

'Jewel in the crown?' The Oxbridge College: its origin, character and future

Duncan Dormor, St John's College, Cambridge

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with a highly particular and unique, form of collegiate education – the Oxbridge College - and the claims made for it. I write as someone who is deeply invested in the system: having studied at one such College in Oxford, Magdalen, and worked at other, St John's College in Cambridge, the latter in a number of different roles which have ranged over a portfolio of pastoral, teaching and management responsibilities.

I have chosen the metaphor 'Jewel in the crown' to convey the sense of an outstanding centerpiece within something of great value, and especially of great symbolic value – as a way of opening up some of the questions and issues involved in thinking about, the 'Oxbridge model'.

1.1 Collegiality

So the Crown here is **collegiality**. **Collegiality is that quality that arises when colleagues work together united in a common purpose with mutual respect for one another's abilities in an egalitarian environment in which independence of thought is highly valued.** So, for example, fundamental to the operation of genuine collegiality are social forms that focus on and value what is said rather than who says it.

Collegiality, most obviously intellectual collegiality, is essential to the business of Universities, its oxygenating lifeblood; it is essential to both the education of students and the intellectual life of scholarship and research. Essential, but also costly in various ways as its nurture requires the creation of certain sorts of space; autonomy; and the fostering and

maintenance of particular kinds of relationship – in addition, of course, to financial commitment.

At its most fundamental level, collegiality requires the creation, nurture and flourishing of certain forms of society and sociality. This unavoidably, entails processes that anthropologists or sociologists might refer to as **the reproduction of moral persons**. For, whether we are conscious of it or not; whether we attend to it or not; our institutions and communities replicate certain values and virtues, and we therefore have the capacity to cultivate not just understanding, but ultimately wisdom and personal integrity.

Such high ideals are under constant threat from political and economic forces; that is from the State and the power of markets, and most immediately from instrumental, reductive and bureaucratic forms of thinking and practice.

Collegiality comes in many shapes and cultural forms, but it is the distinctiveness of the particular form of collegiality (alongside, obviously, the outstanding success of these two ancient English universities), which leads people to believe that the form of society involved might be paradigmatic, might embody a shining example of collegiality worthy of emulation by others. I hope I might be able to provide some insights into the history and nature of these forms of society, not least to help others decide whether such emulation is possible or indeed desirable.

1.2 Elitism

But crowns are also pretty strange things. Their function is primarily symbolic: Their purpose to denote authority sometimes thought of as sacred in its origin. Jewels and crowns speak, somewhat ambivalently, of status and prestige, of power and wealth. And indeed, the

expression ‘jewel in the crown’ has a colonial dimension: it has been commonly used as a description of India within the British Empire.

One of the key questions then to be asked of Oxbridge relates to the issue of elitism:

Of course, these are elite institutions and there is no denying their place in the intellectual firmament. Cambridge after all, has 92 Nobel laureates – significantly more than every nation except the US, UK and Germany... (probably less than Harvard, I suspect, though it depends how these things are counted!).

It is also very clearly a place that is at the heart of the production of the British elite in a range of areas well beyond scholarship and science. Not least politics: It is startling that even in the post-WWII era, ten of the fourteen Prime Ministers (in charge for 54 of the last 71 years) were Oxford-educated (and of the other four, three didn’t go to University). So, the political scene in Oxford and especially the student debating society, the Union, has played a key role in the national life.

Elitist institutions, of course, but the crux is: What sort of elites? What sorts of people enter into this world?

Does Oxbridge perpetuate rather narrow and **closed traditional elites** rooted in kinship (family), landownership or religious status accessed by birth or patronage, ‘a sort of superior intellectual finishing school for young gentlemen and ladies’ⁱ or **open, broad new elites** based on educational qualification, management or bureaucratic or distinctive cultural skills, and accessed by competitive means or ‘luck’.ⁱⁱ

1.3 Mythology

I am deeply conscious that the Oxbridge system is opaque to the outsider (and often fairly mysterious to the insider); that is a highly, and continually, mythologized place, of mist and magic, of ‘dreaming spires’. Such imaginings have doubtless both helped and hindered these universities. I want to try to get beneath all this. But that is particularly challenging when one is trying, at the same time, to argue for a **relationship between a quality of intellectual collegiality and the nature of the society that fosters it**. Especially, as what I think is essential is to get some grasp of what might be described as **the non-rational foundations of that society** that generate solidarity, a sense of belonging, of identity, of allegiance. What I am talking about here are traditions and rituals: those palpable, powerful realities that are not easily measured or talked about objectively.

For example: Both universities are often perceived as places possessed of an unchanging tradition. That is simply untrue. Both Universities and their constituent colleges are engaged in a continual process of re-invention: how could it be otherwise in cutting-edge global research universities? And even in the area of ritual and custom – traditions are invented and re-invented. Indeed, there is a clear insider understanding in Cambridge that a tradition exists when something has happened twice, sometimes just once, and certainly if it has happened three times, then we know ‘it has always been done like that’.

Throughout this lecture I will make illustrative reference to St John’s College in Cambridge as a case study.

2. The Collegiate University

Let me sketch out some of the key aspects of the nature of the two Universities of Oxford and Cambridge by way of setting the scene:

2.1 Ancient Universities

Oxford and Cambridge founded respectively in 1167 and 1209 are clearly among the oldest universities in Europe (though not as ancient as Bologna or Paris). And, for example in Cambridge, which has 31 colleges, the earliest Peterhouse dates from 1284 with half the colleges dating from before 1600. The roots of these institutions then **lie in the world of medieval Christendom**, well before the rise of nation-states and nationalism, as we know it. There were from the outset both **deeply local but broadly European**. They emerged from monastic foundations and quite quickly developed strong relationships with ecclesial and political authorities that gave such groups of scholars the right to a high degree of self-determination.

2.2 A public university in the Anglo-American tradition

Both universities are partly public funded and regulated by the UK Government, though the dynamics are clearly changing. They are both part of the Anglo-American University system which is unabashedly hierarchical and competitive, unlike the more regionally oriented approach of much of continental Europe.

2.3 Governance by scholars

A key aspect of such ancient universities down to the present (though significantly modified in the Twentieth century) has been that of the ideal of self-governance: That the Universities are run by a ‘general assembly of the dons or fellows’.ⁱⁱⁱ

The conviction that academics should play a central and direct part in their own governance, uncontaminated by others, has been seen as an essential aspect in the protection of intellectual freedom; of a piece with the equality of day-to-day working relationships that constitutes intellectual collegiality.

The same is true of Oxbridge colleges: In the smaller colleges, all significant decisions are made by the entire fellowship, as the Governing Body, with College Officers, (the key ones being Bursars and Senior Tutors) implementing those decisions. This model is impractical in the larger colleges where a modified version operates. As a consequence Heads of Colleges have very little actual power, they are in that sense closer to Chairs than CEOs.

2.4 Colleges

i) Autonomy

Colleges are perpetual institutions; they are separate legal entities with their own foundations and statutes. They own property and have endowments. Crucially their autonomy reaches into the nature of the core activity – teaching and research. In that sense, and this is key, for better or worse:

Oxbridge Colleges are NOT simply very up-market residential halls

Both Cambridge and Oxford are genuinely collegiate Universities. This is **the** most distinctive feature of these two ancient universities. There is then a complex web of relationships between the central aspects of the University and the colleges, and this dynamic permeates most aspects of the life of the two universities. Unsurprisingly there have been significant fluctuations over time in the balance of power, though the power and autonomy of the colleges in Oxford is, broadly speaking, greater than in Cambridge.

ii) Admission of Students

So for example, crucially Colleges interview and admit undergraduate students who are admitted subsequently as members of the University. On the other hand, the University accepts postgraduate students who then have to be accepted also by a College.

It is a similar story when one considers the senior members: Even the most distinguished of academics appointed by the University have to be elected to a college fellowship, that process is very far from being automatic. So to some degree, each college can be seen as a 'small university'.

iii) The supervision/tutorial system

In addition to lectures, seminars, lab work or language classes, at the heart of the Oxbridge system is small group teaching: Fellows meet students in small groups, usually 2-3 in the arts and humanities in hour-long slots to discuss particular topics, usually following the submission of an essay. This intense, face-to face focus is on the individual's learning, and especially their learning to study: to be an autonomous thinking person. It is in this context that the student is encouraged to engage, to enquire, to challenge, to defend an argument, to rethink; the Fellow may guide, correct, challenge. It is not about the passing on of information (that is what reading books or going to lectures is for), but about learning to think.

iv) Research

I will just touch on this point, as there is a good deal that could be said, but Colleges make a significant and distinctive investment to support individuals with their research through research fellowships and supportive grants, but perhaps more importantly through the daily business of living within a human-scale inter-disciplinary community of scholars.

3. Historical Sketch: A 'total institution' with a playing field

3.1 A 'total institution'

The origins of the Oxbridge model lie firmly with the medieval Church and with a monastic model in which people lived, ate, studied, relaxed and prayed together.

Historically, Colleges have been close to what might be described as a **total institution** (parallels include boarding schools, prisons, the army or indeed monasteries): That is, an all-encompassing world coming close to supplying all the needs individuals might have – food, a bed, shelter, a community, work, a cultural life, religious activity, sport and recreation. In effect, an alternative family, and family is still a word often used to describe College life.

Many of its occupants, students or junior members, pass through, but the senior members were permanent occupants. For them, in the place of the monastic 'brother' there was the 'fellow' (Bear in mind these have been all male institutions well into the Twentieth century). 'Fellow' implies equality, closeness, friendship - but also a certain separateness and dignity, what might be described as a 'form of **instituted friend**'.^{iv} Like other forms of total institution, ritual and oath/vow-taking at entry is important, and this remains the case. So, upon admission today, fellows still promise to uphold the college as a place of 'education, religion, learning and research'.

Recognising then the potential power of family and dynastic power to dominate, Cambridge retained an aspect of the monastic quality, in that for most of the university's history, fellows of Cambridge colleges were unmarried, and indeed they resigned their fellowships if they found a wife.

This historic pattern of a total institution is very important and remains influential in the life of colleges even today.

3.2. A Victorian Reformation

For most of its life, the colleges of Cambridge University were places that trained clergy for the Church of England, and indeed the overwhelming majority of Fellows were ordained priests in the Church of England, a ‘..school of theology with monastic overtones’.^v Although of course, it also trained courtiers and politicians and civil servants and took in a far number of the sons of the landed gentry. It should, of course, be added that a certain amount of scholarship also took place...

It is generally agreed the idea of the modern university as a place for the pursuit of higher learning can be traced to Wilhelm von Humbolt and the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810. However the German model was most successful when grafted into the world of Anglo-American education, which has dominated university education ever since.

i) Royal Commissions

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge were entirely re-shaped by fairly robust State intervention, namely two major Royal Commissions (in 1850s and 1870/1880s). This led to major reforms: the introduction of examinations; the setting up of new courses; and, in 1860, the removal of the bar on Fellows in Cambridge colleges being celibate and ordained in the Church of England. As a consequence, fellows became professional educators and scholars; religious tests were also removed; and the university and Colleges opened to men of all faiths and none.

Thus, Oxbridge colleges, ‘which had long functioned as a cross between agreeable clubs for the sons of the landed classes and seminaries for the Anglican Church, were [completely] reformed’.^{vi} So, for example in St John’s, the first lay Master (non-cleric) was elected to his post in 1908.

ii) The Public School Spirit and Sport

A second development with a major impact on the Oxbridge colleges was a spirit of reform that had taken hold of the large public schools – the dominant feeder institutions for the two universities. This reform rooted in what is often called ‘Muscular Christianity’ took a high view of participation in sport linking the development of Christian morality to physical fitness, and ‘manly’ character.^{vii} The promulgation of sport in the leading English Public Schools by reforming masters placed a particular emphasis on the character-forming aspect of such team sports.

And indeed, almost all of the major sports clubs and teams within the older colleges and the University were founded in the mid-nineteenth century, although the first boat club, that of St John’s, was actually founded in 1825. The University Boat race between the ancient universities has therefore been held each year since 1856 and the varsity (Rugby) match since 1872. As a result of this Victorian development in the words of one commentator:

‘playing fields came to be regarded as essential to a university education, a historically curious association that still looks quaintly Anglo-Saxon when viewed from Berlin or Paris.’^{viii}

Such athletic activity is of course still seen as an integral part of the University tradition within the Anglo-American world.

3.3 The rise of science

Until the mid-Victorian reforms, the colleges clearly held sway. Since then the wind has blown more favourably into the sails of the University. The steady infusion of government money direct to the Universities has been key in this, but it is also a development linked to the expansion of the sciences and the building of independent facilities. And in Cambridge natural sciences were developed fairly early on with a course from 1851, and St John's College, very much a pioneer, had its own Chemistry laboratory from 1853. This finally closed in 1914, by which time it had become abundantly clear that the facilities required for science needed to be provided centrally within the University.

Since the early twentieth century the dominance of the sciences and the increased sums of money involved have acted like a force of gravity taking the two universities progressively into a slightly different orbit – one with more obvious direct connections to the wider economy and industry. Though even here colleges have been to the fore creating science and innovation parks.

3.4 The changing student 1900 - 2000

The final point in this section relates to the nature of the student body: This clearly touches on the question I raised at the outset about elitism and the beneficiaries of an elite system, but it also raises questions around identity, allegiance and community life. Clearly the more homogenous a group of people are the fewer barriers there are likely to be to the creation of a coherent identity and sense of belonging. So a quick sketch:

In 1900, the overwhelming proportion of students in Oxbridge were undergraduates. In almost all the old colleges there was an expansion in numbers during the first half of the century but undergraduate numbers have been stable since WW II. On the other hand, graduate numbers increased rapidly in the postwar period. So in St John's the number of

graduates doubled from 50 in the late 1930s to 100 in 1960, to 200 in the early 1980s and there are now 350.^{ix} That is one significant change to the community.

Historically, the University only admitted men, and indeed the majority of Colleges only began to admit women from the 1970s onwards, St John's admitted its first women in 1981: A second very obviously important change.

Evidence of another change can be found by looking at professional destinations:

At the beginning of the period, a large proportion of the cohort enter the Church of England, indeed it is the largest single destination. By the 1920s this has changed completely, and over the course of the Twentieth century there is a significant diversification in occupation, and an increase in commercial activity and University work.

Two further developments in college admissions are worth noting from the 1960 onwards which move Oxbridge colleges firmly down the trajectory towards open elite recruitment.

These are:

- a) The removal of the hereditary faculty: Children of Johnians no longer received any preferential treatment; and,
- b) Preferential consideration given to sporting ability was also put aside.

Infringement of these principles in undergraduate recruitment today would now be regarded as scandalous.

Further, detailed analysis show clear shifts in parental occupation and social class composition in St John's, which are more widely observed within the two universities:^x An almost complete disappearance of the aristocracy from the ranks of Oxbridge students, and a very significant drop of those coming from private educational backgrounds. In addition, whilst Oxbridge graduates are clearly over-represented in the British elite, this is much more the case in the area of Education/Scholarship and Science and much less in other areas. In the conclusion of their study of elite formation and Oxbridge, Williams and Filippakou feel quite confident in saying that: 'Oxford and Cambridge are clearly no longer the finishing schools of an existing social elite'.^{xi}

The anthropologist and long-time Fellow of Kings, Alan Macfarlane echoes this assessment in a comment on the changing culture within Oxbridge:

'Talking to my students and observing their life I can see a huge change in all aspects of their life and particularly in the disappearance of much of the obvious snobbery and exclusivity'.^{xii}

One other obvious feature of this more meritocratic world is internationalization, most obvious at the postgraduate level, but also in the internationalization of the Senior Members. In St John's College, for example amongst the fellows there is an older, white British male dominance at the older ages and a much more international group of men and women at the younger end, in a fellowship of 150 there are around 30 different nationalities represented. Again this change has happened in last 30-40 years.

4. Inventing traditions to renew the common life

I now want to consider in more detail the nature of college life today as that of a social organization composed of 'members of a single society with a common loyalty',^{xiii} and how aspects of that life has been significantly reinvented over the last few decades. My theme is then the enhancement of common life in response to changing need, most especially, a more

diverse intake as Oxbridge colleges have become less insular and homogenous, and more outward looking. Nevertheless in the movement away from a culture dominated the all male public school and muscular Christianity, emergent practices and forms of sociality continue to be inspired by traditional core values, which in certain ways echo the deep past

In this section I will focus on the broadly descriptive, illustrated with reference to St John's, the next section will be more general and interpretative:

4.1 The residential community

So, Oxbridge colleges are residential. That is, characteristically undergraduates spend two or even all three of their years as students living in colleges: in courts, on staircases. They are not alone. Amongst them are the Senior members of the College – from young lecturers to distinguished Professors. They are their neighbours, those they bump into first thing in the morning, late at night; in the College bar or refectory. As individuals they may or may not talk or chat or interact, but the residential community certainly facilitates such informal interactions. A neighbor who sings for example will not go unnoticed, and in my experience it is appreciated...

Oxbridge colleges have worked hard to increase their capacity to house all their students during the twentieth century. In the 1930s in St John's the goal was to ensure that undergraduates spent two of three years in College with the rest living in 'digs' with landladies - now they are all accommodated in College. There have also been increased efforts to accommodate the growing number of postgraduates in the University during the post-war period and, more recently, efforts to assist the post-doctoral community.

4.2 Eating together and inventing traditions

Members of College eat together in two main locations, one is the refectory/ cafeteria, but there is also a formal hall every night, with gowns and a three-course meal. College encourages such traditional and highly sociable dining and actively keeps the costs down to encourage such gatherings.

In addition to such everyday informal interactions – there are formal dinners, grander occasions. In St John's, there is one for undergraduates in their first years; a 'half-way' hall for second years, and a final dinner for third years, there are parallel provisions for postgraduates. There are many, many other occasions in the social calendar revolving around food or celebration including the May Ball, garden parties, etc.

But, as I suggest, many such 'traditions' are in fact quite recent:

i) So for example, the Foundation Dinner at which all members of the foundation are present (the Master, Fellows and scholars – the most academically successful portion of the student body), sounds like it should have existed since the beginning of the College. In reality it was introduced in 1936. This was also the first dinner where the students and Fellows were actually distributed across tables rather than there being a separation of tables for senior and junior members.^{xiv}

ii) Lunch for senior members in the Combination Room

The long gallery known as the Combination Room in St John's dates from 1599. Today on most days there is a wonderful table running down its length. Every lunchtime Fellows and other senior academics dine at the Table, but there is a clear principle: you sit in the next seat available and engage with those around you. Despite the clear echoes of monastic principles

of equality and fraternity, this practice also only dates from the 1930s. Fellows had not come together at lunchtime in this way for centuries.

4.3 Clubs and Sports

In addition to these forms of sociability, colleges have academic societies for different subjects with visiting and homegrown speakers usually at evening gatherings accompanied by drink and sometimes food. Furthermore, subject specialists may gather their students for a late evening dessert – a post-dinner social occasion with cheese and fruit and drinks, but above all, as always, for conversation. Students welcome these activities not least because of the opportunity to engage with and get to know senior members.

Colleges have sports teams and musical activities and clubs pursuing all sorts of activities. All of these have some senior members involved with them formally as Senior Treasurers to ensure that all monetary transactions are above board, but this also provides a hook/excuse for deeper involvement. Here Senior and Junior members can come together who share an interest in hockey or chess or netball or astronomy, or wish to support the Women's society or the LGBT group or the Christian Union or the Chinese cultural society.

4.4: Anglican Choral music and 'Oxbridge Religion'

Christianity within Oxbridge has re-invented itself significantly in the Twentieth century. Colleges have become hot-houses of the Anglican Choral tradition, such that, for example, Cambridge now has the greatest concentration of elite choirs performing sacred music in the world,^{xv} and become a training ground for an extraordinary number and range of classical musicians. Television and radio broadcasts, especially from King's College, are an important part of the university's global brand. Christianity in Cambridge now overwhelmingly takes the popular and accessible form of choral evensong – people can wander in, little is demanded of

them, they listen to beautiful music and wander out (though the experience can of course be much more profound than that).

In terms of what might be called ‘College religion’, that is those rituals and symbolic moments that are an integral and important part of the College year, again, tradition is continually reinvented. Rites of passage are consciously marked: So, in St John’s we have very well-attended matriculation and graduation services set within acts of Christian worship – but this practice only dates to the 1990s. Such a college counterpoint to the University ‘entry and exit’ points is deeply valued and reaffirms the identity of the College. Religious activity extends to a wide range of other activities including the blessing of rowing boats and punts. Similarly, St John’s College has had scholars since 1511, but it was only five years ago that it created a public ceremony for students to become scholars – with a ritual in Chapel and a tea to which families are invited.

4.5 The ‘College Spirit’

In short, there is a common life shared by Senior and Junior members that extends beyond the subjects studied: So, inevitably, particular individuals, students or fellows, will be known to a large proportion of the College community as a whole. Certain members of staff will also be widely known and will know many of the students. The friendly porter is a key part of such a social ecology. Those who exemplify such friendliness are praised for exemplifying ‘the College spirit’ – and, indeed, those who do not, are quietly acknowledged as not participating in it, judged to be ‘takers not givers’.

There is then absolutely no doubt that in the creation of identity and a sense of solidarity, the college built on a human scale seeks to embed ‘a set of values, a morality... an invisible attitude to life’.^{xvi} Those values include: freedom from authority, dislike of hierarchy, the

admiration of pure intellectual skill, the disinterested pursuit of truth, and a spacious, speculative, untrammelled approach to life.^{xvii}

5. Collegiality and the enhancement of learning

How does a small multi-disciplinary collegiate context in which senior academics and students are thrown together enhance the learning experience?

The answer, I suggest, lies in an interesting mix of competition and cooperation within a community rooted in sentiment and a feeling of shared identity.

There are very few empirical studies of the relationship between the Oxbridge College experience and learning, but a paper by Keith Trigwell (2005) based on two separate studies, one qualitative, one quantitative, considers the experience in Oxford colleges and produces a number of findings which resonate strongly with my own observations and experiences.

Drawing in part on his study, I would like to suggest four related factors:

- a) A sense of allegiance;
- b) The experience of belonging it generates;
- c) Certain qualities within peer-to-peer learning; and
- d) The nature of the teacher-student relationship.

5.1 Allegiance

Trigwell strongly suggests that learning is enhanced by a motivating sense of allegiance. That is, students who take a pride in their college, its history and its current achievements have a sense of being part of something larger, of not letting the College down. That motivation is wrapped up in a feeling of being part of a tradition in which the example of others can be

evoked to motivate individuals to certain attitudes or practices. It can be a founding figure, in the case of St John's a clever and politically astute woman, Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509), or Bishop John Fisher whose conscience led him to a conflict with the notorious tyrant, King Henry 8th and the execution block, or the poet William Wordsworth or the campaigner for the abolition of the slave trade, William Wilberforce.

The example of historic alumni can be important in inspiring people, but as always, it is important to show how such people overcome particular challenges or difficulties. An example in St John's is Fred Sanger (1918 - 2013), who won two Nobel prizes in Chemistry, but struggled badly with mathematics, and was helped by a tutor to find his way into biochemistry; he also took longer over his undergraduate degree than usual and his first PhD topic didn't work out.

That sense of allegiance to a College is also further embedded by competition between colleges, more naturally in the sphere of extra-curricular activities than in direct forms of academic competition.

5.2 The experience of belonging

Allegiance is important as it helps to cement the idea that one belongs, and we all clearly need a sense of belonging to help us develop and flourish. We have a desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments, and the human scale of colleges allows for the development of friendships and leads to a reduction in isolation or loneliness. This in turn assists learning, as good quality relationships help motivate people to learn, and increase confidence, social competence and improve all-round well being.

5.3 Peer-to-peer learning

The third way in which learning is enhanced focuses on peer-to-peer learning. It is not terribly surprising that the Oxbridge system is very good at encouraging high levels of what is described as ‘engager behaviour’ in groups of students studying a common discipline. But as Trigwell demonstrates, and I know from personal experience, not only is there good interaction between students in the same year in the same subject, there are also good interactions between students in different years and the same subject, enhanced by informal mentoring processes.

One such informal mechanism in Oxbridge colleges is ‘parenting’: All new students have other current students who act as ‘College parents’ assisting them to settle in on arrival. Such informal mentoring often provides an induction into the culture of learning and, on occasion, insights into specific aspects of study (a good example lies in assisting first year medical students with the task of engaging with cadavers).

However, Trigwell also found that students engaged academically with students in other disciplines. Indeed nearly half (42.8%)^{xviii} of the Oxford students in his study claimed that they **often** engaged academically with students in other disciplines, and that they experienced this as being **significantly beneficial**. This is quite clear to me in my own context. It is perhaps most obvious when people are considering a change of subject part way through a degree, which is quite possible in the Cambridge system and often has a very positive outcome.

5.4 Teacher-student relationship

The final obvious factor to consider is the teacher-student relationship. Clearly a positive relationship with teachers and tutors plays an important role and it is one of the key factors

identified in good learning: it facilitates effort, commitment, motivation, satisfaction, engagement; deep learning; achievement and intellectual development. Whilst there are significant challenges in conceptualizing this, and methodological challenges in investigating the subject, two factors that do emerge from the literature as being of positive importance are:

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i). First, the **quality** of the **relationship** between student and teacher, (i.e. it is not just about interactions). That relationship can be seen to have two dimensions:

a) The **affective dimension**: that is the bond built between students and teachers which forms the basis for secure and positively experienced relationships marked by honesty, truth and respect. Teachers who care for their students, nurture their students' character, teach respectfully and try to promote student integration are - unsurprisingly - more effective.

b) The **supportive dimension**; that is the setting of clear expectations, marking work on time, answering e-mails etc.

ii). Second, that the quality of that relationship is primarily determined by 'out of classroom interactions', i.e. context is very important: When out-of-classroom interactions are limited and such encounters that take place are mainly or exclusively task-focused, students don't tend to approach teachers, even when they have an explicit pastoral role. There are a number of quite straightforward and very human reasons: they are uncertain whether lecturers are really interested in a relationship with them; they have the (doubtless accurate) impression that lecturers are under a lot of time pressure and don't want to disturb them; they are uncertain about the potential benefits of such a relationship; or they may fear a negative encounter.

Research suggests then that positive relationships are most successfully fostered only through informal interactions/settings.^{xx} **Approachability** is thus a key characteristic - knowing students' names, smiling, saying 'hi' on campus, staying after class to talk – all of these are key to the development of a good quality relationship between teacher and student. For obviously, the building of relationships, is as much about gestures, postures, and implicit messages as it is about more formal forms of communication. In all sorts of ways the Oxbridge college model is extremely well suited to building such relationships not least through shared participation in sports and music etc.

But this is perhaps especially crucial in the Oxbridge setting where because of its elite status, the mythology and the glitter, many arriving at Cambridge suffer from '**imposter syndrome**': the idea that everyone deserves to be there, except them, that it was an 'accident' that they 'got in'. Equally, some people may initially feel that the college is not theirs but really belongs to another more privileged social group. The successful integration and nurturing of students every year is, and remains, a fundamental piece of work.

6. Looking forward: Some concluding reflections

6.1. Nurturing the enquiring mind

In his short book, *What are Universities for?* Stefan Collini notes a curious paradox about universities today:

'Never before in human history have they been so numerous or so important, yet never before have they suffered from such a disabling lack of confidence and lack of identity.' (p. 3)

My first point then concerns the big, broad vision, and it applies to the sector as a whole. It involves a clear reassertion of what we are fundamentally about, namely enshrining the 'ungovernable play of the enquiring mind' and intellectual collegiality as a priority over and against the 'mercantilism of the intellect'.^{xxi} Markets and competitiveness and what one

might, in a derogatory fashion, describe as ‘bean-counting’, all have an important, but **subsidiary, supportive** role to play in what we do. To draw on the classical language of Max Weber, we must be concerned with **substantive rationality**, that is with decision-making that is ordered towards our **values** and the substance of what we do, rather than allowing ourselves to be completely swept along by **technical or bureaucratic rationality**, chasing funding streams and constantly measuring our impacts. There has to be more to the pursuit of intellectual endeavour, than, Collini again (in polemic vein): ‘the distracted, numbers-swamped, audit-crazed, grant-chasing life of most contemporary academic departments’.^{xxii}

6.2 Championing collegiality

From everything I have said above it is clear that I think Oxbridge has a particular role and duty to promote a vision for education addressed to the whole person within communities which operate on a human scale. So an environment that actively seeks to encourage the pursuit of a wide range of activities, that creates a rich human ecology with opportunities for music and sport and drama and a whole range of cultural pursuits, and which celebrates and takes pride in the success of all of these endeavours is important in itself. But it is also important because it is in the affirmation of these pursuits and in attending to the whole person that ultimately the most successful crucible for the business of education, scholarship and research is created.

A second part of that activity requires an outward, engaging approach to others: the promotion of networks and exchanges and a disposition of hospitality. And indeed, in my view, one of the most important activities within Oxbridge colleges is hosting visiting scholars – senior academics from a range of disciplines. From the very beginnings in the 12th century universities have been international in their orientation and such cooperation is essential. The community of scholarship does not by its nature easily recognize national or

institutional borders. So whilst there are caveats and necessary restrictions, the promotion of cooperation and trust between universities is essential to the future of scholarship and research. Obsessing over league table positions and rankings is not tremendously helpful for an educational institution.

6.3 The continual process of creative reinvention

Finally there is the ongoing challenge for Oxbridge colleges to maintain solidarity and to generate a sense of identity and belonging whilst at the same time continuing to diversify in terms of its intake. At the moment in Cambridge the postgraduate community is fairly international, the undergraduate population, however, is largely British. That will inevitably evolve presenting certain challenges. I think it is essential to the nature of colleges that students seek to engage and participate rather than stick in cliques or ethnic or religious groupings, but the greater the diversity of intake the greater the challenges to mutual understanding within a close residential community. Again a rich range of extra-curricular opportunities facilitates integration and belonging, but there is a continual challenge to college communities to creatively reinvent their traditions and their 'hidden curricula', as the need arises, and as they seek to attract students on a global basis who wish to walk where others have trod for 800 years or so.

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ⁱ Macfarlane p. 153.

ⁱⁱ See Williams and Filippakou for a discussion of universities and the formation of elites.

ⁱⁱⁱ Senior members, academics holding university or college teaching positions are called 'Fellows' or 'Dons'.

^{iv} See especially Macfarlane.

^v Miller p. 90

^{vi} Collini p. 28.

^{vii} See Watson, Weir and Friend for an account of this cultural development.

^{viii} Collini p. 29.

^{ix} Linehan p. 670.

^x See Hennessy.

^{xi} Williams and Filippakou p. 18.

^{xii} Macfarlane p. 129.

^{xiii} Boys-Smith p. 3.

^{xiv} Boys-Smith p. 64-65.

^{xv} See, for example: <http://www.sjchoir.co.uk/>

^{xvi} Macfarlane p. 144.

^{xvii} Rose and Ziman quoted in Macfarlane p. 147

^{xviii} Trigwell, 2005 p 245

^{xix} See for example Hagenauer and Volet (2014)

^{xx} Jaasma and Koper (1999)

^{xxi} Collini p 8, 17.

^{xxii} Collini p 19.