

Flysheet: Prevent the reintroduction of the Graduate Admissions Fee.

The Graduate Application fee is a barrier to study at our University, creating a purely financial hurdle over which applicants who can least afford it must jump. Its presence hinders the many laudable efforts to ensure that an Oxford education is available to everyone, and its existence adds to the impression that this place is exclusively for the wealthy. For these reasons, Congregation voted in 2020 to abolish it from the 2024/25 academic year, yet a resolution has now been introduced at the very last possible moment to overturn this decision.

We oppose the resolution, which is to be discussed at Congregation on June 25<sup>th</sup>, though we share its proposers' evident commitment to the issue of graduate access within the University. The imposition of a fee for applicants to the University is fundamentally and irredeemably inequitable. Applicants are likely to view the request for a substantial fee as a signal as to who is welcome here, not least because Oxford is currently the only UK university to charge such a high fee.

Though waivers can be provided, given the complicated circumstances of graduate applicants, who may well have families, caring responsibilities and other commitments; even the proposers of the resolution argue that there is no evidence that such waivers are effective in increasing access. When the act of having to apply for a waiver is a bureaucratic step we impose only on some applicants – who may well feel like they must ask for special treatment or a hand out - this is not surprising. Selecting graduate applicants who qualify for such waivers is also fraught; it is not possible to use simple criteria to identify those for whom the fee is a burden. The circumstances of an applicant's family, or where they grew up, is not a reliable guide to their ability to pay a fee years or even decades later.

Many who would be dissuaded from applying will not qualify for even an expanded waiver program: the fee represents a barrier to them. We support the University's efforts to target programs such as UNIQ+ at those groups where effort is most needed, but they cannot capture everyone. The implicit linking in the proposal of graduate access to income from an graduate application fee is unwanted, unnecessary, and will likely bring huge pressures for future increases in the fee level.

It also establishes a principle in which core University functions are funded from those who are not, and will not, benefit from being here. The use of a graduate fee imposes a burden on those who owe the University the least, the majority of whom approach graduate study having already accrued major debt under the UK's current funding model. The vast majority of those paying such a fee will not be fortunate enough to win a place here. The proposal to use the fees to fund graduate access and welfare initiatives, while providing welcome support for this important work, amounts to a tax, levied on a community that can least afford it, most of whom will never come to Oxford, for the benefit of those who do. This is simply unfair.

The proposers suggest that, should the fee be dropped as planned, an increased number of applications will overwhelm staff. If these are high quality applicants, then we should welcome them. If the fear is that we will receive more low quality applications, then these can be relatively easily sifted. Either way, since the projected increase in applications will not lead to an increase in the number of candidates shortlisted for interview, the increased workload should be substantially less than that claimed by the proposers, who present a model which depends on many untested assumptions. If we find barriers to applications are needed, they should be based on criteria we wish to use in selection, not on financial means.

In fact, in the four years since the original Congregation motion was passed in 2020, much work has been done by the University to improve systems to prepare for the expected increase in applications, informed in part by the experience of Cambridge, who dropped their fee in 2021. The introduction of this resolution, at the last possible moment, has created much uncertainty and risks undermining benefits brought by these changes.

Removing the graduate fee, and thereby increasing access to our courses, was the right thing to do in 2020, demonstrated sector-wide leadership at the time, and remains fundamentally the right thing to do now. The University has prepared for four years for its removal and changing course at the last moment is both unwise, and likely to lead to negative publicity at a sensitive time. We urge you to join us in rejecting this resolution.

*Signatories:*

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