

Getting in to Oxbridge

I have read with interest the allegations that Oxford and Cambridge do not admit enough pupils from poorer and non professional backgrounds. From my regular contacts with Oxford I think it is a much more welcoming institution than when I went there, which does much more to reach out to people who do not come from communities with strong Oxbridge links. The University spends time talking to schools that have no history of sending pupils to the university, time encouraging more students to apply, and provides a range of bursaries and scholarships to help some students with costs. It has made good progress in changing attitudes within the University and in welcoming people from all backgrounds.

I was the first person in my family to go to university. I was surprised when a teacher suggested to me that I put my name in for the Oxford entrance exam at the beginning of my fourth term in the 6th Form. I was just 16, as I had jumped a year at primary school. What little I knew about Oxford made me think it was unattainable. They told me at school I would be in with a chance, and I am grateful to them for putting opportunity in my way. Everyone with a chance needs an adult in their school or family circle who suggests they try. Governors, Councillors and teachers must ensure all state schools look out for talent to apply to the best universities.

I was very self critical in the 6th form, struggling to develop a well informed voice I was happy with. I pitched myself against the great minds I read in books and thought I always fell short. I tried out various styles of analysis and writing. One essay attracted particular criticism from a teacher which it doubtless deserved. When challenged why I was writing like that, I replied defensively without thought or good reason that I assumed that was what Oxford would want.

Then came one of those defining moments that teachers sometimes achieve without realising it. He replied, "In that case why do you want to go there?" The sheer irreverence of the quip made me realise Oxford could be for people like me, and was only worth going to if it could further my development. He in a way liberated me from possible failure, and confirmed a realisation I had often flirted with that study was about me, the quality of my enquiry and the development of my ideas. There are strict limits to how much anyone else can teach you once you have grasped the conventional wisdom of your subject. I was already grappling with what I thought were the imperfections of the contemporary work in my discipline.

I was invited to interview. The system was you went to stay at your first choice College, but had to stay for longer in case other Colleges in their group – there were 3 groups – also wanted to interview you for a place.

I was staying in a noisy room in an annex building on a main road. It was cold and the room friendless as the student that usually lived there had had to strip the room for my arrival. I waited and waited until I was finally summonsed to an interview. It was perfunctory. There was no apparent

intellectual challenge. I assumed they were going through the motions and had decided against me by the time I got there. I had not researched who was likely to be interviewing me and felt cheated there was no good argument. I did not understand the significance of the hypothetical question about which year I could turn up if offered a place. I waited and waited for an interview elsewhere but none came. I was finally told I could go. By this time I was thinking I was glad I would go off to London who had already offered me a place if I got 2 E grade A levels. In London they had engaged with my views at the interview.

I was amazed when a letter came some time later offering me a place and an Open Scholarship. My bad feelings about my sojourn at Oxford were banished by the offer and by the positive reaction to it of my school. It certainly changed my life. Oxford did not need me to take any A levels but I stayed at school to complete them. 2 Es were needed for a local authority grant. Although that took all the pressure off, for me it did the opposite. I now felt I had to live up to the faith placed in me. I got permission to go to the local university library to work, as I had run out of books to read at school.

In those days we were not to my knowledge invited to any preparatory or introductory discussions. There was no attempt to reach out when you arrived for interview. The Oxford I went to was full of ex public school boys who were better prepared. They were more used to the College life as it reflected patterns from the richer boarding schools. They had been tutored for the exams and made conversant with the dons who would interview them.

The modern Oxford I meet has a much better range of people from a wide range of backgrounds. There are many more women with the strict segregation of old Oxford with just 5 women's colleges broken down completely. The student groups I have spoken to do not see their past school or social origins as significant as it was in the Oxford I attended. Oxbridge provides a good home for those with the discipline of self instruction and study. I just hope every school does encourage their brightest and best to apply. One of the best features of Oxford when I was an undergraduate was the open lecture lists. You could go to any lecture in any subject. I tended to go to the most interesting lectures in some other subjects to provide a more rounded education, rather than to the ones in my subject which did not normally present new material if you had read enough.