Flysheet – Rationale for bringing before Congregation the resolution to retain the graduate application fee for those who do not meet our access criteria and for this income to be used for graduate access initiatives and scholarships. Congregation is urged to support the resolution.

Summary: The resolution aims to address the potential consequences of abolishing Oxford's graduate application fee, emphasizing its potential negative impact on current graduate access initiatives, staff workload, and the need for the fee income for supporting access efforts.

The application fee is currently set at £75 with a range of application fee waivers (low-income countries, UK low-income students, refugees, UNIQ+, multiple PGR applications with a CDT/DTP, re-applications from PGT to PGR). It generates income of approximately £2.7M annually.

Context

In March 2020, Oxford's Congregation passed a resolution to abolish the graduate application fee, hoping to improve access for underrepresented and socio-economically disadvantaged students. However, the decision was supported by anecdotal evidence only. The proponents argued that the fee was a barrier, and its removal would enhance access and diversity.

What do we now know about barriers to graduate access?

Recent data and experience from new graduate access initiatives reveal several key points:

1. *Applicant Demographics:* 64% of graduate applicants are international, and 80% of these are from relatively affluent backgrounds (judged by parental occupation). Applications have surged from 31,000 in 2019-20 to 40,500 this year, and have doubled since 2013.
2. *Impact of Fee Waivers*: Oxford's introduction of fee waivers for applicants from low-income countries doubled the number of applications, but the number of offers to these students *fell* slightly in that year.
3. *UK low-income applicants:* We estimate that 40% of UK University students qualify for the low-income waiver. However, only 5% of Oxford's UK applicants come from low-income backgrounds, (~500 applications per year in total across the whole University) since the waivers were introduced;
4. *Cambridge's Experience:* Abolishing application fees for PGR students led to a 42% increase in applications without boosting access for disadvantaged UK students.
5. *Application Success Rates:* Access candidates are much less likely to be offered a place (up to 50%, depending on demographic) compared to the overall University offer rate (which is dominated by relatively affluent applicants).
6. *Effective Access Initiatives:* Targeted outreach, application support, and scholarships significantly improve offer rates for access candidates. For instance, participants in the UNIQ+ Summer Research Internship Programme had offer rates similar to overall University offer-rate applicants in 2023/24.
7. *Scholarship Needs:* Disadvantaged students need full scholarships to take up offers, but current scholarship distribution favours advantaged applicants.

For a more detailed analysis see our paper here.

Why is Graduate access hard? Key challenges to be overcome:

1. *Perception:* Students from non-traditional backgrounds often don't see Oxford as a place for them.
2. *Support Needs:* Low-income applicants usually require extensive application support to be competitive.
3. *Scholarship Gaps:* Disadvantaged students need full scholarships, yet almost all funding goes to advantaged students (only 3% of Clarendon Scholarships have gone to the most disadvantaged band A candidates over the last two years).

Why will abolishing the application fee make graduate access harder?

1. *Hugely Increased Workloads:* Abolishing the fee could lead to a massive 40% increase in applications, exacerbating the workload for academic staff and administrators, making the system unsustainable. We know that each application takes more than 40 minutes to fully assess. An extra 15,000 applications will overwhelm administrators and academic staff.
2. *Resource Strain:* Abolishing the fee will mean increased workload which would reduce the availability of resources for access initiatives in departments and central services. Access-focused admissions

processes are much time-consuming. We fear that even the third of departments already committed to [graduate admissions pilots](#) will be forced to reduce the resources dedicated to these access activities.

If we are serious, we need to invest not cut

Just as at undergraduate level, what is needed is substantial investment.

1. *Investment in Targeted Outreach Programmes:* To persuade applicants from diverse backgrounds that Oxford that Oxford is for everyone who has the potential to thrive here.
2. *Investment in Research:* To understand how we can assess that potential in both home and international students.
3. *Investment in Admissions Support:* in departments, divisions and centrally to support the much more time-intensive admissions processes required when access is given sufficient priority.
4. *Investment in Scholarships:* Increased funding for scholarships targeting disadvantaged students to ensure they can accept offers.

Our proposal: retain the fee for those who can pay and use the income to invest

The resolution proposes retaining the application fee and using its income to fund and expand graduate access initiatives. This approach aims to balance application volume with sustainable access support, ensuring resources are available for outreach, on-course support, and scholarships.

Timing

The resolution is being proposed now due to growing concerns about the negative impacts of abolishing the fee on access initiatives and workloads. Current measures to streamline the application process are insufficient to handle the increased application volume. The resolution seeks to avert an impending crisis by securing necessary funding to enhance access initiatives.

Conclusion

The resolution urges Congregation members to support retaining the application fee, reallocating its income to support graduate access programmes, and preventing overwhelming increases in application volumes and workloads. This strategy aims to achieve the original goal of the resolution passed by Congregation in 2020 of improving graduate access and diversity at Oxford.

Those putting forward the resolution

Those colleagues signing the resolution who currently hold roles involving promoting graduate access and other EDI initiatives within the University are listed below. This flyer, paper and resolution to Congregation, were drafted by David Gavaghan, Nick Leimu-Brown, and Gail Preston with support from these colleagues.

Signatories: David Gavaghan (New College, Chair of Graduate Access Sub-Committee (GASC)); **Nick Brown** (Linacre, College representative on GASC); **Gail Preston** (Linacre, Chair of UNIQ+ Summer Internship Management Group); **Proochista Ariana** (Nuffield Department of Medicine, Chair of Taught Degrees and Awards Panel); **Esther Becker** (Reuben, Co-Director of BBSRC Doctoral Training Partnership); **Rob Gilbert** (Magdalen, Chair of Research Degree Panel); **Nandini Gooptu** (St Antony's, Associate Head of SSD for EDI); **Jane Hoverd** (Linacre, Chair of Graduate Committee); **Kevin Marsh** (St Cross, Co-Director of Africa-Oxford Initiative); **Garrett Morris** (Green Templeton, is EDI lead of DTC); **Caroline Mawson** (Reuben, College member of Academic Futures Management Committee); **Rebecca Surender** (Green Templeton, Chair of the Graduate Access Strategy Working Group); **Helen Swift** (St Hilda's, member of Education Committee); **Samantha Taylor** is Head of Administration and Finance in the DTC; **Jon Wade** is DGS of Earth Sciences; **Mark Wormald** (Corpus Christi, Chair of Senior Tutors' Committee).

Open Teams Meetings, Tuesday 18th June, 1.00pm and Thursday 20th June, 1.00pm: We are very aware that the issues that we raise in this flyer and in our paper and resolution are perhaps counter-intuitive, and that some colleagues may have further queries that we have been unable to address fully here. We therefore invite all colleagues to an Open Teams Meeting on Tuesday 18th June at 1.00pm. Please sign up to the meeting [here](#) and we will send you a link to the meeting. If you wish, you can also pre-submit your questions to us via the link.