

Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education)
Professor Martin S Williams

University Offices, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD
Tel: +44 (0)1865 280515
Email: martin.williams@admin.ox.ac.uk Web: www.ox.ac.uk



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Stand Alone Pledge

I am writing to commit Oxford University to the Stand Alone Pledge, signalling our support for estranged students. The University and its colleges aim to offer a supportive and caring environment to all our students, in which they are able to excel at their studies while participating fully in university life. We recognise the particular emotional, financial and practical barriers faced by students who are studying without the support or approval of a family network, and are committed to doing all we can to provide an environment that enables them to thrive at Oxford.

In the accompanying document we have set out our current provisions for estranged students and identified several initiatives that we will pursue which we believe will materially improve our provision. This agenda has support at the highest levels of the University, and we look forward to delivering on it over the next two years, working with Stand Alone for the benefit of our students.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'M. S. Williams'.

Professor Martin S Williams
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education)

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

STATEMENT OF PROVISION FOR ESTRANGED UNDERGRADUATES IN SUPPORT OF THE STAND ALONE PLEDGE

INTRODUCTION

The University of Oxford is committed to fostering an inclusive culture that promotes equality and diversity in its student population. Recent research and awareness-raising in the higher education sector has highlighted that not all students will be studying with the support and approval of their family network. This can lead to significant barriers for those who lack family capital, and who are termed 'estranged students'.

The University of Oxford is a collegiate university, in which all students are members of both an academic department and one of the 38 affiliated colleges. Teaching and support of undergraduate students is a joint enterprise between the central university and its colleges. In broad terms, colleges are responsible for:

- admission of undergraduates
- a substantial component of the teaching, in the form of small-group tutorials
- monitoring the progress of students
- provision of accommodation, catering and recreational facilities
- first-level pastoral support (with referral on to central university services, as appropriate)
- financial support on a case-by-case basis, including for hardship

The University is responsible for:

- departmental teaching delivered at the cohort level (lectures, laboratory classes, field trips)
- examining and awarding of degrees
- library and IT provision (complementing college provision in these areas)
- specialised cross-institutional Disability Advisory and Counselling Services
- awarding non-repayable means-tested bursaries (Moritz-Heyman Scholarships and Oxford Bursaries)
- the Careers Service

While this dual provision can initially appear complex, it offers significant advantages to our students. Colleges are small, coherent, multi-disciplinary communities. Each undergraduate will be part of a college subject group that will normally comprise ten or fewer students, overseen by an academic tutor who will get to know them extremely well. In addition to teaching and supervision of students, these subject tutors play a strong pastoral role, and are supported by local and approachable welfare teams.

Colleges are well-placed to respond both quickly and flexibly to the individual needs of estranged students on a case-by-case basis, for example through mentoring, additional financial support and provision of vacation accommodation.

Within this context, while we have not specifically identified estranged students as a distinct group, we do already offer substantial support to many estranged students on an as-requested basis. The remainder of this document sets out both our current provision and identifies several ways in which we will commit to improving this.

CURRENT SUPPORT FOR ESTRANGED STUDENTS

Financial support. Currently there is no support specifically earmarked for estranged undergraduates. However, those who are assessed by Student Finance as estranged and have independent status, will normally have a household income that is sufficiently low to qualify for Oxford's most generous bursary, the Moritz-Heyman Scholarship. This provides a non-repayable contribution to living costs (currently £3,700 per annum), as well as funding for internships (see below). Our new commitments below show that we are evaluating this support, and our aim is to increase this level for estranged students who qualify as such through the Student Loans Company (SLC) or Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS).

Additional college support. As above, there is no earmarked support for estranged students. Those who are suffering from financial hardship are eligible for additional college grants. Undergraduates who do not have accommodation outside of term can be provided with year-round housing. Some colleges also offer vacation employment opportunities.

Counselling and welfare support. The University has its own Counselling Service which helps students to gain understanding and insight into any difficulties, to develop emotional resilience and to put into effect real change, enabling them to fulfil their academic and personal potential. We offer support through one-to-one sessions, groups and workshops. Oxford has extensive welfare provision, with each College having its own welfare team, often including professional staff (nurse, GP, chaplain, counsellor), other trained staff members and student volunteers. Students can take any concerns to a member of their college welfare team for support and advice.

Student Union support. The Student Union currently offers free, in-house, confidential and impartial advice through its Student Advice Service. This can help estranged students with queries about accommodation, finance and wellbeing support. Additionally the six elected sabbatical officers represent the student body on various committees and forums within the university and are able to raise any concerns that estranged students have. These officers also promote Estranged Students Solidarity Week in conjunction with Stand Alone.

Careers service. Estranged students who are awarded Moritz-Heyman Scholarships are entitled to one-to-one careers mentoring and a bespoke internship scheme, including financial support for travel and subsistence costs. The careers service also offers web-based resources for students and alumnae seeking vacation work and employment.

NEW COMMITMENTS

For the elements below, our aim is to provide a guaranteed level of support for estranged students who qualify as such through the SLC or SAAS. For students who have not been through this process but have come forward while at Oxford, we will assess their needs on an individual basis and offer a bespoke support package, with an upper limit of equivalence with estranged students identified by the SLC and SAAS

Enhanced financial support. As part of a wider review of our undergraduate bursary package, we aim to offer enhanced levels of financial support for on-course estranged students from 2019/20. From 2020/21, UK domiciled, SLC/SAAS-registered estranged students starting first degrees, and whose household income is less than £27,500, will be eligible for a maximum non-repayable bursary of £7,200 p.a. Estranged undergraduates who are eligible for Oxford bursaries (household income of £27,500-£42,875) and those identified outside of the SLC/SAAS process, will be eligible to apply on an as-needs basis, for a living cost supplement of up to £3,000 p.a., recognising additional expenditure during vacations.

College survey and dissemination of best practice. While the support currently offered by colleges is substantial, it would be beneficial to understand any variation between them. We will therefore conduct a survey of all colleges' provision to identify and disseminate best practice and to propose a standard level of support that all colleges could offer.

Improved accommodation offer. While colleges already offer accommodation to undergraduates who make their needs known on a case-by-case basis, we will move to a position in which estranged students are guaranteed vacation accommodation, if required. This will be widely publicised so that undergraduates are aware of, and encouraged to make use of, the provision. We will also explore the possibilities for accommodating them with or in proximity to other students who are remaining in Oxford, to minimise the risks of isolation.

Access to counselling provision. We will ensure that there is no overall cap on the number of counselling sessions an estranged student can receive.

Additional vacation employment support from the careers service. Besides the support already offered, the Careers Service will offer further, bespoke support for estranged students needing vacation employment.

OTHER PLEDGE REQUIREMENTS

Meeting of Vice-Chancellor/Pro-Vice-Chancellor with a group of estranged students. This meeting is currently being scheduled for early 2019. A group of estranged students will meet with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and/or the Vice-Chancellor. This will provide an opportunity for senior staff to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by estranged students, and how the university can best support them.

Named contact for estranged students. Our named contact will be Gillian Hamnett, Head of Student Welfare and Support Services.

Process to identify and monitor estranged students. The University will keep a record of those students who disclose that they are estranged. This may be via their SLC/SAAS application, through their College welfare team, or directly to the Director of Student Welfare. In each case, a disclosure will lead to a sensitive, confidential discussion to establish the student's circumstances and the extent of their support needs – this will either be with a college welfare lead or with the University's Director of Student Welfare. To make undergraduates feel more able to come forward and have confidence they will be supported, we will establish processes to inform applicants, offer-holders and current students of the University's commitment to supporting estranged students, and the routes through which they can seek support.

Increasing staff awareness. Staff awareness will be promoted through briefings and discussions at the regular Welfare Forum meetings of college welfare officers. We will also disseminate best practice through the established departmental and college routes, including college Senior Tutors, Bursars and Domestic Bursars (who have oversight of, respectively, the academic, financial and accommodation needs of students).

Staff development. We will work with Stand Alone to train welfare staff in Colleges and others in key roles to understand the issues faced by estranged students, and how we can best support them.