

SCHOOLS LIAISON STRATEGY

1. The Previous Strategy

With generous support from alumni, Univ engaged between October 2008 and September 2012 in an intensive schools liaison programme, guided by a strategy that had as its principal objective a year-on-year increase in the number of strong applications to the College from the full range of school types. To that end, it undertook a mixture of recruitment and outreach work, with the latter framed in terms of changing the balance of successful applicants from the independent to the maintained sector.

The review of the effectiveness of the College's schools liaison activities was completed in MT 2011. It concluded that the work carried out by the Schools Liaison team had attracted much favourable comment from other parts of the University and from external stakeholders, and had exercised a profoundly beneficial effect on the culture of the college and the levels of engagement of students and staff. Although the College's applicant pool had not grown or become academically stronger, the Review noted the significant increase in the proportion of applicants from the maintained sector, and since 2011 a concomitant increase in the intake from that sector. Welcoming the shift, the Review nevertheless proposed a move away from number chasing given the inevitable fluctuations in small data sets; a smarter, better targeted, use of resources; a closer alignment between identified aims and the activities carried out; and some rebalancing of priorities. The key features of the revised schools liaison strategy adopted by the College in Trinity Term 2012 are set out in Sections 3 and 4 below.

2. The Institutional Framework

Schools liaison forms part of the College's wider efforts on undergraduate admissions. The College's admissions policy has two overall aims, neither of which should be traded off against each other:

- To apply the highest standards to its admissions offers, strictly on grounds of academic performance and potential;
- To ensure that the social, geographical and educational diversity of its undergraduate intake reflects the diversity of prospective applicants with the highest academic performance and potential.

Schools liaison activities must also be consistent with the College's charitable purposes, specifically those expressed in the Public Benefit statement. Univ's Public Benefit statement commits the College to pursuing the following objectives under its schools liaison strategy:

- Strengthening the College's links with the secondary education sector and increasing its efforts to attract applications from academically outstanding students;
- Providing bursaries and scholarships to students of limited financial means;
- Helping those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and in particular offering enhanced bridging support to facilitate the transition of successful 'flagged' applicants from secondary to tertiary education;
- Continuing a targeted programme of access and recruitment activities.

Univ's schools liaison strategy must in addition be aligned with each of the following linked University policy statements:

- **The Common Framework on Undergraduate Admissions** (2006), with its emphasis on the need to ensure that candidates' prospects of admission are not affected by college choice and that offers are made to the academically most promising candidates irrespective of socio-economic, ethnic or national origin;
- **The University's OFFA agreement** (2011), with its shift in emphasis from type of school to income and community culture as key indicators;
- **The Common Framework on Widening Access** (2012), which operates the University's regional programme of access work, which in the case of Univ entails responsibility for the local authority areas of Reading, West Berkshire, Wokingham, Shropshire, Telford and the Wrekin, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, but does not preclude a continuing engagement with schools and regions with which we have well-established ties (e.g. South Yorkshire).

3. The four strands of Schools Liaison Strategy

Schools liaison strategies vary in their emphases, but typically comprise all or most of the following strands:

- **Recruitment**, which focuses on academically able students who are already seriously considering making a competitive application to Oxbridge or other Russell Group universities. In our case the goal is to encourage this group to make Univ their chosen destination for undergraduate study; as is stated in the University's new Common Framework on Access, recruitment often consists of work with schools and colleges which have traditionally provided successful applicants to Oxford University from the UK or further afield.
- **Conversion**, which seeks to ensure that able students from disadvantaged backgrounds have an equal chance of being offered a place at Oxford and of meeting the conditions of their offer. Conversion targets students who have the ability to succeed at Oxford and who tend to apply but either are not offered places or fail to meet the conditions of their offer. The goal is to supply these students with the information they need prior to application in order to have an equal chance of securing a place, and to provide additional targeted bridging support, in cooperation with the University, to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds in receipt of offers.
- **Outreach**, which focuses on students who have the ability to succeed at Oxford but do not tend to apply; the goal is to encourage them to consider applying to Oxford and Univ.
- **Widening Participation**, which aims to raise general aspirations to study at any university or college, without a particular focus on Oxford or Univ.

There is a natural progression in access activities from widening participation work with younger age groups to raise their aspirations about higher education, to outreach work with students as they consider their higher education options, to conversion work with students as they put together applications and prepare for Oxford admissions. Recruitment activities might in principle engage students of various ages, but will very likely be most effective when targeted at students on the cusp of a decision about where to apply to university and for which course.

4. Approaches

Much work has already been done to establish strong relationships with teachers and their schools in our regional areas and to maintain existing links. During the next planning period, we will continue the work that has proven successful, but seek to become 'smarter' and more efficient, linking each activity to specific objectives. We will also seek to innovate, for example through developing our on-line presence and digital forms of communication with our stakeholders more comprehensively. Thus, our work in the next period will comprise two complementary approaches:

(i) *Continuing our face-to-face schools liaison and access activities*

We will continue to offer inbound and outbound school visits, work closely with our regional clusters, offer aspiration-raising study days and training workshops, engage with teachers on an individual basis and at our annual teachers' conference, develop our offerings on the occasion of Open Days, have a well-trained team of student ambassadors, and provide high-quality publicity material.

(ii) *Digital Outreach*

Online materials have far greater reach than any in-school or college-based activities, and help to ensure equity of access across the broad spectrum of potential applicants. We aim to make Univ a leading college in digital outreach, using what we have learned about effective schools liaison work from our face-to-face activities and translating these activities into distinctive, accessible, and informative online resources. The intention is to develop new online resources that complement the face-to-face activities carried out within each major strand of our schools liaison work.

5. Univ's new Schools Liaison Strategy (for implementation from October 2012)

Our schools liaison work in the coming years will focus on Recruitment and Conversion, while pursuing new and more targeted methods for Outreach. Our efforts in Widening Participation will focus on supporting the University's Central Admissions Team, which is best placed to undertake this type of work. The guiding rationale and strategy for our three main areas of SL work are detailed below.

(i) Recruitment

Univ continues to face fierce competition from the best students, and needs to work effectively to maintain its visibility and its reputation for academic excellence. Recruitment is therefore central to our aim of attracting students of the highest academic achievement and potential from all sectors, and will continue to form a major part of our efforts.

Objectives

- To maintain close and effective communications with schools that have strong results and a track record of sending successful candidates to Univ, Oxford and comparable institutions;
- To offer a distinctive and informative programme of schools liaison activity for teachers and students at these schools.

(ii) Conversion

Conversion will be a major focus of our schools liaison work in the current planning period, in keeping with one of the principal targets of the University's OFFA agreement, namely to increase the number of students at Oxford from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and from neighbourhoods with low participation in higher education. Most qualified candidates already apply to Oxford and Cambridge, but there is a greater attrition rate for applicants from non-traditional backgrounds at each stage of the admissions process. Understanding why this happens and addressing any problems that are identified may be the most efficient way of improving the effectiveness of our admissions process.

Objectives

- To provide a continuum of support to outstanding applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, from the pre-application phase to post-entry. The details of our conversion activities will be set out in our implementation plan, and will be subject to annual review. As far as possible, they will be aligned with the bridging and other conversion schemes for candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds offered by the Central Admissions Office and the Academic Divisions;
- To develop effective means of ensuring that able students from disadvantaged backgrounds are equipped with the information and knowledge required to make a competitive application to Univ;
- To provide teachers and applicants from schools with strong academic results but a relatively weak record of sending successful candidates to Oxford and comparable institutions with the information they need to make a competitive application;
- To provide Univ's tutors with relevant contextual information to ensure effective decision-making.

(iii) Outreach

Although most well-qualified candidates already apply to Oxford and Cambridge, a number of talented students fail to do so because of lack of information. Traditional schools liaison activities (e.g., school visits) are inefficient in identifying those students and providing them with the specific information they need. Therefore, while continuing to engage in Outreach work, it is vital to develop ‘smarter’, more carefully targeted, methods for identifying and reaching out to these individuals.

Objectives

- To develop effectively targeted ways of identifying students with the necessary qualifications and ability to succeed at Oxford but who are currently not applying;
- To develop new partnerships with organisations that have the infrastructure and information in place to identify talented individuals who may be unlikely to apply to Oxford, for the wrong reasons. These partnerships will include the Central Admissions Office; our regional clusters; and relevant charities and community groups;
- To work with clusters of schools in our regional areas so that our outreach efforts are targeting large cohorts of prospective applicants, and so that the schools involved can share their experiences of good practice in outreach.

(iv) **Widening participation**

Within the new common framework on access, the central Undergraduate Admissions Office is responsible for coordinating the University’s widening participation work.

Objectives

- To support the University’ widening participation activities within the common framework on access, particularly when proposed activities complement the College’s ongoing work in recruitment, conversion, and outreach.

As well as continuing with traditional schools liaison work, a key focus of the new strategy will be achieve a substantial improvement in our online presence. This form of ‘digital outreach’ has the potential to contribute to all four categories of access and schools liaison work.

6. Conclusion: key features of the new strategy

The strategy outlined above has three distinctive features in relation to the previous strategy and to ongoing schools liaison work in the wider University:

- **Smart outreach.** The targets of traditional outreach work—prospective applicants who are qualified, but not inclined, to apply to Oxford—are increasingly rare ‘needles in haystacks’. The new strategy acknowledges this fact, whilst reiterating the College’s aim of admitting the most able individuals from the widest possible range of backgrounds. The proposed solution is to

develop more effectively targeted methods for identifying and reaching out to talented students who do not apply due to misinformation or a lack of information.

- **Conversion.** The new strategy identifies conversion as a crucially distinct focus of access work, one that has very different aims and focus from the often-stated outreach goal of increasing applicant numbers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Most qualified applicants already apply to Oxford and Cambridge. The greatest improvements in creating a level playing field are therefore likely to be made by ensuring that our admissions procedures are transparent, fair, and effective in identifying the most talented individuals in the applicant pool.
- **Digital outreach.** Our schools liaison activities to date have proven enormously beneficial to the College, but inevitably target relatively small numbers of individuals. Online resources potentially have a global reach and, importantly, offer the opportunity for the College to maintain a distinctive and innovative profile of schools liaison work in an increasingly competitive environment.