War. The nature of community support for the change is examined, with particular reference to support from outside the academic and teaching world. Comparisons with the efforts made to achieve university status for colleges in other parts of England are drawn. These help to show the significant characteristics of the initiative in Devon: the broad-based support for a local university; the problems of securing an adequate endowment; and the organisational talents of the prime movers.

## Historiography

Early accounts of the events that led to the incorporation of the UCSW in 1922 were written by the then town clerk of Exeter, H. Lloyd Parry, in 1946; by the principal appointed in 1920, Hector Hetherington, in 1963; and by B.W. Clapp, a University of Exeter lecturer in 1982.[2] Clapp’s history acknowledges its debt to the earlier two, written by those contemporary with the events they describe. The authors were ‘insiders’ in the world of education: the town clerk had been a registrar to the college as well as being involved in his official capacity since the college was part of the Royal Albert Memorial.[3] Hector Hetherington was principal from 1920 to 1925 and took a leading role in the events of that period. Their focus was naturally on the relationship between the college, the local authorities and the relevant government departments and, although Hetherington has some

[1] *Reading Observer,* 27 November 1920, quoting Principal Clayden of the University College of Reading on the proposals for creating new universities.

[2] H. Lloyd Parry, *History of the Royal Albert Memorial College, Exeter* (University College of the South West, 1946); Hector J.W. Hetherington, *The University College of Exeter 1920–1925* (University of Exeter, 1963); B.W. Clapp, *The University of Exeter: A History*, (University of Exeter, 1982).

[3] The collective term for the museum and the college before the creation of UCSW was the ‘Royal Albert Memorial’. Governors were appointed as governors of the Royal Albert Memorial.

shrewd observations about the process, they are less descriptive of wider engagement in the movement for higher education.

Two recent studies prompt a reappraisal of the evolution of the case for a university between 1917 and 1922 and what the significance of the incorporation was. The first is John Taylor's *The Impact of the First World War on British Universities: Emerging from the Shadows*.[4] Taylor describes how the experience of joint state/university partnerships during the war led to a pivotal shift in the relationship between the universities and the government:

> … both the Universities and the Government began to look ahead to a future with significantly increased student numbers, drawn from a broader cross section of society, with new and better buildings and facilities; new courses; a stronger commitment to research, often working together with business and industry; and a better paid higher status workforce. … [I]n the closing years of the War there was a strong consensus that change was needed.'[5]

It was, Taylor suggests, 'the pressure of the War and the wider social changes that it prompted that helped to transform an essentially private, inward-looking set of institutions into a more outward-looking, publicly focused higher education system'.[6] The post-war development of a small group of 'university colleges' was part of that achievement.

The second new contribution to an interpretation of the process of building public support for a university in the far south west is Martha Vandrei's 2021 article drawing on researches generated by the Mayflower quatercentenary, '"Why should not Citadels become Academies?" Transatlantic Tercentenaries, Higher Education and Local Pasts in Britain after the First World War'.[7] Vandrei draws attention to a little-known initiative at a time when international links were prized, to set up an Anglo-American university, possibly named Mayflower, with bases both in the United States and in Devon, melding 'the contemporary enthusiasm for historical commemoration and the growing debate around access to higher education'.[8] In fact, the movement was little more than a fantasy and had evaporated by 1922, but its discussion made a contribution to contemporary public opinion.

## Early Initiatives

Although the city of Exeter, by comparison with other university college towns and cities, was extremely small,[9] it had long aspired to turn the RAMC into a university college and ultimately to obtain a charter and become an independent university. While similar colleges elsewhere had secured their incorporation earlier – Southampton and Nottingham University Colleges in 1902, for example – the University College, Exeter, had no independent status but remained a part of Exeter City Council. In 1911, the City Council thought it had fulfilled the requirements of the treasury for university status by building a substantial new block of accommodation (now the Exeter Phoenix,

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[4] John Taylor, *The Impact of the First World War on British Universities: Emerging from the Shadows* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
[5] Taylor, *Impact,* p. 329.
[6] Ibid., p. 336.
[7] Martha Vandrei, '"Why Should Not Citadels Become Academies?" Transatlantic Tercentenaries, Higher Education and Local Pasts in Britain after the First World War', *History,* September 2021, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.13182 [accessed 10 May 2022].
[8] Ibid.
[9] The population of Exeter in 1911 was 47,000. Other aspirant county boroughs were much larger. Nottingham had a population of over 289,000; Reading almost 73,000; and Southampton almost 105,000.

see Figure 1) and securing an appropriate level of endowment. The title of the college was changed to 'University College, Exeter' in aspirational anticipation. Unfortunately, the treasury then changed the rules and the endowment was deemed insufficient. No further progress was made before the First World War.

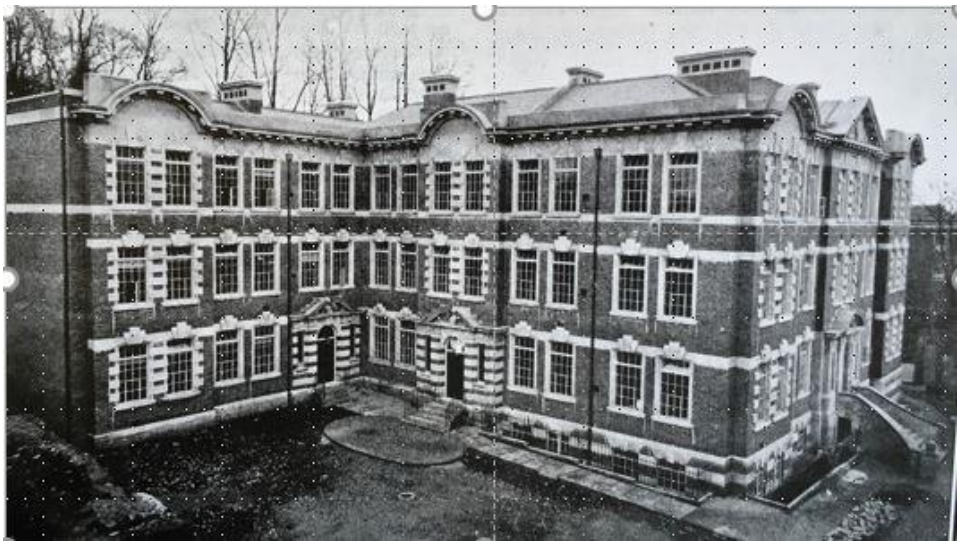

**Figure 1:** The purpose-built RAMC Buildings, 1911
(Royal Albert Memorial College, later University College Exeter, postcard in author's collection.)

During the war, the government began to plan for post-war reconstruction. The scope of the task widened. The Ministry of Reconstruction's first public pamphlet described the original purpose as enabling the country 'to slide with as little friction as possible into the familiar grooves of July 1914', and how this had developed into the 'larger and worthier ideal' of creating 'a better world after the war', an aim for which they felt 'so many of our best have given their lives.'[10] Education, the Ministry announced, was 'the most important and enduring side of post-war policy; for upon the extent to which the country develops and makes use of the innate abilities of its citizens, its future prosperity and happiness depend.'[11]

The best-known result of that approach was the 1918 Education Act, reorganising post-elementary education. Less publicly, however, other changes were underway. Treasury money for universities, existing or aspirant, was to be channelled to the universities through the UGC. This put at a disadvantage a local authority establishment like the University College, Exeter, which remained under the aegis of the Board of Education. Lloyd Parry acknowledged that University College Exeter had no formal claim to the title of a university college, but claimed that in 1918 'the status received de facto recognition when the college was invited to be part of a group representing the "Universities and the University Colleges of the Kingdom"'. However, such informal acceptance would no longer be enough to facilitate the development of a degree-awarding university.

The movement to create a full university had been growing in Devon. In 1915 the head of the RAMC, Principal Clayden, gave his presidential address to the Devonshire Association.[12] In 'The Future of Higher Education in Exeter', he set out a broad vision of a federated University of the

[10] Ministry of Reconstruction, *The Aims of Reconstruction* (HMSO, 1918), pp. 3–4.
[11] Ibid.
[12] *TDA*, A.W. Clayden, 'The Future of Higher Education in Exeter', vol. 47 (1915), pp. 62–82 ; *Western Times (WT)*, 21 July 1915.

South West, to be developed on the foundations of existing establishments: the University College in Exeter (arts and sciences); Plymouth's technical schools and Marine Biological Laboratory; and Camborne (school of mines). He also considered that the new agricultural college at Seale-Hayne and the teacher-training colleges at St Luke's (Exeter) and Truro should be involved.

Clayden's speech prompted considerable discussion which led to the formation of a provisional Committee for the Furtherance of University Education (CFUE) in the south west, covering the four counties of Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Wiltshire. By 1917, this committee had engaged the interest and support of local education authorities, college and school principals and teachers, the National Union of Teachers and Trades and Labour Councils in the four counties of Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Wiltshire. The committee was encouraged in its work in October 1917 by a telegram from Addison, then the Minister of Reconstruction, who said that he heartily approved the object of endeavouring to obtain increased facilities for university education. He considered it 'of the utmost importance that university education should be within reach of all capable of taking advantage of it.'[13]

The new secretary to the Board of Education, Herbert Fisher, appointed in 1918, was also committed to the expansion of university education and to a new role for the state to foster higher education establishments.[14] Taylor has described the changes he drove as transforming an 'essentially private, inward-looking set of institutions into a more outward-looking publicly focused higher education system'.[15] Within such a context, the CFUE might have expected its deputation to the Board of Education in November 1918 to have been welcomed and their proposals endorsed. Their reception must have dismayed them. Fisher attacked their case on every point. Where were the students to come from, given the small numbers staying on at school after 16? How was the necessary local contribution to the university's funds to be raised? How did they think they could make a federated university work?[16] Their case was dismissed almost contemptuously:

> To propose at this time of day to form a university out of a second-rate college at Exeter, mainly filled with Training College Students, a newly founded Agricultural College at Newton Abbot, a School of Mines in Camborne and a Technical School in Plymouth, is a very tall order.[17]

## Local Reaction and Responses

'The President of the Board of Education has put us West-country folk in our places', began the leader in the Plymouth-based *Western Evening Herald* (*WEH*), when the formal negative reply was received.[18] The news had already provoked an angry local response. It had even been rumoured that the strength of feeling was such that Coalition candidates might lose Parliamentary seats in Plymouth in the December 1918 General Election.[19]. The CFUE redoubled their efforts and by the beginning of 1919 their revised case was ready for distribution to all those agencies whom it was hoped would sign it. Over the course of the next few months, amid much public debate, all of them did. The committee started an appeal for an endowment fund. Unlike the industrial towns where earlier 'red-brick' universities had been founded, and unlike their rivals in a claim to university

[13] *WT*, 10 Oct 1917.
[14] Taylor, *Impact,* pp. 331–32
[15] Taylor, *Impact,* pp. 336–37.
[16] The federation of Leeds. Liverpool and Manchester as Victoria University, he pointed out, had only lasted 15 years.
[17] Fisher's speech quoted in Clapp, *University of Exeter,* p. 50. He describes it as 'extremely hostile'.
[18] *WEH*, 3 February 1919.
[19] Clapp. *University of Exeter,* p. 50. He refers to the source of this information as an HMI (inspector of schools) at Plymouth but gives no detailed reference.

status such as Nottingham and Reading, they had no wealthy manufacturing firms ready to make substantial endowments or to sponsor students and staff. The fund was going to need to be scraped together. A notice appealing for funding appeared in local newspapers [20]

> No finer investment for the benefit of our South Western community could be made than the provision of adequate endowments for the colleges at Exeter, Plymouth, Camborne and Newton Abbot which must form the foundations of any future local university

Other hard work behind the scenes took place. Fisher had been explicitly critical of the lack of financial support from the county council. This criticism was addressed in late 1919, when a joint committee between Exeter City Council and Devon County Council (DCC) reviewed a report about the Exeter college. Additional funds were urgently needed to make any progress towards university status.[21] DCC was put under pressure to increase its grant, as it was demonstrated that that Exeter City Council was already providing a grant of £4,000 a year, while the county council contributed just £240. The DCC chair, Sir Henry Lopes, a firm supporter of a University of the South West, acknowledged it should be more. He pointed out that there were 47 students at the college from Exeter and but 71 from the county.[22] In effect, the city was subsidising the county and demonstrating its commitment to higher education by investing the product of a 3d rate.[23] Lopes persuaded the county to increase its grant to £4,000 which, as he indicated, was no more than the product of a halfpenny rate.

The new county council funding did impress the Board of Education, which sent a delegation to inspect the college and to discuss its future. The case made by the local committee was now a Devon one, and based on the University College Exeter alone, with improvements to higher education in Plymouth to be developed in due course. That visit took place in the spring of 1920. The inspectors reported that the college had about 450 students and 28 staff. Most of the students were in fact enrolled on a teacher-training programme, but others were undertaking studies for degrees.[24] It was physically based in the 1911 college building and in accommodation within the museum itself, supplemented by a number of redundant army huts on the site.

The inspectors found that the quality of teaching demonstrated solid foundations for honours degrees in history and modern languages and 'thorough and efficient instruction' to pass degree level in other subjects such as science.[25] The Board remained concerned about funding and accommodation. 'Poverty', their report concluded, 'is the main if not the only obstacle.'[26] Local representatives could not assure the Board of sufficient income. The Board was, however, now

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[20] *WMN*, 18 January 1919, letter signed by Harry Lews as the committee's joint hon secretary. The reference to Newton Abbot meant the Seale-Hayne Agricultural College.

[21] *WT*, 5 December 1919. Report to the governors of the Royal Albert Memorial. Lists the need for additional funding for salaries and wages, apparatus and books.

[22] These numbers appear to equate to the number of students on degree courses. The overall number, including students training to be teachers and those on technical courses in the Schools of Arts and Science, were reported as 355.

[23] *Devon and Exeter Gazette* (*DEG*), 31 October 1919.

[24] Charles Illingworth, *University Statesman: Sir Hector Hetherington* (George Outram & Co, 1971). Sixteen, apparently using Hetherington's own account. There had been a school of science too, but possibly this had been displaced along with the technical schools in 1918.

[25] Clapp, *University of Exeter,* p. 51.

[26] Ibid., quoting the official report.

generally sympathetic to the idea and agreed to discuss the proposal with the treasury to see if the college could be placed on the list for university grants, warning that the level of income they would expect to see would be at least £45,000. Importantly, though, they had endorsed the idea of the college as a centre of higher education in its region.

## 1920–22: Success At Last

Hector Hetherington was appointed principal in 1920. His previous appointment had been in Wales, where there was already a federal university. He understood the importance of creating and maintaining good relationships in the local area, and was prepared to go out and about, speaking to professional associations or at school speech days. He also understood better than members of the CFUE how to deal with civil servants and advisers. He developed an alternative proposal: the creation of an 'apprentice' university. Another 'senior' university would take on a supervisory role. A board of visitors would be appointed to supervise the academic work – staff, curriculum and examinations – until all were satisfied that university standards had been achieved. He obtained agreement from the University of Oxford to become the supervising university. Although there was initial interest in this proposal, and a conference about it held in London in December 1920, Hetherington learned informally that it was never likely to be approved. 'It was a dead duck', he acknowledged, and withdrew it in July 1921.[27]

He continued work to enhance the endowment fund, persuading all local authorities to agree that the proceeds of a penny rate at least should be dedicated to the funding of the new university. When the UGC came to Exeter in February 1922 he was even able, through the generosity of Alderman Reed of Exeter (a paper manufacturer), to take them to visit the new site for the university; the Streatham Hall Estate on the edge of Exeter, thus presenting a solution to the problems of inadequate accommodation.

Hetherington described this as 'by far the most exciting single event of my time in Exeter'. He recounted the meticulous preparation that went on over the papers to be presented and the people to be interviewed, down to the very last detail of Sir Henry Lopes bringing wines from his cellars at Maristow for the formal dinner at the end of the first day.[28]. This time they were convinced. As the UGC later summarised for the treasury:

> They were impressed with the great increase in Secondary School provision… and with the unanimity of the demand for a recognised University Institution in the district. They were also satisfied with the quality of the work being carried on at the college and with the standing and qualifications of the teaching staff. The college forms the valuable nucleus of a University Institution in an area at present unserved… There are now some 365 students under the committee's definitions; of these just over 100 are degree students. The income of the college (£26000) is admittedly below the standard suggested by the committee in their Report of 1921, but is not far below that of the smaller recognised University Colleges…[29]

The outcome was confirmation that the University College would be placed on the list for grants with effect from 1 August 1922. Disappointingly, it would not be constituted as a university with a

[27] Hetherington, *University College*, p. 11.
[28] Illingworth, p. 20.
[29] TNA, HM Treasury, T161/27, *Exeter University College*. For admission to Treasury list of Institutions accepted for Grant.

formal charter, but Exeter was not alone in finding the gate to university status closed against them.

The necessary processes were put in place to constitute the University College of the South West, and it was so incorporated on 1 August 1922. From the autumn of 1922, students would be fully prepared for external degrees awarded by the University of London

## A Thirst for University Education: Building and Sustaining Local Support

It was probably to be expected that the proposal for a University of the South West would receive support from academics and other members of teaching professions around the peninsula: staff of the technical colleges, staff of the grammar schools and high schools. They looked for a better range of opportunities for their pupils and, no doubt, as Perkin and Barnes note, the academic staff were also affected by the opportunities to improve their own professional status.[30]

Beyond the support from the academic world, however, there seems to have been a wider body of support in the south west for a local university. This is particularly demonstrated by information in local newspapers. The *Western Morning News*, for example, published a series of statements by 'prominent Plymothians' about the need for a university in the south west following the decision by the Higher Education Sub-committee of Plymouth Education Authority to recommend a penny rate in support of a University College of the South West.[31] Of the six Plymothians identified, including councillors, a headmistress and a leading trade unionist, five were positively in favour and one had minor reservations.

The CFUE did in fact include two prominent journalists: Frederick Gratwicke and Sir James Owen. The committee also included the more traditional 'great and the good', such as the Anglican Bishop of Exeter, the Roman Catholic bishop of Plymouth, Lady Acland of Torquay and both the current and previous Exeter MPs. Potential donors such as Viscount Hambleden and Sir Edward Chaning Wills, were also invited. Representatives from the Trades and Labour Councils of Plymouth and Exeter and the Exeter Chamber of Commerce were also members. Organisations such as the Plymouth Incorporated Mercantile Association and the Barnstaple Trades Council also wrote in support of the concept. Urell, the Plymouth Trades Council and Devon and Cornwall Federation of Labour representatives, stated that his purpose as a member of the 1918 deputation was to voice 'the feelings of Labour …[in order to obtain] the education needed by the democracy of the South West a university was necessary'.[32]

There was a wider lay education movement to support the proposal for a South West University. This included the 'Education Society of the South West', with branches in Exeter and in Plymouth, who wrote in support. So, eventually, did the Plymouth Co-operative Society's Education Committee, although they had to be chivvied to do so by the *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, which stated:

> It is true that we intend to establish our own Co-operative College … but in the meantime we ought to be the most enthusiastic supporters of every scheme intended to bring the benefits of university

[30] Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society Since 1880* (Routledge, 1989) pp. 79–80; Sarah V. Barnes, 'English Civic Universities and the Triumph of the Oxbridge Ideal', *History of Education Quarterly,* vol. 36 (1996), pp. 271–305.
[31] *WMN,* 27 June 1921.
[32] *WMN*, 3 February 1919.

education nearer to the homes of working people'.[33]

Additionally, the end of the war had seen a number of ex-servicemen taking up educational opportunities to which they were introduced by the army's education corps. Most of these were seeking vocational qualifications, including people like the class in Plymouth for about twenty ex-servicemen who 'desire to qualify with the Chartered Institute of Secretaries and the four ex-servicemen who enrolled at the Exeter School of Art with a view to setting up an advertising agency'.[34] It demonstrated, nonetheless, an increase in aspirations for higher education.

One particular contribution to the debate about the expansion of university education was an initiative for the creation of a transatlantic university, recently discussed by Vandrei as part of the researches into ideas for commemorating the sailing of the *Mayflower* in 1620. The idea, promoted first by the American ambassador in 1917 and then in 1918 by a leading Free Church thinker, James Rendel Harris, was to establish a 'Mayflower' University with bases in Plymouth and in the United States.[35]. Although the notion never became a reality, it was widely discussed, especially early in 1918 when Rendel Harris was in Plymouth speaking to groups such as the Free Church Council and the Co-operative Society.[36] The idea was also referenced as an alternative means of bringing a university to Devon when in the winter of 1918–19 it seemed the Board of Education had ruled out Devon's aspirations. The *WEH* reminded readers not to 'lose sight of the glimmer of distant light which Dr Rendel Harris pointed to last year. His Anglo-American university would be no second-rate affair; it would have no lack of professors or of students …'[37] The Anglo-American university never became a realistic proposition. It did, however, contribute to a climate in which university education was being widely discussed in non-academic circles, and the comments of 'leading citizens' on the proposition published.

Devon was not alone in finding widespread support for the creation of local universities opening up more places for students. A number of other university colleges were similarly supported. Nottingham, Reading and Southampton all sought to become degree-granting universities between 1918 and 1922. Their experiences were all slightly different, affected by their size, geography, history and opportunities to attract major endowments, but like the UCSW, their applications were turned down.

## Other University Colleges

Nottingham had the advantage of a college with a charter, a large city and support from a long-standing Workers' Educational Association for what the university college principal described as 'the democratic tradition of the working men's college'.[38] There were also local industries, keen to support research and teaching such as Boot's the Chemist, whose owner Jesse Boot made a major endowment and gave the university site. There were, however, difficulties in the idea of creating an

[33] Quoted in *DEG*, 1 February 1918, and reinforced by the South West Educational Association of Co-op Societies (*WEH* 8 Jan 1919).
[34] *WMN,* 18 December 1919; Gwen White, *An Exeter Perspective at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century.* Privately printed by Guy and Richard Moore, 2022.
[35] Martha Vandrei, '"Why should not Citadels become Academies?" Transatlantic Tercentenaries, Higher Education and Local Pasts in Britain after the First World War', *History*, 14 September 2021 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.13182> [accessed 4 June 2022]. As well as a Mayflower University based in Plymouth, a Raleigh University in Exeter was also discussed.
[36] *WEH*, 14 March 1918; 3 December 1918.
[37] *WEH*, 3 February 1919.
[38] *Nottingham Evening Post*, 18 October 1919.

'East Midlands' University on the Nottingham foundation, as Leicester advanced a parallel claim for its own college.[39] The Hartley University College, Southampton, already had a charter and was independent of local authority control but its detachment from the local authorities in the area and lack of industrial partners meant that it struggled, as its council recognised, to build up an endowment fund. Local newspapers compared its achievement unfavourably with that of the UCSW.[40]

The head of Reading's university college, Principal Childs, whose view of the position overall that 'the new England was knocking at the door' is quoted in the title of this article, had taken a very cautious approach to development. For more than a decade he had built up an endowment fund of over £200,000, brought in professors, set up a library and created a faculty organisation. Reading was probably better prepared than any of the other university colleges to become a degree-awarding university in 1920, when they made their application. They too were turned down, though, alone amongst this cohort of university colleges, they applied again in 1925 and were awarded the full status of a university, the only establishment to achieve that status during the 1920s.

## Conclusion

In spite of his initial hostility to the proposals for a university based in Devon, Fisher, the president of the Board of Education, did indeed believe that the state should be a 'supporter and partner' of an expanded university sector.[41] His challenge to the CFUE in Devon was to demonstrate that there would be sufficient students, a sound body of academic staff, and enough of an endowment fund to proceed. His criticism spurred the many local individuals and organisations who wanted to see a university in Devon to a course of action that achieved at least the foundation for such a body. The Board of Education particularly noted among the strengths of the case in 1922 'the unanimity of the demand for a recognised University Institution in the district'.[42] The success of their activities compares favourably with the other university colleges, which started from better positions. In the end, Fisher's officials permitted the UCSW development to proceed, even without achieving the target level of funding. (The endowment fund brought in only £25,000 instead of the specified £45,000.) No doubt this was due partly, as earlier authors have suggested, to the administrative skills of Principal Hetherington. He himself, however, saw the importance of securing a wider body of support and devoted considerable time and effort to meeting and lobbying individuals and groups who might sway public opinion and gain influential support, Without the firm and vocal support of laypeople in Devon the result might well have been that the RAMC remained little more in the 1920s than a teacher-training college.

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[39] *Nottingham Journal*, 15 January 1920.
[40] *Hampshire Advertiser*, 29 April 1921.
[41] Taylor, p. 332, referring to Fisher's 1919 paper on 'The Place of the University in National Life'.
[42] TNA HM Treasury, T161/27, *Exeter University College.* For admission to Treasury list of Institutions accepted for Grant.