

## Scrap the Oxford Postgraduate Application Fee

The Graduate Application Fee represents a barrier to study at our University. It creates a financial hurdle over which prospective applicants must pass before they can be considered, and as such hinders attempts to ensure that an Oxford education is available to all those who would benefit from it, regardless of personal circumstances. Furthermore, the existence of the fee adds to the unfortunate impression that Oxford is a place exclusively for the wealthy, and so it further undermines the laudable and extensive efforts many put into the goal of increasing the diversity of the student body. For these reasons, the fee should be abolished.

We acknowledge that an enormous amount of work is being put into efforts to increase graduate access. The establishment of a Graduate Access Working Group is welcome, as is the forthcoming introduction of a limited waiver of the fee for those students who qualified for full financial support during their undergraduate degree (family income ~£20k), and for those taking part in the UNIQ+ program. While these waivers acknowledge that the fee is indeed a barrier, they do not go nearly far enough. They are not the same as waiving the fee for any applicant in financial need. The requirement for full financial support during undergraduate education is stringent; a family earning less than £400 a week would be expected to find £75 for an application; or nearly twice that if the student were to also apply to Cambridge. Furthermore, graduate students lead more complicated lives than the typical undergraduate; when considering an applicant pool which contains many who have children or other caring responsibilities, it is clear that an assessment based primarily on parental circumstances will still leave many in genuine financial need out of the picture. Abolishing the fee will not instantly solve the problem of Graduate Access - but it will help.

The debate in Congregation on the motion to abolish the fee raised the fear that its abolition would lead to an increase in the number of 'poor quality' applications. The abolition of the fee for those from less well-developed countries, we are told, led to an increase in application rate from qualifying students, but not on the acceptance rate. Yet those involved in graduate admissions know that the barriers to such students' successful entry into Oxford are many, and the lack of suitable overseas studentships is key. To extrapolate from this limited experiment to conclude that there are no good candidates who are not applying because of the fee is simply wrong - and it contradicts the experience of those of us who have been directly involved in recruitment.

The argument that abolishing the fee would lead only to the receipt of more 'poor quality' applications is specious. It implies that being in a position to spend £75 - or not being put off by the University's request for the money even if you can afford it - is somehow correlated with academic ability or standing. This is manifestly false. Financial means are not a proxy for quality of thought, and in a modern, open university, ability to pay should not be any part of a well-founded admissions process.

We are also told that charging a fee is 'normal', and, though the practice is rare in British higher education, it is true that a small number of universities do charge a graduate fee. Nevertheless, Oxford's is the largest for postgraduate research courses, most other institutions which do charge do so for only a limited range of courses. Others take a liberal approach to fee waivers which we do not; Harvard, for example, grants an exception to anyone who can demonstrate a need. In any case, Oxford should lead on access, not use the fact that others charge occasionally as an excuse.

It is also true that multiple universities charging makes the problem worse; for students in interdisciplinary Doctoral Training Programs, where multiple applications are the norm, or in the humanities, where funding may be scarce and applications to multiple institutions

common, the total cost may easily run into hundreds of pounds. We should be reducing the burden of applying here, not adding to students' problems.

The final objection is that the fee only covers costs. The fact that it has increased by 300% in little more than a decade suggests that costs are not the only factor driving the level at which it is set. Regardless, we believe that assessing applications of potential students is a core activity of the University, and the cost should not be passed on to applicants, any more than one would charge someone applying for a professorial appointment to apply. Though times are hard, our University's resources and reputation are such that it is difficult to argue that such core costs should be borne by those who are merely applicants. The abolition of the undergraduate admissions fee recognised this; graduate applicants deserve the same treatment.

The motion does not propose an alternative source of funds to cover the cost of graduate admissions. The amount is, in the context of the University's total budget, small, amounting to less than 0.2% of annual income. The motion is deliberately conservative; if passed, the fee will not be abolished until the academic year 2024/25, a period which we believe will give time for alternative support to be found. There is no reason for such costs to fall on other graduate access initiatives, or on overstretched departments.

The motion is, essentially, about our priorities as an institution. Do we want to find the resources to properly assess the applications of all those who want to pursue graduate study here, or are we comfortable with insisting that only those who can afford a substantial fee may be considered? In supporting our motion, you will help ensure that it's understood everywhere that Oxford does not consider financial means a necessary requirement of study.

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