

Gazette Supplement



Resolution regarding Phasing-out of the Graduate Application Fee

Congregation

10 March

The following text is of the meeting of Congregation at 2pm on 10 March. For further information, please see *Gazette* No 5269, 5 March 2020, p316, and Flysheet 1 in the same issue. For the list of signatories to the resolution, see *Gazette* No 5267, 20 February 2020, p265.

The Vice-Chancellor: There are two items of business before Congregation today, the first being resolutions approving the conferment of honorary degrees and the second being a resolution on the phasing out of the graduate application fee. Would you please be seated.

I know that many colleagues are concerned about the coronavirus and I did offer the proposers the opportunity to postpone this meeting, but they preferred to go ahead and so we will do so. I would, however, encourage you to take advantage of the space available and spread out around the theatre, if you would like to do so.

The first item of business is the resolutions to approve the conferment of honorary degrees. The resolutions were placed on the agenda of this meeting first published in the 13 February issue of the *University Gazette*. No notice of opposition or amendment has been received. I therefore declare these resolutions carried.

We now turn to the second item on the agenda, the resolution for phasing out the graduate application fee. The resolution, together with an explanatory note, was placed on the agenda of this meeting in the *Gazette* published on 20 February. Council has decided that the resolution is unacceptable and Council's response to the resolution was published on the 5 March issue of the *Gazette*.

The procedure will be as follows. I shall first call Mr Benjamin Fernando to move the resolution and Dr Michael Cassidy to second it. I shall then call Professor Martin Williams to oppose the resolution on behalf of Council and the Revd Professor Robert Gilbert to second that opposition. There will then be further speeches in support and in opposition to the resolution, as time permits. At the conclusion of the debate, I will invite Professor Martin Williams and then Mr Benjamin Fernando to reply. The resolution will then be put to Congregation and a vote will take place by paper ballot. Information about the voting procedure is printed on the voting paper. Please note that you will only be able to cast your own ballot and will not be able to give a vote to a colleague to cast for you. If you must leave before the vote is called, you will not be able to cast a ballot. Any member who has not received a paper will have an opportunity to collect one at the exit as the vote is called.

Speakers: when called, please could you come forward and speak into the microphone, first giving your name and college or department. The anti-loquitor device will indicate your final minute with an amber light and then turn red at the end of that minute. You are asked to confine your remarks to themes relevant to the discussion.

The text of the resolution is: 'To commit the University to the abolition of the graduate application fee in its entirety by the academic year 2024-25 and to prevent further fee increases in the meantime'.

I call on Mr Benjamin Fernando to move the resolution, followed by Dr Michael Cassidy to second it.

Mr Benjamin Fernando: Thank you Madam Vice-Chancellor. Benjamin Fernando, Worcester College. It is an honour

to be here today and speak on behalf of the 100 or so members of faculty and the 1,000 or so members of our community who support this resolution to phase out the application fee that the University charges its graduate students, which we feel to be unfair and to reinforce perceptions of this place as being elitist. It is rare in our community to gain such support for a motion and I am proud to have the support of everyone from first-year undergraduates through to heads of department; from the council of the Students Union who supported this motion overwhelmingly, even the shadow higher education minister.

As the proposer, it falls to me to frame this debate. I would urge you, as you sit here today and listen to the arguments and consider your position, please, think not only of the financial implications but of the people, the individuals, both studying here today but perhaps most importantly, those who do not study here today because of the fee.

My colleagues will speak to the financial implications of the fee and how this could be offset, but I say again, I reinforce: please, think of the students that we are talking about.

This fee was brought in nearly 15 years ago. In that time, we seem to have made little progress on this particular graduate access matter, although the University has, and we commend them, made progress on other topics. In the time since I have literally been in primary school, this fee has tripled. This is not progress. Other universities have followed Oxford's lead in introducing a fee, though it is by no means common in the Russell Group or the wider higher education sector in this country, with only two other universities charging for postgraduate research courses.

My test of a good policy is not one that we keep because we have had it for nearly 15 years. It would be: would we bring it in today if we did not already have it? I would ask any of you, in the current political climate, would we choose to bring in this policy if it did not already exist?

There is clear evidence that it puts people off applying. I only ask you to go look at Twitter and hear the stories of students who chose not to apply here because of the fee, both those who could not afford it and those who could afford it but chose not to apply because of the perception that generated. What do I say to Emma, a prospective graduate applicant who says that she would have to work for an extra day at her minimum wage job to afford the application? Or the physics student who said he was utterly humiliated to have to borrow money from his friend to apply? Or the transgender student who told me he could afford to pay but he knew he would have to pay for gender reassignment surgery one day, and frankly if Oxford didn't want him and charged that fee, he would rather put the money towards his own wellbeing?

There is plenty of peer-reviewed research to support this hypothesis. I am not sure whether the opposition to this motion plans on citing peer-reviewed research, but I point you to a report by Amanda Pallais of the National Bureau of Economic Research at Harvard University, published in September 2013. She looked at the effect of waiving the fee required to send admissions test scores to universities in the United States. When students were allowed to send their application scores for free to four rather than three universities, there was a substantial increase in the number of low-income students attending more selective colleges. 60% of that increase came about from students applying to more selective universities than they otherwise would have done.

If you wish to speak in favour today, I ask you, please, cite with us this research and assure us that no-one is put off by the fee and any waiver that you would introduce would absolutely ensure that no one is caught out, and cannot afford to apply.

Is this postgraduate fee fair? Well, we are the only ones in Oxford, the graduate students, who have to pay to apply specifically to Oxford. Undergraduates do not, heads of departments do not, Vice-Chancellors do not.

We cannot imagine charging candidates for head of department a week's wages if they wish to apply to three universities, because

we know what effect that would have on the quality of candidates. How can we say that this fee is consistent with our stated equality and diversity aims? Many of you I am sure feel obliged to be here today and I would ask you to follow your consciences and hear what we have to say.

I implore you: vote to abolish this fee so that, when I stand up at the next graduate access event that I will run next month at St Edmund Hall, I can tell the participants how proud I am that my University has seen that it is out of touch on this issue, has heard the voices of its staff, its students and its academics and has taken such a positive and trailblazing step forward. Thank you.

The Vice-Chancellor: Dr Michael Cassidy.

Dr Michael Cassidy: Mike Cassidy, Earth Sciences. The University cannot deny that the graduate application fee puts off poorer, talented students, and the admission of this fact was the introduction of a waiver to students who receive the maximum financial support as an undergraduate. After 12 years since the graduate application fee was introduced, this is a welcome addition, but the parental income bracket to qualify for this is £16,000 a year and anyone who comes from a family that earns just over £310 per week will still have to pay this fee. This fee waiver is categorically not the same as Oxford saying that Oxford will waive the fee for anyone in financial need, as they do in Harvard. There is also an assumption here that applicants are being provided parental or family support for their graduate study, whereas we know that prospective graduate students are more likely to support families and have other care and responsibilities, and so an assessment based on their parents' income is not appropriate.

If Oxford knows that this fee deters poorer talented students from applying, why doesn't Oxford lose this fee? When you listen today to the University's arguments, what they fundamentally boil down to is money. Money that the University claims, if it loses this vote today, will come out of departments, scholarships, student services, including disability access.

But freedom of information data of PhD applications show that Bristol, Birmingham, UCL, Edinburgh and Imperial all have more applications per place than Oxford. In other words, they are more selective and yet they manage to afford this service without charging an application fee for their postgraduate research courses. But Oxford University, one of the richest universities in the country, states that it cannot afford to lose this £2 million income source which

comprises 0.12% of its annual budget. This is the same Oxford University which states in its 2019 financial report, and I quote: '... with net assets of over £4 billion, not including colleges, the University benefits from a strong balance sheet relative to its peers in the UK and Europe'.

The same Oxford that in the last year saw a £21.5 million increase in its income from tuition fees, the same Oxford that saw a £20.2 million increase in its investment income and the same Oxford that received donations of more than £260 million, all in the last year alone. So forgive us if we do not believe you that the Oxford balance sheet cannot absorb the loss of this fee income without the need to cut essential fundings from departments, student services and disability access.

Oxford University can afford to lose this fee but today it needs to decide on its priorities. Is its priority to retain its wealth and support fundamental student facilities by making money from mostly rejected students or is its number one priority the one it claims in its own reports, and I quote, "To attract and admit students from all backgrounds with outstanding academic potential and the ability to benefit from an Oxford education"?

Today, let's get our priorities straight, let's vote with our hearts and our minds and not our pockets and send a message to all that Oxford University is open to anyone with outstanding academic potential, irrespective of their personal income. Thank you.

The Vice-Chancellor: I call on Professor Martin Williams to oppose the resolution, followed by the Revd Professor Robert Gilbert to second the opposition.

Professor Martin Williams: Good afternoon. I am Martin Williams, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education and Fellow of New College. Vice-Chancellor, colleagues, let me start with a point of agreement. I believe that everyone on both sides of this debate agrees that increasing access to graduate study is one of the University's most urgent priorities. This debate is not about fundamental principles, it is about tactics to achieve the shared aim of admitting the brightest and the best, whatever their background.

The resolution before us is based on the premise that the application fee is the major barrier to diversifying our graduate student population. Along with many others working in this area, I believe this view is mistaken and that abolishing the fee would be counterproductive. There are bigger, more difficult barriers to address. In

the meantime, simply encouraging more applications by removing the fee is very unlikely to achieve the aim of enabling more disadvantaged students to take up graduate places. The biggest barrier is the availability of funded studentships. On this front, the University has just announced an investment of £40 million in a new matched fundraising scheme to endow around 120 new scholarships, following through on its commitment in the Strategic Plan. I hope that many of these new scholarships will be awarded on widening access criteria, rather than purely academic ones.

We have also just agreed £1 million per annum uplift in the funding of the Clarendon Scholarships and these central initiatives are supported by numerous other schemes in divisions and colleges. Last year we established the Graduate Access Working Group, a group of very able academics with a longstanding commitment to widening participation, to develop policy and new initiatives in this area. The group has made impressive progress and has brought forward a series of recommendations, including targeted fee waivers, that have met with wide approval. The group opposes abolishing the application fee, having become convinced that this would be unhelpful. It would be strange in governance terms for the University to set up an academic expert group, only for Congregation to immediately countermand one of its earliest recommendations. The group needs to be trusted and given time to develop its work. The University has a waiver in place for applicants from low-income countries and, from next year, this will be extended to disadvantaged UK applicants. These waivers need to be evaluated to see if they are effective.

Earlier experience both here and at Cambridge, which has a similar scheme, is that waiving the fee alone does little or nothing to increase successful applications. The working group is therefore developing accompanying measures to support applicants to make stronger submissions. In the meantime, removing the fee in its entirety risks a rapid growth in uncompetitive applications.

There are genuine costs to our admissions processes that have to be met. The cost of just the central processing and support is £68 per applicant, close to the £75 we charge. The teams that provide these services are excellent and I am convinced the money is well spent. If the fee were abolished or, as might seem logical, passed on to the admitting departments, these central costs would still have to be covered

somehow. Realistically this could only be from a levy on departments.

To conclude, I believe that the resolution is well meaning, but mistaken. If passed, it may undermine important work in admissions and access, will unnecessarily impose additional costs on academic departments, and is unlikely to achieve its aims. I therefore ask you to vote against it.

The Vice-Chancellor: Professor Gilbert.

The Revd Professor Robert Gilbert:

Robert Gilbert, I am a Fellow of Magdalen and Director of the Medical Sciences Graduate School. Vice-Chancellor, members of Congregation, like everyone here I am committed to improving access to our graduate courses. To this end, the Graduate Access Working Group, of which I am a member, and which benefits from the expert external advice of Paul Wakeling, the Head of Department of Education at York University and the sector expert in this country, is reviewing current access profiles for postgraduate taught and research programmes in Oxford and elsewhere in the sector, identifying best practice and implementing new access initiatives. We do not support the phasing out of the graduate application fee. Instead, we are finding that graduate access is best addressed using a combination of internship programmes, mentoring and outreach, scholarship funding and, as you have heard, targeted fee waivers. Our leading strategy is the opportunity for potential applicants to gain research experience and to explore whether graduate study at Oxford might be for them. This is why UNIQ+ and Nuffield College's NUSI scheme have been set up, to provide well-funded research internships alongside mentoring and support and so encourage applications for graduate study. The number and the quality of applications received in the first year of operation unquestionably prove the need for UNIQ+ and conversations with participants showed that it had enabled new thinking, not just about DPhil but also about other forms of advance study and training. Following last year's programme, almost all participants indicated that they were seriously considering applying for graduate study. While UNIQ+ currently targets UK students, other internships exist to encourage South American, Chinese and African students to apply here. These schemes are all proving their value because they result in strong applications for graduate study which would not otherwise have been made.

Limited funding and the ways in which we assess funding awards are another graduate access barrier. We are working also

on elements of means testing in awarding scholarships. A pilot scheme in the Medical Sciences Division this year has assessed 34 of 138 scholarship nominees as socio-economically disadvantaged. Some of those, as a result, will receive funding when otherwise they would not. We can now build on this successful pilot and explore a wider application of targeted funding schemes.

The graduate application fee is waived for participants in UNIQ+ and NUSI, and also for qualifying unsuccessful internship applicants. From next year the University, as you have heard, has agreed to waive application fees for UK students who have received the maximum amount of means-tested financial support as undergraduates, about 14% of UK applicant applicants, but waiving the fee alone is not the solution to widened access and participation. A fee waiver scheme targeting World Bank low-income countries last year led to a doubling in applications from them, but no increase in offers.

Targeted fee waivers certainly have their place, but the main barriers to access lie not at the application stage, but in a more complex set of factors which demand a variety of strategic responses on our part. We all believe in the need to widen participation in graduate study at Oxford but phasing out the application fee is not the way. Instead, successful outreach activity such as UNIQ+ and NUSI, better targeting of scholarship funding, active support of disadvantaged applicants in putting together the strongest applications they can, alongside targeted fee waivers for those most in need are the route. That is the conclusion of the Graduate Access Working Group and we further believe that loss of the graduate application fee would negatively impact our work. It would reduce the funding available to support our activities and it would overload the system with applications, consuming time and energy which could otherwise be used in access and outreach work. I ask you to vote against the motion.

The Vice-Chancellor: I call on Dr Nicholas Brown.

Dr Nicholas Brown: Good afternoon, my name is Nick Brown and I am at Linacre College. Today's debate has been caricatured already as a question of whether we should prioritise graduate study or money. I am very uncomfortable with that. I am going to join a long line of people who are pledging their commitment to graduate access here this afternoon, but I think the credentials of the Graduate Access Working Group are unchallenged. It is led by some extraordinary people, Robert and David

Gavaghan, who are deeply committed to the process of improving our admissions of students from non-conventional backgrounds. I am head of a graduate college that has taken a leading role in improving graduate access for more than a decade and I am also a member of the Graduate Access Working Group and academic sponsor of the Graduate Admissions Focus Project, a project that has been working over the last year to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our graduate admissions, from application right through to admission.

The first task that that Focus Project tackled was mapping the entire graduate admissions process from start to finish. It was a month before we got it right and when complete, it took up an entire wall of the Focus office. There are two observations that emerged from that mapping exercise that are relevant to our discussions today. First, graduate admissions is both meticulous and extremely complex. Typically, an application will be thoroughly reviewed at least eight times or more. First it is assessed for its completeness and eligibility by the graduate admissions and recruitment team. They also provide dashboards and reports that inform departmental processes, and in colleges. They administer the student loan process, including compliance and regulatory activity for graduates from the US, Canada, UK and EU. They undertake fee status assessments and they provide information and guidance via websites, and enquiries about the process of applying, living costs and funding options, including scholarships. They respond to more than 35,000 enquiries from applicants.

The application is then passed onto departments for academic review where subject specialists and the director of graduate studies will assess and rank them against other applications, a process that usually involves face-to-face interview. If successful, it then travels on to a college where financial support is checked. It may be moved into scholarship and special needs assessments and assistance streams. Around about £38 million worth of scholarship funding is currently disbursed annually. Visa and immigration advice, accommodation advice also follow. All of this winnows down 30,000 applications to the 8,500 that receive an offer. And this leads to my second observation. £75 is nowhere near the full economic cost of processing a single application. Graduate admissions and recruitment carry out a substantial part of the administrative burden that falls centrally and you have heard that the cost per applicant is about £68. But it is academics who shoulder

the major part of the assessment load, at significant cost to the time that they have for other work. It is just another of the tasks that academics are supposed to do willingly and diligently as part of their normal duties. College assessment work also is completely unfunded. The complexity and workload of these teams continues to grow year on year and they are, as the Focus Project discovered, only just coping. These services have operated with cash-strapped budgets for the last three years, absorbing growth and streamlining processes to ensure that the impact on applicants and Oxford colleagues is as minimal as possible.

The motion we are considering today seems to be an obvious way to remove a barrier for cash-strapped students and I agree it would definitely encourage more applications, but I also fear it will have the unintended consequence that will have a negative impact on the quality of our admissions. More applications does not mean more access. I think it will tip a system which is already creaking over breaking point. Finally, I would like to see clear plans for how we might fund a system if we remove the graduate application fee. I hope that the proposers of this motion can come forward with some sensible ideas because I fear that simply adding this significant cost to the 123 charge on departments will add already to a very heavy financial burden on them. Thank you.

The Vice-Chancellor: I call on Professor Angela Russell.

Professor Angela Russell: Angela Russell, Departments of Chemistry and Pharmacology. I am a co-director of a recently established Wellcome Trust-funded doctoral training programme which bridges the Medical and MPLS Divisions in Oxford. The Wellcome Trust has been pioneering an initiative to support a more positive research culture, one that is creative, inclusive and honest, where Wellcome is leading UKRI, and other independent funders are following. These are major funders of graduate studentships in Oxford and across the UK. Improving equality, diversity and inclusion at all levels, including recruitment, are clear aspirations. In criteria set by initiatives such as Athena SWAN, which promotes EDI, or in some cases become a requirement for departments to access funding, Oxford must and should be leading the way in driving this initiative.

The whole philosophy of our graduate studentship programme is that embracing and supporting diversity in all forms will lead to a collaborative research culture in

which science and scientists can flourish. In common with other studentship programmes, my co-directors and I have identified that widening the base of our application pool is central to maximising diversity in our programme. We have taken many measures already to realise this aim: outreach targeted to under-represented groups; a publicised shortlisting process, anonymised for gender, nationality and ethnicity; and we will be participating in the University's UNIQ+ scheme. Yet none of this is enough. The graduate application fee stands in direct opposition to the stated aims of our course and for any graduate course which seeks to widen access. From my own outreach activities, I have heard multiple testimonies of people choosing not to apply because of the £75 fee. It is hardly surprising when we do not even invite over half of these applicants for an interview. We are quite simply fining these people for submitting an application and this is extremely harmful for Oxford's image.

The introduction of the UNIQ+ scheme is a positive and welcome move but in reality will have a negligible impact on our future applications. For us this year, two UNIQ+ places will be funded; note, no funding from the central University but from the Wellcome Trust. On this basis, we might expect a maximum of two fee waivers per year out of 80+ applications. Many of the applicants we awarded scholarships to had paid employment throughout their undergraduate studies to fund themselves through their course. Why should a prospective applicant coming from a disadvantaged background have to give up such employment to complete a six-week residential course in Oxford in order to benefit from a £75 fee waiver?

We hear that the graduate fee supports a centre with a host of activities but of course, again, as we have heard, it is not the centre that does most of the work around graduate admissions. For our programme, in common with other CDTs, we have a dedicated project manager funded through our department, not through application fees. Within the Medical Sciences Division Doctoral Training Centre, where our programme is currently based, our administrative support is funded through the JRAM income attracted through our programme. For other studentships, departments, graduates, studies office and academic staff, such as many of you and I, that do most of the work - including recruitment, application processing and assessment, co-ordination for scholarship nominations, visa applications - not the central University. All processes claimed to

be funded through the graduate application fee. There is no transparency on what specifically is funded by the graduate application fee and not covered through other funding sources such as JRAM. Aside from the loss of income, which seems to be the primary driver in the reluctance to abolish the graduate application fee, the other argument is that we will be inundated with uncompetitive applications, and yet a barrier to apply need not be financial. It is actually very easy to remove an application where the applicant does not meet the criteria for the course and in fact this is already a requirement for a fee waiver. We should be considering all of those that do meet the criteria, this is genuine active inclusion; rather having widened our applicant pool by abolishing the fee, we should next be revisiting how we assess applications to maximise diversity in the offers we make.

The Vice-Chancellor: I call on Dr Benjamin Thompson.

Dr Benjamin Thompson: Thank you, Vice-Chancellor. I am Benjamin Thompson, I am a tutor in Medieval History at Somerville and, at the moment, also Associate Head of Humanities Division for Education. As we have heard, no-one is quarrelling with the aims of the proposers of this resolution to promote access and not to put financial barriers in the way of good applicants. The question is whether this measure supports these aims or not and to my mind, the decisive view of the Graduate Access Working Group that it will not needs to be taken very seriously. Those are the key arguments in this discussion and I hope that Congregation will take note of them, but I am going to speak briefly from the perspective of Humanities. Our faculties collectively run an annual deficit of around £1.5 million. Since the central University cannot absorb the projected loss of application fee income, it would have to pass it onto faculties and departments. £68 lost from each of our 4,700 applications would present Humanities with a bill of £320,000 per annum. Moreover, the chances are that, in the absence of a fee, application numbers would increase. Therefore that £320,000 cost would go up, perhaps significantly. There would also be additional administrative cost in processing the extra applications. We have faculty staff that are extremely dedicated but they are also very hard pressed already so we would have to hire extra personnel. The ultimate financial cost to Humanities is therefore likely to be in the region of £0.5 million, perhaps more. This is clearly not sustainable for a division in deficit, and this is to take no account of

non-financial costs. At present, we receive more than five applications for each Humanities graduate place, up to ten per place in courses such as Fine Art, Women's Studies, English and Philosophy. More applications would require more academic time to be spent assessing them and since much, or perhaps most, of the increase would come from speculative or less serious applications, the attention given to the more promising ones would be squeezed.

Where would we find the savings? There is no fat to be cut from divisional and faculty administration, as I have discovered on taking up this administrative post. We would therefore either have to raise our course fees, each successful applicant making up the lost application fees of at least four unsuccessful ones, or we would be forced to cut beneficial but non-core items that we want to support. These of course include access and outreach and UNIQ+. Perhaps it is worth commenting that students on UNIQ+ are paid a stipend to compensate for the work that they have to miss out on. That is a point worth making with respect to the previous speaker. Of course, we might have to cut graduate funding itself. Fewer than half of Humanities' doctoral students have full university funding and only 14% of our taught postgraduates do. At present, even these scholarships are cobbled together through a huge variety of schemes, including matched funding. Projecting the smallest possible loss of income against the most expensive scholarships, we would lose eight fully-funded overseas masters' students, but the likely higher loss would equate to up 40 part or matched funded awards for home doctoral students. None of these measures look to me as if they would help access.

A final point: a resolution in Congregation mandating the loss of income does not look like a good way to make financial policy. University planning is done in a wide range of bodies, by a large number of people, and it involves careful balancing of different priorities. This measure would impose a single policy element from outside this nexus and then leave many parts of the University to work out the complex consequences. For these reasons, I shall be voting against the resolution.

The Vice-Chancellor: I call on Professor Stuart Ferguson.

Professor Stuart Ferguson: Vice-Chancellor and members of Congregation, although I am Stuart Ferguson, from St Edmund Hall and the Department of Biochemistry, I must make it clear that I am speaking as an individual. I know as a college

tutor that the application fee is off-putting to able potential research students, the more so now it has risen from £25 to £75, hardly loose change for many final-year undergraduates carrying student debt burdens. But students in Biochemistry are eligible and competitive for multiple programmes, all separate DTPs with very limited places. This year, one of my students paid £300, and another £225. I know students like this have to borrow to pay; of course, there are some for whom that is loose change but I do not think that is the majority by any means and, for those applying from outside, the same problem applies. If they want to maximise their chances of a place, they have to apply for more than one programme. For example, the programme that was just mentioned, in Chemical Biology, is sitting essentially in the MPLS Division and as far as I can see – I am not an expert – that cannot be lumped together with any other application. Although, yes, the £75 can sometimes cover more than one programme, not all programmes are in the same basket, hence these large sums for multiple programme applications. And indeed, it ends up with people like me writing six and four Oxford references for these particular students, as do the external referees or anybody else, which is a very cumbersome and annoying procedure, which I urge the University to do something about.

The advice that students could concentrate on just one programme is wide of the mark. These programmes are very small – DTPs, Wellcome and so on – and are very competitive. You cannot retrospectively improve your exam results or record student summer internships.

Experimental science laboratories must have – must have – excellent research students. I know that to my cost and to my benefit over the years. Groups without such frequently struggle to thrive. This is not necessarily an access issue, this is a quality issue. There are fierce competitors, most not charging applications fees; for example, the European leading labs such as EMBO and the Crick Institute in London. I understand the latter had around 1,250 applications this year; the majority of their UK applicants – I do not know the proportion of UK and overseas – will have predicted first class honours degrees, no doubt. Apparently they interviewed around 100 and offered places to around 30. That is a success to application rate of 40 to 1 or 1 to 40, whichever way I said it. They are also bringing in an internship competition currently, which involves massive HR resources for them, taking up references and interviews for selected candidates. Altruism? I doubt it. It seems

that UCL and Warwick charge application fees for masters' courses but not PhDs. I wonder why? If they can do this, perhaps we should think about doing something similar.

Fee waivers are better than nothing but, age 21, we should not be looking to parental income and background to do this waiving. There are many families not in receipt of undergraduate support who are squeezed. Of course graduate course access is a big issue for lack of studentships, I fully accept that. But certainly, in my view, the fees of unsuccessful graduate applicants should not be used in any way to support access for others or procedures for others. I do recognise that graduate application fees are now a significant income stream. As I recall, in its introduction it was meant in part to manage demand, but logically why don't we charge an undergraduate fee for the same purpose? The numbers there have massively increased; indeed, I have been somewhat shocked to discover that for Medicine and Law, you do in fact have to pay an entrance test fee, admittedly not specific for this University. Access? I don't know.

In conclusion, I urge you to seek ways to mitigate the effects of this graduate admissions fee, at the very least by enabling a single fee to cover all applications in a given year from a single candidate and resisting any temptation for a further hike to £100, which I believe has been mooted. Some students are leaving Oxford with a bad taste in their mouths, not good. I have never spoken to any member of the academic staff who is in favour of this fee, not that I have spoken to everybody. Thank you.

The Vice-Chancellor: I call on Ms Kathy Harvey.

Ms Kathy Harvey: Good afternoon. Kathy Harvey, representing Saïd Business School. Each year, Saïd Business School admits 840 postgraduate students, out of around 3,000 applicants. 540 of these are fee-paying matriculated students and the others are postgraduate diploma students. And currently we charge £150 application fee. We retain half and forward the other £75 to the University. If we were to abolish the application fee, the loss of income to us would be almost £200,000. If we recouped this income by charging the matriculating students an increased course fee, they would have to pay almost £350 extra.

Instead of charging this extra amount, which does not do anything to enhance the situation of less affluent students, we believe it is better to offer application fee waivers, which we already do. There is an established process for this, as we know.

Waivers, along with the provision that we offer to cover the cost of GMAT tests where appropriate, are established practices in business schools around the world and are targeted at the applicants who really need the most encouragement. Moreover, it is usual practice amongst reputable business schools to charge an application fee. In the UK, London Business School charges £200; Warwick charges £80; and Cambridge, in line with Oxford, charges £150. If the fee were to be abolished, this could have a detrimental effect on our positioning in the market. It is also likely to increase the number of speculative applications and at the same time, decrease the number of high-quality applicants. This could give the impression that we are desperate to increase application numbers, possibly at the expense of quality.

In our admissions office, we have almost ten full-time people, all working on bringing the best possible students to Oxford. If we were to receive an extra 30% in applications, this would necessitate employing an extra three staff, leading to an extra cost of £250,000. Transferring this cost to the matriculated students' course fees would amount to another £450 per person, making a total additional cost to the student of £800. So, to save our applicants £75, we must charge our MBA fee-paying students another £800.

We already have mechanisms in place for attracting students who would not otherwise have access to an Oxford education. Each year we award £1 million in scholarships, almost £1 million. By doing so we have managed to increase gender diversity, with 43% of our class in the MBA being female. These scholarships have also helped us attract students from Africa, who make up 13% of our MBA class, and 7% of these students receive a Saïd Business School bursary and 22% receive a scholarship.

To summarise, the effects of scale and market positioning for us is such that the abolition of application fees would lead to the perverse consequence of a substantial increase of £800 to the fee for matriculating students. We are keen to take steps to encourage successful applicants from as diverse a pool as possible. We do everything we can and we have some success. We feel that well-targeted scholarships, fee waivers and test waivers are more effective than a blanket abolition of the application fee. Thank you.

The Vice-Chancellor: I call upon Professor Christopher Lintott.

Professor Christopher Lintott: Vice-Chancellor, colleagues, fellow members of Congregation, I am Chris Lintott, I am Professor of Astrophysics in the Department of Physics and I am a Research Fellow at New College. I stand here because I was for many years the person in charge of co-ordinating the graduate applications for the Astrophysics subdepartment. And I can tell you that every year I heard from excellent candidates writing to enquire or just to tell me that they would not be applying because there were no fee waivers involved. It was very difficult to write back to people and tell them that, indeed, when I was applying, I would not have been able to find £75 either. We do not have a good answer, for these people, many of whom were in financial circumstances that would not have led them to qualify for the current and very welcome fee waiver that is being introduced.

At this stage in the debate it is probably worth thinking about the arguments that have been put forward. We have heard, convincingly, that the graduate fee is not the only barrier in the complex landscape of graduate access that we face as we all seek to encourage the diversity of students that we want to see at this University. But it is a barrier, as we have heard in the comments on the fact that we should expect applications to increase if we get rid of the fee; I welcome that. It is hard to understand how removing a barrier is somehow unhelpful or problematic in the broader fight to increase access to the University. There is a hole in the logic being presented there. The Graduate Access Working Group is a welcome addition to the University and its members are doing amazing and interesting things in this fight that we all share, but to rest an argument that we should not increase the access to the University by reducing the fee for those from all sorts of backgrounds where financial hardship might be a factor are, on the so far response to the international waiver, is problematic; students and courses are very different.

The question is really whether we as a University are comfortable relying on fees charged to those who cannot often afford them for what is a core part of our activity. Assessing applicants is fundamental to what we do as a University, just as it is for undergraduate admissions, where it would be unconscionable for us to introduce a fee. An analogy might help, I think. No one would dispute that the administrative effort that goes into putting together and marking exams is enormous and that it costs the University money, but it would be

considered unjust and ridiculous to charge students to sit their exam papers. You can imagine a debate in Congregation where we hear the same kind of objections we have heard today, that the charge is reasonable because it would only cover the cost of an exam or that waivers are available for those students who have made it into Oxford from financially straitened circumstances. But any argument that said that those students who couldn't pay were simply not deserving would be laughed out of Congregation. To me, assessing applicants to our PhD, our research and our taught masters' programmes is as fundamental. The resolution put before you is deliberately conservative; it gives the University several years to plan for the loss of a small proportion of its income before the fee should be dropped in the year 2024–25 and I am confident that colleagues responsible for financial planning who deal with complex consequences all the time will be able to face this challenge.

Supporting the resolution will increase the number of excellent students who apply, and it will help us get rid of the impression that the only kind of people that we want round here are those that can peel off 75 quid in a fresh stack of notes without a second thought. And therefore I urge you to support the motion.

The Vice-Chancellor: I call on Dr Jörg Friedrichs.

Dr Jörg Friedrichs: Jörg Friedrichs, Department of International Development. Colleagues, Vice-Chancellor, it is our privilege and duty to select the best candidates from rising numbers. In my department, we get 5 to 18 applicants per place. One degree has 455 files for 25 places this year. Can you see the pile? Many piles, actually. Each file requires a first and a second reader. The degree in question has four academics as core staff; not all of them do admissions. There is no way we can cope with many more files. We are just about managing and there are similar situations elsewhere. If we abolish the fee, sky-rocketing applicant numbers might overwhelm academic-based selection in our most competitive degrees. Administrators would need to step in to keep it manageable. This implies a risk that we might not be able to do justice to all applicants on academic grounds. There could be other counterproductive effects. For instance, we might rely on admin or automatic systems to screen out applicants that do not fulfil the language requirement. At present, academics look at such applicants one by one. We occasionally waive the language

requirement for promising candidates from less privileged backgrounds. In the future, we might not even get to see such files. Competitive degrees might introduce a GRE requirement to discourage weaker applicants and raise the share of stronger ones. Taking a GRE costs over US\$200; it would hit poorer applicants harder than our current fee of £75. What is more, GRE favours candidates from expensive schools who have had advanced quantitative training. The effect might be the opposite of what we want, making it harder for applicants from less-privileged backgrounds to access Oxford.

Make no mistake, the fee is not to generate income, it is to recover cost. Yet, if we abolish it, we will not just lose the costs currently recovered; the hike in applications, many at the less competitive end of the spectrum, would cost us extra time and money. Academics would have less time for teaching and research, administrative costs would increase; we might need more staff. We are already able to exempt applicants who find the fee difficult. We should be delighted to do so for strong candidates. Also, coming from the Department of International Development, let me state the obvious. £75 is more for applicants from lower-income countries than from advanced economies. Why don't we move from the same £75 for anyone anywhere, to a more flexible fee reflecting average income or purchasing power parity? Doing so seems only fair. Yet abolishing the fee is too blunt a tool. Actively enabling candidates from less privileged backgrounds to access Oxford is the way forward. We are moving in that direction.

The Vice-Chancellor: With thanks to all the speakers, that concludes the list of those who had indicated that they would like to speak and I think there has been adequate and reasoned arguments on both sides. I will now turn to Professor Williams and invite him to reply and will then turn to Mr Fernando. Professor Williams.

Professor Martin Williams: I would like to thank colleagues on both sides for their contributions to this debate, which I think has covered many interesting aspects of graduate admissions and access. I think what the debate has made clear to me is that this is quite a complex argument. What at first glance might seem an obviously good or bad thing is actually more nuanced. The University is not against change, but we need to look carefully at the evidence and evaluate the effects of policy changes as we go. The other thing that struck me is that the proposers seem very heavily focused on

doctoral applicants, but two-thirds of our 30,000 applicants are for taught masters' courses. And, as we have heard today, in those cases the financial background and the access arguments are quite different.

Professor Ferguson highlighted some possible changes we could make that might improve the system. But the resolution before us allows for none of this complexity. For the resolution, it seems that only outright across-the-board abolition will do; it is a blunt instrument that does not allow for any nuance or variation. We have heard this afternoon about the positive work the University is doing to promote graduate access. The growing summer internship programmes, the additional support for disadvantaged applicants, the extensive new scholarship schemes: all of these promise real change. I am convinced they will achieve more than abolishing the application fee. Where we think the fee is a barrier, we are introducing waivers and it may be appropriate to extend these. But we have also heard evidence that simply removing the fee does not improve access to Oxford. We have heard that the admissions processes for many graduate courses are close to capacity already and that they would struggle to handle the dramatic growth in applications that would be the likely consequence of the resolution, particularly when accompanied by increased costs due to the removal of the fee.

Finally, we have heard that the Graduate Access Working Group, the very people charged with promoting access to Oxford, are opposed to the resolution. I ask you not to tie their hands by passing it today.

The Vice-Chancellor: Mr Fernando, do you wish to reply?

Mr Benjamin Fernando: Thank you, Madam Vice-Chancellor. In response, I would refer you back to the test that I set out in my introductory remarks. Is this policy fair? Is it one we would introduce today, if we did not already have it? Can we be sure that no-one is put off applying because of the fee? And can we be sure that every single candidate who wanted a fee waiver would be given one? Have we heard any peer-reviewed suggestions to refute the evidence I presented, that application fees put excellent low-income candidates off applying? I am afraid the answer to all five of those questions, at least from what I heard, is no. Peer review, something that I have learnt during my doctoral degree, is the cornerstone of academic work. When one of my colleagues tells me that I am wrong, perhaps especially if they are someone

younger or more inexperienced, I might be inclined to ignore them or put it down to naivety. If 100 tell me that I am wrong, I might have to look slightly longer and harder at what I think. If 1,000 members of the community were to say, 'It is okay, you are out of touch on this and there is no shame in changing your position', I think I would feel compelled to do so.

Us graduate students, of whom only a couple are in the room, cannot vote here today. We are a quiet bunch; we don't normally demand or protest or insist or require. We keep our heads down and work. When the University came under fire for its undergraduate admissions statistics, many of us, including myself, stood up publicly to defend its reputation and say that we honestly believed that they were doing as best as they can. On this issue, I am afraid I don't believe that is so. Today, those of us who cannot vote ask all those of you out there who can to vote both with us in mind and the future graduate students of this University.

Madam Vice-Chancellor, I am sure what unites us in this room is the belief that education is a fundamental right, perhaps the most fundamental right. I have postgraduate colleagues, both undergraduate and postgraduate, who will go on to be Nobel laureates, Field Medal winners, prime ministers, presidents, Booker Prize winners. But the idea that a single worthy student would be put off from studying amongst the dreaming spires because of this fee is something that should sadden us all. We have heard about the reasons for abolishing the fee from an access perspective. We have heard - indeed it is stated in the University's own response in the *Gazette* - there are other ways of making up this money, but that is not for me to tell you how to do.

We have heard a great deal of speculation about how the numbers might increase if we were to remove the fee, but the truth is we do not know because no university has ever got rid of the fee before. With this in mind, I ask you to vote using the ballots you have, which are confidential, on behalf of all those of us who do not have the right to. On behalf of this University's current, but perhaps most importantly its future, graduate students. Thank you.

The Vice-Chancellor: Thank you to everyone who has contributed to the debate this afternoon. I now call the vote on the resolution. I ask the Proctors, the Assessor, the Pro-Proctors and the Clerks to the Proctors to move to the voting stations at each of the exits to the theatre. When they

reach their positions, I shall invite members of Congregation to cast their votes, having completed your voting paper. Please leave via the closest exit as quickly as possible and return promptly when the doors have reopened. Please place your voting paper in the ballot boxes under the direction of the voting officers. Any members of Congregation wishing to vote who have not received a voting paper may collect one from one of the stewards immediately inside each exit. When invited, members may return to your seats to await the result, which will take about ten minutes. I now ask members of Congregation wishing to vote on the resolution to do so.

The Vice-Chancellor: I invite you all to take your seats so I can announce the vote on the resolution. There voted in favour of the resolution... I want to change my vote on that one... there voted for the resolution 50. There voted against the resolution 100. The resolution is accordingly rejected. This concludes the business before Congregation.