



# Should Oxford Lower Its Admissions Standards for the Sons and Daughters of Generous Benefactors?

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## 1. Introduction

"Education is the most powerful weapon that can change the world," Nelson Mandela once said. But now, this weapon is losing its value. In March 2019, wealthy families, including celebrities, began to buy the admissions system, which is the so-called buying a degree. This is not just news, but also a wake-up call. As a century-old university in the academic world, if Oxford University begins to relax the rules for donors, what will the cost be? Although donations can provide financial support, Oxford University's reputation is built on education, not wealth. Lowering the admissions standards for donors will reduce opportunities for talented students, Oxford University's social status will also be affected, and people's trust in Oxford University will also be reduced. Therefore, Oxford University cannot lower its admissions standards, which will harm fairness, damage its reputation, and set a precedent for higher education.

## 2. The Erosion of Fairness

If the requirements for donors in university admissions are lowered, the inequality of social educational resources will be destroyed. As a world university, Oxford University is already very competitive. Behind every student who obtains a degree because of his family background, it means that a student who may have higher academic knowledge but no economic advantage will lose his educational resources. Many outstanding students will face structural barriers to entering universities because of their poor families.

- In 2023, 14.4% of UK students admitted to Oxford came from the two most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (ACORN categories 4 and 5<sup>6</sup>).

**Table 3.1: Socio-economic disadvantage: UK applications to Oxford, offers made and students admitted from ACORN categories 4 and 5<sup>6</sup>, 2019–2023**

|      | APPLICATIONS | OFFERS | STUDENTS ADMITTED | ACORN 4 AND 5<br>PROPORTION OF<br>STUDENTS ADMITTED <sup>7</sup> |
|------|--------------|--------|-------------------|--|
| 2023 | 2,596        | 458    | 365               | 14.4%  |
| 2022 | 2,492        | 466    | 401               | 15.5%  |
| 2021 | 2,375        | 485    | 460               | 17.3%  |
| 2020 | 2,316        | 495    | 467               | 16.0%  |
| 2019 | 2,097        | 418    | 313               | 12.2%  |

- In 2023, 13.3% of UK students admitted to Oxford were from the two groups with lowest progression to higher education (POLAR quintiles 1 and 2).

**Table 3.2: Areas of low progression to higher education: UK applications to Oxford, offers made and students admitted from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2, 2019–2023**

|      | APPLICATIONS | OFFERS | STUDENTS ADMITTED | POLAR 1 AND 2<br>PROPORTION OF<br>STUDENTS ADMITTED <sup>7</sup> |
|------|--------------|--------|-------------------|--|
| 2023 | 2,345        | 423    | 337               | 13.3%  |
| 2022 | 2,376        | 481    | 426               | 16.6%  |
| 2021 | 2,288        | 476    | 450               | 17.0%  |
| 2020 | 2,123        | 478    | 454               | 15.6%  |
| 2019 | 2,079        | 471    | 355               | 14.0%  |

- In 2023, 7.6% of UK students admitted to Oxford were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). This is an increase of 2.3 percentage points since 2021. (No FSM data is available for previous years.)

**Table 3.3: Free school meals: UK applications to Oxford, offers made and students admitted, relating to students eligible for Free school meals, 2021–2023**

|      | APPLICATIONS | OFFERS | STUDENTS ADMITTED | FSM ELIGIBLE<br>PROPORTION OF<br>STUDENTS ADMITTED <sup>8</sup> |
|------|--------------|--------|-------------------|---|
| 2023 | 984          | 228    | 178               | 7.6%  |
| 2022 | 792          | 186    | 159               | 7.3%  |
| 2021 | 770          | 129    | 121               | 5.3%  |

From UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD ANNUAL ADMISSIONS STATISTICAL REPORT | 2024

According to official admissions data from the University of Oxford, only about 14.4% of British undergraduates admitted in 2023 come from the two ACORN categories with the worst socioeconomic conditions, down from 15.5% in 2022 and 17.3% in 2021. Similarly, only 13.3% of students come from areas with the lowest participation rates (POLAR quintiles 1-2), and only 7.6% of students are eligible for free school meals. These data show that even with the implementation of outreach programs, students from poor families still account for a small proportion.

Agreeing to this admission mechanism will only further exacerbate this inequality. Every special treatment of donors will cause students who can only rely on hard work to lose their opportunities. If Oxford does this, other universities are likely to follow suit, leading to a change in the education system where academic achievement becomes meaningless and is replaced by money. This also changes the status of universities, turning them into hereditary privileges. As a world leader in education, Oxford has a responsibility to maintain fairness, not only for its community, but also for the global academic standards it helps define.

### 3. Reputation at Risk

Oxford's reputation is the university's most important asset in the world, and much of its reputation rests on its

image as a highly selective and merit-based university. But recent global rankings suggest that the image is in decline. More than 60% of UK universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, have slipped in the QS World University Rankings, according to a 2025 report by the Financial Times, reflecting concerns about the quality of UK higher education as competition for universities around the world intensifies.

| Current ranking | Previous ranking | University                            | Location    |
|-----------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1               | 1                | Massachusetts Institute of Technology | US          |
| 2               | 2                | Imperial College London               | UK          |
| 3               | 6                | Stanford University                   | US          |
| 4               | 3                | University of Oxford                  | UK          |
| 5               | 4                | Harvard University                    | US          |
| 6               | 5                | University of Cambridge               | UK          |
| 7               | 7                | ETH Zürich                            | Switzerland |
| 8               | 8                | National University of Singapore      | Singapore   |
| 9               | 9                | University College London             | UK          |
| 10              | 10               | California Institute of Technology    | US          |

Notably, Oxford fell from third to fourth, while Cambridge fell from fifth to sixth. Global rankings and reputation surveys consider not only research output, but also academic integrity and fairness. This highlights the intense competition and shows that the academic status of British universities is already under pressure. This trend could intensify dramatically if Oxford agrees to lower its admissions standards. Students around the world look to Oxford for a degree because it represents the students' own conditions and level. But now people are beginning to question whether wealth is your condition in the admissions process, and people's trust in Oxford is beginning to decline. Graduates may face more skepticism in the labor market, and international applicants may turn to institutions they believe still prioritize talent over money.

In a world where reputation and opportunity are linked, Oxford cannot signal that standards are being lowered. Rigorous selection is not just about fairness, but also about Oxford's reputation and value, and its leadership in the global academic community.

Reputation has a measurable impact on students. For students, Deloitte (2022) points out that "the payoff of a college degree is heavily dependent on an institution's reputation," and lower-ranked students generally have lower incomes after graduation and fewer job opportunities. For teachers, Clauzet et al. (2015) found that "a small set of elite universities supply a disproportionate number of faculty hires", which means that a decline in reputation may lead to a decline in the proportion of elite teachers recruited by Oxford University. Finally, a report by Forward Pathway points out that "university rankings strongly influence public and private investment decisions", and a decline in university reputation may also lead to less government funding and charity.

#### 4. The Case for Strategic Philanthropy

Of course, some argue that the money donated by donors to the university can benefit the university as a whole. Institutions like Oxford University require substantial funds to support their students. Private donations can support the school's construction, research, scholarships, and other aspects, all of which play an important role in the school.



In 2022, according to the Oxford University report, the school received more than 240 million pounds in donations, most of which were used by the school to build facilities and academic research. Those who support lowering the donor standard believe that if some poorly educated donors are admitted, the school can guarantee millions of dollars, which will help the entire student body.

In addition to funds, there are also some "soft advantages". Children of donor families can provide schools with global connections, entrepreneurial perspectives, and leadership opportunities. Their network may provide them with new opportunities. They can also improve their horizons and their own development through internships, mentorship, and international cooperation. Some supporters even believe that these students themselves can become future donors, thus continuing the cycle of donations and growth. From this perspective, lowering the bar for donors is not a bad thing, but a strategic investment. As long as the majority of admissions to a school are still based on merit, and the funds obtained allow the university to improve its infrastructure and the academic performance of its students, the trade-off seems worthwhile. Ultimately, it is a question of long-term interests and short-term fairness.

## 5. Financial Necessity vs. Moral Integrity

While charitable donations are undoubtedly beneficial, they cannot come at the expense of admissions integrity. The benefits that come with donations, such as advanced facilities and research funding, derive their legitimacy from the fairness of the institution that provides them. If the admission criteria do not depend on one's own ability and grades, but on the family background of the donor, then Oxford University is sending a clear signal: admission and degree can be bought with money. This contradicts the fairness and superb academic and educational standards of Oxford University. As a result, the institution may lose its excellence that could have attracted donors, partners, or opportunities.

| University of Oxford's finances: key statistics (£ billions) |                               |        |
|--|-------------------------------|--------|
|  | Financial year ending 31 July |        |
|  | 2024                          | 2023   |
| Total group income of the University (excluding colleges)    | 3.054                         | 2.829  |
| Total expenditure during the year <sup>[7]</sup>             | 2.263                         | 2.581  |
| <b>Key sources of income<sup>[7]</sup></b>                   |                               |        |
| Tuition fees and education contracts                         | 0.551                         | 0.5042 |
| Grants from funding bodies                                   | 0.2247                        | 0.2292 |
| Research grants and contracts                                | 0.7789                        | 0.789  |
| Publishing services  | 0.7468                        | 0.753  |
| Investment income  | 0.1972                        | 0.1805 |
| Donations and endowments                                     | 0.238                         | 0.1869 |
| <b>Assets at year end</b>                                    |                               |        |
| University endowments (excluding colleges)                   | 1.912                         | 1.678  |
| Total net assets <sup>[7]</sup>                              | 6.388                         | 5.385  |
| Total College endowments                                     | 6.796                         | 6.388  |
| Total college net assets <sup>[6]</sup>                      | 8.738                         | 8.176  |

Furthermore, the argument that Oxford's financial health is critically dependent on such admissions is questionable. According to the financial report of Oxford University, Oxford University has diverse and stable financial income, including tuition fees, research funds, and government support. According to the financial report of Oxford University in 2023-2024, the total income of Oxford University is as high as 3 billion pounds, but the endowment fund only accounts for 238 million pounds, accounting for only about 7.8% of the total amount. Most of the funds come from tuition fees and college investments. This data shows that Oxford University can continue to develop without violating fair admissions. Lowering the admissions standards for donors is not necessary.

## 6. Setting a Dangerous Precedent

Moreover, lowering the admissions standards for donors would set a dangerous precedent. If Oxford University follows this decision, it means that other universities will follow suit, and the entire status of higher education may become a transaction. Opportunities depend on wealth, not on each person's ability. Over time, it will have a negative impact on the entire university education, people will begin to question university qualifications, and undermine the essence of academic credibility. Adhering to strict selection standards is not only the moral right choice, but also vital to Oxford University, the entire academic community, and society. In recent years, the number of families who have been admitted to college through donations has been increasing, especially at various colleges. A report by National Affairs notes that "the wealthiest applicants routinely purchase what's best understood as an admissions fast pass." The 2019 Varsity Blues scandal and statistics from the University of California show that dozens of unqualified students from donor families were admitted to colleges. These incidents show that admissions through donations are no longer rare exceptions, but a growing trend, and have also raised serious concerns about the fairness and transparency of higher education.

## 7. Conclusion

As a world-renowned university, Oxford University is not only famous for its academic achievements but also for its students' hard work and fairness. Lowering the admission standards for the children of wealthy donors damages the image of Oxford University, making admissions less fair, and also endangers its reputation and social mobility. Although donations can indeed provide the university with better infrastructure and academic conditions, Oxford University's financial ability and moral responsibility enable Oxford University to have a good reputation and integrity while pursuing top education. Oxford University should refuse to use funds to exchange for scholarship. More broadly, this debate reflects the conflict between money and merit in modern education. In today's world of

increasing inequality, elite universities have the right to set an example with their social status. Merit-based admissions means that opportunities come from one's own efforts, not money and privilege

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