A celebrated Oxford University college is breaking new ground in reaching out to underprivileged and deprived communities. Its aim? To allow access for all. LUX speaks to current students and academics.

All photography by the students and staff of Wadham College, Oxford.

Oxford University is perhaps the world’s most celebrated centre of learning. Depending on which ranking system you believe, it is either the world’s best university or in the top four. Over recent years, it has also become a brand—an Oxford education a marque of desirability for families from Guangzhou to Georgia.

Oxford also has an image problem. Visions of the place, burnished over the centuries, involve golden stone colleges, manicured quads and ancient dining halls, much though not all of which is accurate. But Oxford is also known as the finishing school for the privileged British upper classes and the global presidential elite.

Oxford may have given us Tim Berners-Lee, Aldous Huxley, VS Naipaul, J.R.R. Tolkien, Margaret Thatcher and Qian Zhongshu, but it also gave us former British prime minister David Cameron, who hummed his way idly into Brexit, and new prime minister Boris Johnson, whose nonchalant vision of the world seems little changed from when he shared a university debating society with the editor of this magazine (among many other students).

In short, Oxford was—and to an extent still is—seen as an institution for aristocrats whose families have been studying there for generations, rather than a place for the equally bright whose families have never been to a university and who have no idea what a quad is.

All of that is changing, and at the vanguard of that change is one of the university’s oldest and most prestigious colleges, Wadham. Founded by Dorothy Wadham in 1610, it has long been a radical college. During the Soviet era, its students plastered a hammer and sickle on the banner they took on marches; in 2019, they are leading the university’s LGBT+ movement. But behind the undergrad passion and posturing lies a serious intent. The college leads the way in targeting deprived areas of the UK, where schools and pupils have little experience of, or confidence in, applying for the university. Its strategy involves sending current students out...
to speak during its ‘access’ programmes, setting up free summer schools for pupils from poorer areas, and aiming to remove unconscious bias in favour of the expensively educated from its intake. There was a lack of knowledge among my teachers about Oxbridge and my teachers didn’t back me when I applied. When I went to my first Oxford open day, I didn’t like it, it felt imposing, intimidating. I went back and did a tour of Wadham and it seemed open and friendly. The narrative around Oxford is changing: access is more in the news, and Wadham seems to be dragging the other colleges up with it. There’s no doubt, though, that familiarity with the place will give you greater comfort – if your parents have been here, or if your school is familiar with it.”

**THE STUDENTS**

**Daniel Gunn, 20**  
*Studying: Philosophy, politics, economics*

“I come from one of the more depressed areas in the country, and my school had never given anyone into Oxford or Cambridge before me. There was a lack of knowledge among my teachers about Oxbridge and my teachers didn’t back me when I applied. When I went to my first Oxford open day, I didn’t like it, it felt imposing, intimidating. I went back and did a tour of Wadham and it seemed open and friendly. The narrative around Oxford is changing: access is more in the news, and Wadham seems to be dragging the other colleges up with it. There’s no doubt, though, that familiarity with the place will give you greater comfort – if your parents have been here, or if your school is familiar with it.”

**Dhanya Nair, 21**  
*Studying: Classics*

“I’m a child of two immigrant parents and my parents knew nothing about Oxbridge, although they were very positive about my trying to get in here. It was always going to be an additional struggle learning classics, as it doesn’t cater well for people who haven’t studied both Latin and Greek [which are more commonly taught in private schools], I wasn’t personally supported by my school; I didn’t see me as a candidate. My first open day, to Lady Margaret Hall [another Oxford college] put me off completely. I wasn’t personally supported by my school, who didn’t know each other before they got here. We were very mindful of not creating structures that make it harder for some candidates than for others, using vocabulary and references that favour a certain type of candidate – for example, if we quoted a bit of Latin, that would advantage certain candidates [generally from private schools where Latin is more widely taught]. We avoid anything that allows bias to creep in, for example, I don’t shake hands with candidates, something which could make some of them feel uncomfortable. We have to be careful not to be deceived by polish, or a lack of polish. We have come a long way, but there is a long way to go.”

**Alfonso Castronuño Pita**  
*Engineering tutor*

“We work hard to ensure nobody has an unfair advantage at interview. We can tailor interviews so everyone has the same chances - we are looking for potential, so we see how interviewees respond to brand-new information.”

**Carolin Duttlinger**  
*Philosophy tutor*

“It is true that we try to be elitist in the positive sense, not the negative sense, as in, designed to perpetuate the existence of an undeserving elite. When people are applying for philosophy we pay a huge amount of attention to contextual data, and less to personal statements, for example. We give as little attention as possible to the stuff you can buy; in interviews we are very mindful of not creating structures that make it harder for some candidates than for others, using vocabulary and references that favour a certain type of candidate. For example, if we quoted a bit of Latin, that would advantage certain candidates [generally from private schools where Latin is more widely taught]. We avoid anything that allows bias to creep in, for example, I don’t shake hands with candidates, something which could make some of them feel uncomfortable. We have to be careful not to be deceived by polish, or a lack of polish. We have come a long way, but there is a long way to go.”

**THE TUTORS**

**Thomas Sinclair**  
*Philosophy tutor*

“One of our challenges for access in German at Oxford is to help students from poorer families apply to the stuff you can buy. In interviews we are very mindful of not creating structures that make it harder for some candidates than for others, using vocabulary and references that favour a certain type of candidate. For example, if we quoted a bit of Latin, that would advantage certain candidates [generally from private schools where Latin is more widely taught]. We avoid anything that allows bias to creep in, for example, I don’t shake hands with candidates, something which could make some of them feel uncomfortable. We have to be careful not to be deceived by polish, or a lack of polish. We have come a long way, but there is a long way to go.”

**Pelin Morjan, 20**  
*Studying: English*

“My parents and my school didn’t have any experience of highly regarded universities, and when I came here I felt aware I was competing against people who had a lot of cultural capital. Everyone seemed to have something which could make some of them feel uncomfortable. We have to be careful not to be deceived by polish, or a lack of polish. We have come a long way, but there is a long way to go.”

*One of our challenges for access in German at Oxford is to help students from poorer families apply to Oxford.*