

# Oxford should withdraw its current policy on postgraduate funding immediately

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*The recent court case initiated against an Oxford University college has raised awareness of the issue of postgraduate funding. The requirement by St Hugh's that all prospective students demonstrate that they have resources to cover tuition fees and living costs has attracted much criticism. **Rachel Brooks** explains how this policy is problematic in a number of overlapping ways, pointing to the broader issues which differentiate postgraduate from undergraduate funding.*



As has been [widely reported](#) in the press, St Hugh's – one of the constituent colleges of Oxford University – is currently being sued by a student who claims he was prevented from taking up the place he had been offered to study for a master's degree in economic history by the University's policy of 'selecting by wealth'. By this, he is referring to the requirement made of all prospective students to demonstrate that they have sufficient funds to cover the tuition fees for their proposed course plus at least £12,900 a year in living costs. According to the University's rules, projected earnings from paid work cannot be taken into consideration when assessing the funds available. This case is troubling for a number of (inter-related) reasons, four of which are outlined below.

Firstly, and most importantly, such action can be seen to exacerbate the social inequalities that have long been evident within higher education, generally, and postgraduate studies, specifically. At undergraduate level, numerous reports have demonstrated that, despite over a decade of initiatives to 'widen participation' under the previous Labour administration, students from lower socio-economic groups [continue to be under-represented](#). At postgraduate level, the picture is rather more complex. Nevertheless, differentials by social background remain. Analysis of students moving immediately from a first degree to a postgraduate qualification has revealed differences by socio-economic status, with those from [lower socio-economic groups under-represented](#). However, these differences become much more marked amongst those who [take up postgraduate studies at a later point in time](#), after some years away from education. Wakeling has suggested that this increased level of social inequality amongst later entrants may reflect the use of postgraduate education by higher socio-economic groups as a 'second chance' of securing graduate employment – a choice that is less likely to be made by those with lower levels of familial resource. The Oxford policy of requiring prospective students to demonstrate that they have at least £12,000 available to support their studies can only serve to increase such social inequalities.

Secondly, as well as exacerbating social inequalities in access to postgraduate education *per se*, Oxford's current policy is likely to further the social stratification of the sector. Postgraduate education has become increasingly popular over recent years, with enrolments increasing 400 per cent between 1990 and 2006, as [students aim to gain more specialist knowledge](#), develop more work-related skills and/or distinguish themselves from other graduates of mass higher education in possession of 'only' a first degree. Within this expanded sector, differences between institutions have become increasingly significant, and institutional hierarchies have been shown to have an important bearing on progression to postgraduate study. Students from more privileged backgrounds are typically over-represented in high status universities, while their peers from less advantaged backgrounds are more commonly found in less prestigious institutions. As first-degree institution is significant in determining access to postgraduate education, [inequalities by social class are perpetuated](#). Moreover, research has shown that prospective postgraduates make their own hierarchical judgements about possible institutions, and [decide what is or is not \(socially\) appropriate for 'a person like me'](#).

Thirdly, Oxford's policy appears politically naïve when there is, for the first time, a national focus on widening participation to postgraduate education. Alan Milburn, the Coalition government's 'social mobility tsar' has argued that postgraduate education is ['a real time-bomb in terms of social mobility'](#). Similar claims were made in the report,

published last year, by the independent Higher Education Commission. This argued, firstly, that the UK needs a greater proportion of its population to undertake postgraduate education and, secondly, that such education represents [‘the new frontier of widening participation’](#). Indeed, the Commission recommended that postgraduate education is included in all institutions’ widening participation strategies. While it seems likely that the Commission’s call for a sustainable system of postgraduate funding (through government loans) may well be implemented in the future, Oxford’s current position in relation to the financing of a degree shows scant regard for any notion of widening access and is likely to lead to an even more privileged student body across the University as a whole.

Oxford’s funding policy perhaps also demonstrates political naivety in relation to changes within the wider market within which it is operating. Clearly the university occupies a very privileged position within the global higher education market and, to date, has not come under any political pressure to ‘widen participation’ on its postgraduate courses. Nevertheless, over the past year elite US institutions have been pursuing UK students with renewed vigour, and well-regarded universities in mainland Europe have [strengthened their attempts to capture a share of the UK market](#) – offering courses in English, and emphasising clearly the advantageous fee differentials. Such universities do not ask for evidence of the same financial resources as Oxford does and, in the case of many North American institutions, are able to offer significant financial support packages to those from low income backgrounds. Evidence to date suggests that, although British students are relatively unlikely to move overseas for an undergraduate degree, there is more mobility at postgraduate level – and, here, [financial considerations often come into play](#).

Finally, the Oxford policy appears to ignore the realities of many young people’s lives, as a result of not taking into consideration the income that is likely to be derived from part-time work. For many years now, a considerable proportion of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level have [combined part-time paid employment with a full-time degree course](#). Although research has pointed to the negative impact this can sometimes have on academic performance, part-time work has been [actively encouraged](#) by the current UK government and, indeed, is often [seen as beneficial by students themselves](#). Moreover, with the current increase in undergraduate fees and, as of yet, no recourse to government funded loans at postgraduate level, it is likely that paid employment will continue to be an important means of support for many of those wishing to pursue higher education beyond a first degree.

It may well be that, in the not-so-distant future, students applying to Oxford will be able to support themselves by taking out a government-supported loan. In the meantime, however, in the interests of social justice, ensuring that postgraduate courses recruit the best students (rather than the richest), and retaining a competitive place within a global market, Oxford should withdraw its current policy on postgraduate funding immediately – and not wait until the results of the legal action are known.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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