Access at Wadham
Covid-19 is a call to action

How do you respond to a pandemic? Our immediate focus has been on our community’s health and wellbeing and ensuring our research and practical expertise can support the national effort. But we also know that the impact of this crisis is likely to be long-lasting. It will intensify social inequity. And that is why we believe now, more than ever, we need to redouble our commitment to fair access.

The pandemic continues to have an unpredictable impact on us all. Our immediate focus remains on the health and wellbeing of our students, colleagues and the wider Wadham community. We continue to support the national effort in every way we can, from our sixth-year medics working on the frontline to the ventilators (already in production) designed by our Fellows.

But while the medical response is the urgent priority, we know that Covid-19 will have significant secondary effects on the economy, the labour market and on education; and that these may intensify social inequalities in the UK and around the world. We see this most immediately in young people’s different experiences of home education and their access to technology, but also in the wider economy as job losses are already having a differential impact on families.

For the College, this is a call to action. Our commitment to fair access has its roots in our founding principles. We know you expect Wadham to welcome talented students of all backgrounds and, now, in what is likely to be the biggest crisis of this generation, this matters more than ever. In this impact briefing, we summarise our work to date, why it matters, the impact we have made so far, and our vision for the future – both during and beyond the pandemic.

At a time when solutions to the world’s most pressing challenges depend on research, innovation and creative insight, supporting the brightest talent – wherever it is found – remains our unwavering priority.

Ken Macdonald QC, Warden

“The current pandemic has exposed the deep inequities in our society and its effects will be disproportionately borne by those already disadvantaged. As the University of Oxford navigates this new world, it will be more important than ever that we ensure educational opportunity for smart, ambitious young people of every background. This is why Wadham’s redoubled focus on access and on clear headed evaluation of its programmes is so important.”

Professor Louise Richardson
Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford

Find out more
For more details on how we are implementing our Access to Excellence programme and to read the full version of the 2020 Impact Report please visit: www.wadham.ox.ac.uk
Access

Wadham’s Access to Excellence programme delivers comprehensive, targeted support that takes students from secondary school through to higher education and beyond. Over the past four years, the College has expanded the reach and scale of its programmes, working with more than 350 schools and 25,000 pupils. Our events programme is also expanding: we have run more than 650 events, with over 200 taking place in the last academic year.

At the heart of our work are programmes that engage with pupils early and over a sustained period, a strategy that research consistently shows makes the most significant difference. Since 2015, Wadham has collaborated with schools in Luton (one of 11 link regions allocated to the College by the University), working with groups of pupils across Years 10 and 11. Today the project continues to thrive and, in collaboration with partners such as the Connolly Foundation, the College has embarked on a major expansion of the Luton Project. By 2023, 3,200 students will engage annually through the initiative as it expands to work with schools across Bedford and Bedfordshire. Rooted regionally, these programmes are recognised nationally by ministers, policymakers and in the media.

Our events for sixth-form pupils encourage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to consider Russell Group universities in general, and Oxford and Wadham in particular. Wadham’s summer schools give students realistic, first-hand insights into university life, providing intensive academic training in a chosen subject, and guidance on preparing strong university applications.

Throughout the academic year, until the restrictions imposed by lockdown this spring, Wadham staff and students also continued to visit schools and collaborate with partner organisations to support groups that are under-represented in higher education. Our partners include Target Oxbridge, IntoUniversity and The Brilliant Club. At every stage, Wadham’s students are key contributors, offering young people insights into student life and busting myths and pre-conceptions about the 'typical' Oxford student.

“...My students have as much right to be here as anybody else. But unless we empower them and make them realise it’s a possibility, they won’t aspire to it. It’s vital our students see that they could achieve and flourish here in Oxford.”

Sixth-form tutor, State school, Milton Keynes
The impact

Wadham’s approach to access is strategic and evidence-informed. Critically, our Access to Excellence programme recognises the connected challenges that students face on their journey to join our College community, and beyond.

This life-cycle approach, which has been in place for six years, balances activity that supports pupils’ broad aspirations to study at research-intensive universities, promotes applications to Oxford and to Wadham College, and supports Wadham students through to graduation and as they go out into the world to make a difference.

The evidence shows that our work has a direct impact on aspiration and applications. It addresses information barriers (such as how to make a successful application) and attitudinal ones (such as ‘Oxford is not for people like me’).

Statistical analysis undertaken by UCAS highlights that pupils engaged in Wadham’s access activities are “very significantly” more likely to apply to Oxbridge and also “very significantly” more likely to take up places at leading research and teaching UK universities. This evaluation will be repeated annually to help track the impact of interventions with younger pupils as they apply and take up places at university.

Pupils engaging in Wadham outreach activity are more likely to apply to Oxford and Wadham – and more likely to secure a place. For example, in the last academic year, 23 of the 44 pupils who attended our residential summer schools made applications to Oxford (14 to Wadham), and 10 received offers of a place (four to Wadham).

Outreach activity is having a measurable impact on how confident pupils feel about making an Oxford application and their ability to thrive at the University. Before attending Wadham’s summer school, less than a third of participants understood how to make an effective application to Oxford and, similarly, under a third of participants felt confident they would fit in. After attending the summer school, 100 per cent of participants said they understood how to make an effective application – and 86 per cent felt confident that they would fit in at Oxford.

Finally, our access team, and the College more widely, are in close touch with the latest policy and research evidence, ensuring our activity is responsive and progressive.

“I didn’t think I would fit in at Oxford and, honestly, I worried I wouldn’t like the people. But the student ambassadors showed me that just wasn’t true. I had an amazing experience and an invaluable reminder of how much I love learning. It’s an experience I’ll never forget.”

Wadham Summer School attendee

25,000

Over the past four years, the College has worked with more than 350 schools and 25,000 pupils from across the UK. This is as a result of a conscious and determined effort to dramatically expand the reach and scale of our programmes.
Wadham’s Access Team deploys a data-driven approach to targeting, analysing the latest sector, school and pupil-level datasets to ensure we are engaging the young people who will benefit most from our programme.

How we measure it

60%

Pupils engaging in Wadham outreach activity are more likely to apply to Oxford, and more likely to secure a place. Over the past three years, 60 per cent of summer school attendees have won places at Russell Group universities and 20 per cent have won places at Oxford.

“I’m really glad that social mobility is so firmly on the agenda for Wadham. The fact that they are on their third Social Mobility Summit, that the Access Centre is being constructed in the Back Quad, and the emphasis they have given in terms of the leadership they are providing in Oxford – these things are very important.”

Sir Michael Barber
Chair, Office for Students

Our ambition is that Wadham becomes an international beacon for fair access. We want the impact of our work to extend beyond the pupils, teachers and schools that we work with directly – especially important at a time when the need for effective action is so great. Careful targeting of activities and effective evaluation are key to ensuring we can deliver maximum impact and inspire others to do the same.

Over the past four years we have embedded a robust approach to evaluation, measuring impact using a variety of tools, including tracking pupils’ progress, feedback surveys and by accessing national benchmarking data. This data-focused approach has been developed in partnership with the Bridge Group (a charitable consultancy that promotes social equality), which also works with many of the City employers our students ultimately aspire to join.

This rigorous evaluation has put us in a strong position to use our own evidence and experience as a basis for convening wider discussions about policy and practice relating to access. In 2019, we held our third Social Mobility Summit. Building on previous events, the Summit explored how ethnicity and socio-economic background impact access to university, with panellists focusing on specific actions that universities, schools, government and the third sector can take to advance equality.
The pandemic is impacting everyday life, but it also risks exacerbating educational inequalities. In consequence, our work needs to both increase in breadth and meet entirely new challenges. Simultaneously, we are examining how we can develop all our programmes for an unpredictable future.

In terms of immediate action, we are rapidly digitising our summer school programme and application guidance, enabling pupils to access online support and resources. We are also offering online support for UCAS applications and personal statements, matching what we would usually offer face-to-face at this time of year by providing specialist mentoring to around 250 pupils. This is targeted at schools most likely to benefit from this support. We are also supporting the rapid digitisation of the UNIQ summer schools, to enable pupils who were signed up for courses this summer to attend the programme online.

Longer-term, we are expanding the digital delivery of aspects of our outreach programme – not simply replicating provision online, but adapting content and approach to make the most of the technology available, exploring, for example, the potential to be more inclusive.

In collaboration with teachers, we are beginning to develop digital teaching materials for use in schools. These aim to engage young people with academic content that complements their studies and boosts the cognitive and study skills needed to excel at institutions such as Oxford.

This work supports young people now, but also promises to transform our practice long into the future. As well as providing a catalyst for the development of blended digital and face-to-face activities, it is a model for increasing the scale and reach of our programme beyond our 11 link regions, both nationally and globally.

Finally, we know that today’s students will face a challenging graduate labour market – whether they graduate this year, or in the years that follow. The effects of a contracting workforce are likely to impact students from lower socio-economic backgrounds most severely. Working with alumni and employers to build on the existing support available to our students and with the University’s Careers Service, we will continue to source fully funded internships and work experience, professional advice and training for students who need it most.

**Oxford’s first purpose-built Access Centre**

One day in a not too distant future, we will gather together again. When this happens, Wadham will be ready. The new Undergraduate and Access Centres, currently under construction in the Back Quad, play a critical role in our ambitions, providing us with a dedicated space where prospective school students from Wadham’s target areas can participate in outreach programmes, and combining world-class facilities with academic mentoring and accessible information about what university has to offer.

Government directives have enabled us to continue the building work and we are making good progress on the William Doo Undergraduate Centre and the Dr Lee Shau Kee Building in the Back Quad.

You can see the how Oxford’s first purpose-built Access Centre, which will be completed in time for the academic year 2020-21, is taking shape on our website.

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The future

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2021

Oxford’s first purpose-built Access Centre will provide a dedicated space for prospective students to participate in world-class outreach programmes.
“There has never been a more important time for business to sharpen its focus on inclusion and diverse talent in order to remain competitive. For young people, the challenge starts at school – and at Wadham we’re focused on how we best support the broadest range of young people on their journey to Oxford and beyond, both during the pandemic and for years to come.”

Warren East CBE (Engineering, 1980)
Chair, Wadham College Development Council; CEO of Rolls-Royce

Thank you
We are grateful to the many members of the Wadham community, including tutors, students and alumni, who have helped Wadham widen its doors to talented students from all backgrounds and enable us to do significantly more than many of our peer institutions. The generous support from alumni and friends of the College have made Access to Excellence possible. The programme exemplifies the College’s commitment to equality and talent, but it is also a vivid example of how our community comes together to deliver impact in demonstrable and meaningful ways. If there was ever a time for communities to come together in this way, it is now. Join us. www.wadham.ox.ac.uk

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