

A Brave New World: The Student Perspective on Oxford post-Browne

Oxford has changed forever. The raising of the cap on tuition fees to £9000 and the introduction of a market in Higher Education will have a profound material and ideological effect on how prospective and current students view an Oxford education. The University must be ready to respond to these changes in order to ensure that our ideals of a world-class and unique education accessible and affordable to all are upheld. Here are just a few factors which Congregation should consider at its Discussion next Tuesday.

The Fee Level

There is a real danger that the sudden rise in fees will deter students from poor backgrounds from applying to Universities with the highest fee levels. It will take time to educate schoolchildren about the benefits of the new system, as Oxford recognised in its submission to the Browne Review when it promised to phase in any fee rises. Amongst all Universities, Oxford is in a unique position due to its access to philanthropic resources to honour that promise.

Fee Waivers

All the available evidence suggests that those from the lowest income households are the most likely to be debt-averse. Oxford should consider putting in place an aggressive fee waiver scheme for the poorest students which will dramatically challenge preconceptions about what kind of a place Oxford is and who is welcome here.

Bursary Provision

Bursary provision that allows students from every background to live comfortably in Oxford during term-time without having to work is an absolute must. This means that a bursary system needs to be designed which is not only generous in terms of headline figures but which can guarantee that students will not fall into hardship no matter where in the Collegiate system they find themselves. That is not an easy task, and should not be rushed simply to meet arbitrary Government deadlines.

Freedom and availability of Information on College costs

A huge key to designing a working bursary system will be to uncover the true nature of College costs for undergraduate students. For many years now most Universities have been entirely up front about living costs. Oxford, on the other hand, remains impenetrable in the way Colleges advertise their accommodation, food and other costs. That has got to change under a national market system in which prospective students will be expected to choose their University as rational economic actors. In reality this will be a great PR exercise for the University, because for most Oxford students rent and food are heavily subsidised by their College. However, College charges which do not provide well-defined and direct benefits to students cannot and will not survive in a system in which students are paying a vastly increased proportion of the costs of their course.

College Best Practice

Gross inequality of provision between Colleges simply will not be accepted by students under any new fees system. Serious structural efforts need to be put in place immediately to ensure that best practice on issues such as academic

discipline, welfare provision and complaints procedures are taken up by all Colleges.

Careers Information, Advice and Support

Universities will become increasingly judged not simply on their ability to educate, but on their ability to prepare students for lucrative and fulfilling careers. Oxford lags behind its competitor institutions in terms of its funding and support for its Careers Service, and whilst an Oxford education equips students with many key skills, others – such as teamwork and business understanding – are structurally neglected.

With debts of over £20,000, there is a real danger that Oxford graduates will begin to make career choices based on financial considerations rather than personal and social ones. The University should consider a loan repayment assistance programme similar to the one operated by Duke Law School, whereby graduates that go on to teach in primary and secondary schools are assisted by the University in paying back their student loans. This could form a major platform of any new fundraising drive to support students in the new fees system.

Postgraduate Access and Quality of Provision

A combination of the Government's plans on immigration and the reality of undergraduates leaving Oxford with significant debts will lead to a crisis in Oxford's graduate provision. For too long Oxford has given graduate students the impression that they are cash-cows, and the internationally competitive nature of postgraduate study will ensure that such a situation cannot continue. A full-scale postgraduate teaching review must be initiated at once, and schemes to give undergraduates more experience of research should be considered to boost top-quality applicants at graduate level.

Student Representation and Common Room Funding

There is a real danger that University students in the UK will begin to see themselves as consumers, and as such will demand increased rights. The only way to counter this perception is to give students a real and meaningful stake in the decisions which affect their lives in Oxford, not as consumers but as co-producers of their own education and as real and valued members of the College and University community. That means opening up more financial and confidential material to elected student representatives. It also means sustainable and significant funding for Common Rooms and for the Student Union, so that students have more of a stake in where their money is being spent.

The Executive of Oxford University Student Union

Signatories:

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