



Oxford University Student Union

Target Schools Review

Past and Present
Options for the Future

Discussion Memo

First published August 2007

*Revised October 2007 in light of discussions with University Access
Organisations, AimHigher, OUSU Exec and WomCam*

Executive Summary

Target Schools has a distinguished history, but has recently failed to operate effectively. Its original goals, to campaign for more effective widening participation work by the University, and to act independently to dispel myths about Oxford remain both valid and important. To help achieve these goals, a full evaluation by the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs) of current work has taken place. It makes the following recommendations:

Projects to continue and expand

- The Alternative Prospectus – but this should be sent alongside the official prospectus to all state schools annually.
- School Visiting Schemes – but moved to the summer, work with Cambridge University Student Union and with volunteers provided with increased training and resource support.

New Projects

- Mentoring – Returning OUSU Mentoring Scheme within Target Schools, and working with the University Museums, AimHigher and local Oxford schools to organise open days for students at local Oxford schools to raise their aspirations towards higher education.
- Interview Support Website – Website with lots of student profiles on interviews, with the aim of adding mock video interviews in future.

Projects to Change

- Target Schools Meetings – become a venue for discussions on admission policy and training.
- Working with JCRs – rather than relying on JCRs for volunteers, engage with them to support their own schemes, and use Target School meetings to facilitate coordination, training and sharing of best practice such as video conferencing.
- Regional Conferences – support the University Admissions Office by providing volunteers for Northern Ireland conferences, but not organise them directly. Campaign that these conferences are expanded to include other leading Universities.
- Open Days – work with the OUSU liberation campaigns to organise Open Days specially designed for minority groups, but no longer organise general Target School Open Days.
- Co-Chairs – recruit a larger number of co-chairs, each responsible for Target School work in a different region of the UK, but under the leadership of the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs).

Campaign Areas

- Greater coordination and cooperation between widening participation stakeholders within the University of Oxford and among other leading Universities, especially Cambridge.
- Increased work with teachers and careers advisors, especially recent graduates of Oxford University.
- Dedication of further resources to raising aspiration work from a much earlier age.

The Past

Founding Philosophy

Target Schools was established in 1982. Its purpose was to campaign to increase the number of Oxford applicants from the state sector. Non-application, not non-admission, was the problem to be addressed by the committee. Target Schools aimed to reach pupils and educators to disabuse them of popular myths and misinformation, with the belief that this would encourage applications from the state sector.

A Brief History

In Michaelmas Term of 1982 the OUSU Education Committee drew up lists of 'Target' Comprehensive schools that had never sent students to Oxford. In 1983 many of these schools were visited for the first time, with the volunteers being organised and briefed by the Education Committee. In 1984 the first Target Schools Chairman was appointed, and coordinated in Hilary Term five colleges to hold a joint open day for the first time, with 140 students from 'Target' Schools visiting. In 1985 the first Handbook and Teachers Guides were created and in 1988 Target Schools separated from Education Committee, receiving its own budget from OUSU and contributions from JCRs and even some SCR's (Christ Church SCR granted over £200). Funding shortages persisted and in 1994 a funding submission to the Joint Undergraduate Admissions Committee (JUAC) was accepted, granting Target Schools full funding because of the cheap PR for the university and excuse for their then inaction on admissions issues. The range of activities has grown since then with an expanded Visiting Scheme, Open Days and Regional Conferences, including an annual conference in Belfast starting in 2002 and a biannual Alternative Prospectus.

Historical Aims

From past material and records, Target Schools historical aims can be considered to be two fold:

1. Independent action and programs aimed at providing information to state school pupils and teachers to dispel myths about the University of Oxford.
2. Campaigning within the University of Oxford to encourage greater and more effective work on access and widening participation.

The Present

In 2006-2007 under the Target Schools banner students organised regional schools conferences in Northern Ireland and Dundee, a summer open day, a Women's Open Day organised by the Vice President (Women), and copies of the Alternative Prospectus and associated material (booking forms, teacher information) were sent to all state schools in the country. No records or evaluation of the events took place, although from personal experience of the summer open day, students who attended found it useful and enjoyable. The Alternative Prospectus has been rewritten as an edition suitable for the next two years.

Going into the new Academic Year, Target Schools has no appointed Co-Chairs, and is administratively in limbo. It is my personal impression that many of the current projects are not an especially effective use of resources, duplicating the work and projects of colleges and the Student Funding and Access Office. Target Schools seems to have lost sight of its campaigning work within the University and has failed to highlight gaps in University widening participation provision. In short, a new direction and purpose is needed to continue effective dispelling myths and ensuring that the widening participation agenda is implemented as effectively as possible.

The Future

This document evaluates current Target School schemes and sets out ideas for new projects. The primary motivations are that all these projects are in line with Target Schools historical aims, which I still believe continue to be both valid and important. The campaigning aim has been interpreted as attempts to plug important gaps in Widening Participation Project provision, with the aim of encouraging innovation and persuading the University to either finance or manage the projects where appropriate. Secondary considerations are their cost effectiveness and feasibility.

The Alternative Prospectus

This is a full colour, 200+ page guide to applying to Oxford, the subjects on offer, undergraduate colleges and student life, all from a student perspective. It is sent to all state schools annually and individual copies can be requested from OUSU by prospective applicants. The AP is the main publication covering the whole University, not just individual colleges, from a student perspective. Its honest account is successful at dispelling myths. The AP is currently produced bi-annually by a full time editor over the long vacation. The annual mailing requires a small team of volunteers to stuff envelopes each February. Currently, two years supply of the AP (around 8000 copies) costs approximately £8000, including the cost of hiring an editor. Mailing copies to approximately 2800 state schools is estimated to cost approximately £2500, including envelopes, teacher leaflet and booking form.

The Alternative Prospectus is a vital resource that, through its honest student perspective, is much more effective at dispelling myths than official university publications. Many Universities in addition to Oxford, for example Cambridge, Edinburgh, Bristol and Warwick, provide an alternative prospectus to communicate information about student life in their institutions. Sent annually to all state schools, it has a readership far greater than the number printed suggests.

Target Schools should continue to produce regular editions of the Alternative Prospectus and ensure they are sent annually to all state schools, and remain available for individual requests by students.

As a resource to give an honest account of student life, there seems no reason why the Alternative Prospectus cannot be distributed alongside the official University Prospectus. Target Schools seeks to raise applications from state schools and therefore should not

spend money sending the Alternative Prospectus to fee-paying schools. However, the information contained in the Alternative Prospectus is relevant for all students considering Oxford, even those in independent and public schools. It should be available to send to all students upon request (and receipt of money for postage). If the University is willing to finance the cost, the Alternative Prospectus should be sent to all UK schools alongside the official University of Oxford prospectus.

The Alternative Prospectus is currently available as a printed guide, or as a PDF file on the OUSU website. I will work to have an accompanying website to provide more up-to-date information, and seek to expand the number of profiles available. This can then be accessed by all students throughout the year and from any location. In addition, future editions of the Alternative Prospectus may wish to be published in different mediums, for example on DVD rather than in printed format.

School Visiting Scheme

For many years, students have volunteered to visit schools local to their homes during the Easter Vacation. Students give talks about life at Oxford, answer the questions of prospective applicants and encourage all who attend to think about applying. These visits have a record of being very successful in encouraging applications from all backgrounds as prospective applicants see are comforted to see “people like me” already at Oxford.

The Schools Visiting Scheme should remain a central part of Target Schools work. Target Schools is the only Widening Participation organisation in Oxford capable of finding so many student volunteers to organise so many school visits. In future, the scheme could be improved by greater training, in partnership with the Student Funding and Access Office, to ensure student volunteers have the correct information, information packs to accompany any talk (for example, a pre-prepared power point presentation), and consideration of whether a workshop or interactive discussion may be more effective. Cooperation with Cambridge University Student Union will also be beneficial as the two universities will not have to compete for time in schools.

The scheme has previously taken place at the end of Hilary term. Either in addition, or instead of, I recommend visits taking place at the end of Trinity term to coincide with the end of AS level exams. Following the end of exams, pressure in schools is substantially reduced, and teachers are more likely to be able to spare the time to allow pupils to hear a presentation about Oxford. If visits were aimed at being completed before the traditional college open days, prospective students who had never thought about Oxford, would still have opportunity to visit the University in person.

Regional Conferences

Target Schools began an annual set of conferences in Northern Ireland five years ago to highlight the lack of widening participation and recruitment work that occurred in the region. The conferences have tended to be very successful and popular events. However, attendance this year was much lower because of school visits undertaken by the University Schools Liaison Officer. Pembroke College is also planning to undertake work with schools in Northern Ireland.

With University and College bodies now focusing resources on the low application rates from Northern Ireland, the Target Schools campaign on this issue can be considered a success. The annual conferences are now though due a rethink. Currently they impose a very high administrative burden on the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs), and cost considerable sums of money for little real return (application rates from Northern Ireland have broadly stayed constant over the past five years).

I recommend not continuing the conferences in their traditional format this year. Instead, Target Schools should work with the Undergraduate Admissions Office, Pembroke College, Cambridge University and perhaps other Russell Group Institutions to organise a series of high profile, aspiration-raising conferences in Northern Ireland. This will allow us to invite a wider range of students to the conferences and encourage them to consider applying to the best Universities on the mainland. It will also allow the costs of the scheme to be shared. Such a conference would need students from Northern Ireland at Oxford (and other participating Universities) to discuss their experiences and demonstrate that it is possible for students to successfully leave Northern Ireland for their Higher Education.

I also recommend that the other annual regional conferences that use student volunteers travelling to the Northern Ireland conferences be discontinued. The resources saved from this scheme can be transferred to expanding the schools visiting scheme, and making this much more successful.

Target School Open Days

Target Schools ran a special open day in 9th week of Trinity term at Oriel College. The event was attended by about 40 students from three different schools. Although the students found the information and tours useful, many were returning to the annual College open days in 10th week.

Target School Open Days in their current format duplicate the work of College open days and provide very little additional benefit for the time and resources they consume. However, College open days are not always suitable venues for widening participation work. This is because they are designed as a means for students who are already interested in applying to Oxford finding out more about the University. Students from backgrounds without a history of higher education may also be put off by the large proportion of public school students that attend on these days. For the purposes of widening participation work, it is desirable to provide the students to whom we are reaching out with separate, tailor made opportunities to visit Oxford. This work is best done by the Schools Liaison officers within Colleges who have access to finance, and most importantly space, that Target Schools cannot provide. I recommend that Target Schools discontinues its annual open days. Instead it should help train student volunteers to participate in college organised widening participation events, and campaign for a coordinated strategy among colleges and the University to reach out to 'Target Schools' and invite them to special visits throughout the year.

Target School Meetings

Target Schools has traditionally met weekly in OUSU officers, normally to organise major events like the Northern Ireland conference. These meetings are attended by Target

School Co-Chairs, and in theory, JCR Access officers. The administrative discussions are of little relevance to many who attend the meetings, which may explain their consistent poor attendance.

I recommend that these meetings continue, but their purpose altered. Target Schools meetings should invite access officers and other interested students to fortnightly meetings. At these meetings, the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs) will invite speakers from across the University to inform those who attend about the work that is happening across the University and provide training. Discussions in the meetings can help coordinate the work between JCRs with the University and share best practice. The Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs) can also use the meetings as a venue to discuss admissions policy so that they can continue representing the common student view.

Interview Help Website

Interviews are perceived to be a barrier to applying and being successful in applying to Oxford by some groups. This is because of a perception that there are techniques or training that can be provided, which benefits those who receive this training. It seems likely that schools that have a long history and experience of applying to Oxford, and can dedicate resources to helping students practice in mock interviews, may help improve the performance of those students in interviews relative to students whose schools do not provide the same training.

With this in mind, Target Schools aims to create an interactive website dedicated to providing information and advice for students preparing for interviews. This will go live in early October to accompany the close of applications for Oxford. Initially it will contain advice from students about the application and interview process. Target Schools should aim to gather as many profiles as possible so that all subjects are covered. With careful preparation, embedded video clips of mock interviews for each division and the most popular subjects, in terms of number of applications could act as a useful resource. These will help demystify the interview process.

Due to the likely interest such a website will create, it is important that time and care is taken on these videos so that they cannot be used out of context. Working with the Oxford University Film Foundation and the University Admissions Office, I hope to test the videos in focus groups of school children to ensure they have a positive reaction, and do not scare the targeted audience. It is hoped progress and planning can be made over Michaelmas term, with filming and post-production conducted over Hilary Term 2008 so that the interview website is complete in time for the 2008 admissions process.

Though this website can only provide a partial guide to interviews at Oxford, it is hoped that the extra information and dynamic content will help students from all background prepare more effectively. This website will need to be monitored in November and December of each year, and if it proves successful, can be expanded to have a wider range of videos.

Mentoring

Mentoring takes place through face-to-face contact and email correspondence between University students and prospective applicants, with the former acting as a mentor for the latter. The University student can be expected to provide advice and encouragement on study related matters, with the aim of either helping the mentees application to Oxford or raise the mentees aspiration. Currently there is an OUSU Mentoring Scheme working with three local schools. This mentoring scheme has had little support from OUSU over the past three years, although it contributes to Target Schools goal of raising aspirations.

I propose integrating the Mentoring Scheme into the Target Schools Campaign. Subject to sufficient volunteers being found, its expansion would also allow more mentees to benefit. As part of the mentoring program, I suggest organising aspiration-raising open days for Oxfordshire students. These will be coordinated with Oxfordshire AimHigher, and involve a visit to a University Museum or Collection in the morning, lunch and a tour of Oxford and colleges with current students in the afternoon. These events will be designed to encourage bright students to consider working towards applying to Oxford, but also encouraging them to raise their aspirations towards higher education.

The University owns the license to an E-Mentoring administrative system that will allow any college or student group to organise new schemes. The system is centrally monitored, so users do not require CRB checks, and represents an underused resource. Mentors can expect to write one-to-two good length emails a week, and can typically mentor up to around three students.

Target Schools may wish to consider supporting JCRs setting up E-Mentoring schemes. The Campaign could provide training for E-Mentors and set up its own scheme for local Oxford schools. It is also worth exploring offering E-Mentoring during interview periods for target schools visited over the summer by students. The cost of administrating the E-Mentoring system is free, although there will be costs in training, advertising and perhaps incentives that may have to be provided as part of the recruitment. Any such schemes, especially those with local Oxford schools, should be coordinated with AimHigher and the Student Funding and Access Office.

Working with JCRs

Many JCRs now elect their own Access Reps who help organise own open days, visiting schemes, conferences and publications. This work is largely uncoordinated between JCRs, and its quality can vary year-to-year, and college-to-college. Target Schools, as a centrally based student Access organisation, can play a key role in sharing best practice, providing training and facilitating coordination. I recommend that Target Schools dedicates resources to support the work of JCRs, working with the Student Funding and Access Office to provide training, sharing ideas and resources on Alternative Prospectus, websites, e-mentoring, open days, conferences, visiting schemes and helping JCRs be innovative centres of Widening Participation schemes. I recommend that Target Schools produce a support guide for Access Reps, use the regular Target School meetings to facilitate training, coordination between JCRs and resource sharing, and encourage JCRs to adopt E-Mentoring programs.

Working with Liberation Campaigns and Minority Groups

Equal opportunities within Oxford for minority groups, for example students with disabilities, black and ethnic minority students, LGBT students, and women, should also extend to admission work. Target Schools is likely to benefit from coordinating with pre-existing liberation groups such as WomCam, LGBT Soc and the OUSU Liberation Campaigns. These groups already have contact with active students who fall into these minority groups, who will be able to provide advice on how current admission policy and resources adapt to their needs. Such active students are also role models for potential applicants, who are concerned that 'people like me' do not exist in Oxford. Target Schools can use its experience in widening participation to work in partnership with these groups to target minority groups across the country. Target Schools resources should be used to provide training and support to set up schemes, such as special open days, websites or e-mentoring schemes targeted at these groups. There already exists a successful Women's Open Day, which could potentially be a model for other Minority Group open days. Nonetheless, such open days need to be carefully designed and considered, so they do not duplicate the activities of other access groups. Target Schools may wish to explore encouraging a coordinated approach to the Women's; Black, Minority and Ethnic Students; and Students with Disabilities Open Days, so that they occur on the same day if not in the same locations. This will have the benefit of easing the administrative burdens within schools of supporting students attend additional open days, and allow students from within these groups to travel to Oxford together. The three open days should be run and advertised separately. Target Schools should also work with these groups to provide year round support, through websites and e-mentoring projects.

Admissions Research and Evaluation

As one of the main student led widening participation groups, Target Schools is an excellent forum for discussion on current admissions policy. Target Schools meetings and working groups can be established to allow interested students to take a detailed look at issues surrounding admission policies and practices, research student opinion and make recommendations to OUSU Council. This will help the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs), along with other student representatives, to represent what students actually think on admissions issues, rather than what they believe students think. Target Schools, with a large list of volunteers has access to a pool of relatively representative students, who are likely to be willing to offer opinions in surveys for research purposes. Such surveys may focus on what encouraged students to apply to Oxford and the barriers they had to overcome, to help focus the information provided to potential applicants to ensure that it remains relevant. Such work is very important, and evaluations of Target Schools practices and the information we provide should be conducted on an annual basis to ensure that it remains up to date and as effective as possible. However, the administrative burden of large scale research is not appropriate for students or the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs). As work on what encourages students to apply to Oxford and the barriers they overcome is relevant to all widening participation organisations, Target Schools should campaign for this research to be conducted centrally if it is not done so already and shared amongst all organisations.

Video Conferencing

Current students do not have to visit schools, or prospective applicants visit Oxford, for there to be interaction and dialogue between these groups. Video Conferencing, where it exists, represents a cheap and effective way to host discussions between current and potential students so that honest discussions which dispel myths can take place. Such discussions, although without the personal contact, represent a cost and time effective way of reaching out to large groups of students year round, where facilities exist. Target Schools should campaign for greater use of this resource to be used at a College and University level, and consider using video conferencing to beam into schools not visited as part of the School Visiting scheme. Video Conferencing could also be used for other purposes: teacher training and discussions, interview training, aspiration raising and so on. Target Schools should campaign that modern technology be used to its full potential, and encourage greater use of this resource where it does exist.

Working with other Stakeholders

There are many different schemes, departments and colleges supporting the widening participation agenda within the University. From a Target Schools perspective, their work seems largely uncoordinated which is likely to lead resources being used at less than their potential due to duplication, and large areas of the country missing comprehensive coverage. Target Schools should campaign for greater coordination and dialogue amongst University organisations. This is not just to avoid duplicating resources and ensuring comprehensive colleges, but to encourage greater dialogue to share best practice, volunteers and training resources. Where possible, a greater awareness between different stakeholders will benefit potential applicants, who may be able to be directed towards different schemes and groups, so that they can find all the information they need to complete applications to Oxford in a manner that suits them best. This is not a recommendation for increased centralisation. Different groups have different strengths and comparative advantages. This should be reflected in the work they conduct; for example, Target Schools is able to organise a very large number of temporary student volunteers, which is why it is the group best placed to coordinate a large scale school visiting scheme. I recommend that Target Schools should practice what it preaches, and avoid duplicating projects and schemes already run by other organisations. It should also be willing and open to share its resources and volunteers, to ensure that it is the prospective students needs that are always put first and foremost.

Working with other Universities

Oxford is a world class University, but is not suitable for all students, whether through not offering the desired course or the style of learning appropriate for an individual. When visiting schools students should be honest about this fact, but as part of a goal to raise aspirations, encourage prospective applicants to consider other leading Universities in the UK. Time within schools, with pressured examination deadlines, is a precious commodities and Oxford should not compete with other universities for access to students. Instead, Target Schools should campaign for greater coordination with Cambridge in school visits and conferences, along with other leading UK universities, for example Russell Group institutions. Target Schools should also consider working with other student led widening participation groups at other Universities, especially Cambridge, to learn from their ideas

and reach as many students as effectively as possible. This is especially true for large conferences, such as those that take place in Northern Ireland.

Raising Aspirations

By the time many students reach A-Levels, their chances of successfully applying to Oxford is likely to have been decided. This is because they have underperformed at GCSEs due to a lack of motivation or aspiration, or have chosen A-Level subjects inappropriate for courses they may consider studying at Oxford. We must therefore reach these students at a much earlier age, encouraging them to achieve their full potential at all times, and help them make Oxford a realistic future goal. Raising aspiration work is therefore vitally important, and Target Schools should campaign for further resources to be dedicated to such programs. To highlight the lack of current provision, Target Schools should run local open days for Oxford schools, and encourage JCRs to set up their own schemes, especially E-Mentoring schemes with younger students. Raising aspirations should never be just for Oxford however, as the University may not be appropriate for all students. When conducting raising aspiration work, we should also highlight the wealth of opportunities available at other higher education institutions, and not measure our success solely by the increased number of applicants to Oxford.

Working with Teachers and Careers Advisors

One of the most effective investments in widening participation work is altering the perceptions held by some teachers and careers advisors about whether Oxford is a suitable University for their students. Rather than needing to visit schools every year to meet prospective applicants to alter their perceptions, by persuading teachers and careers advisors that Oxford is a realistic option for their students, they can be year-round ambassadors on our behalf. Target Schools currently provides a small guide offering advice to teachers in helping their students apply. This can be expanded and placed online so it is accessible all year round. Teachers are however likely to be best served by advice from the Student Funding and Access Office, and Oxford academics who can offer suggestions as to how their students should be prepared for interviews. Many Oxford graduates also leave Oxford for careers in teaching. Having direct experience of the benefits of an Oxford degree, these graduates are ideal ambassadors and continued contact should be encouraged. Though Target Schools is not able to provide this support, it should campaign for the University to focus its resources on projects that build links with teachers and careers advisors, especially those who are former Oxford graduates.

Target School Co-Chairs

Target School has typically been run by the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs), with the help from three to five students, appointed every year as campaign co-chairs. These students are meant to take a leadership role within the scheme, with overall responsibility, leadership and administrative support being provided by the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs). The success of each years campaign has depended on the enthusiasm of these co-chairs, and the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs) can find themselves in a difficult position where they have no effective co-chairs to support, and Target Schools work is not completed.

I recommend a change to the structure of the Target School leadership to make the scheme more effective. Elected by the whole student body, the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs) should continue to take a leadership role within Target Schools, running the campaign as a committee with the help of the OUSU part-time executive officer for Admissions and appointed co-chairs who are responsible for individual schemes. The primary work of Target Schools in the forthcoming year will be the school visiting scheme and the local school aspiration visits. Therefore I recommend appointing regional co-chairs responsible for recruiting, leading, training and administrating volunteers who are visiting schools in their area. These co-chairs will be recruited from the more interested volunteers from Freshers Fair. I recommend that there should be ten co-chairs, one each for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, North East, North West, Midlands, South East, South West, London and Oxford, the last to coordinate the Oxford Aspiration visits. Responsibility for other schemes can be divided between the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs), Admissions Officer and regional co-chairs.

Conclusions

Target Schools has many exciting projects which it can concentrate its resources and volunteers enthusiasm over the coming year. The primary goals should be a successful schools visiting scheme and aspiration days for local schools. Ideally, these should be run and led by volunteer co-chairs, with the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs) providing support. Other schemes, especially those increasing the range of information available and supporting JCRs, can be facilitated by the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs), working alongside the OUSU Admissions Officer. Whatever projects Target Schools decides to proceed with, it must priorities improving its cooperation with other widening participation organisations, so that the needs of the prospective applicant are always at the forefront of our efforts. There is still much work to be done in encouraging wider participation in the higher education sector, and Oxford particularly. Though the complete dispelling of myths may be a near impossible goal, by adopting the suggestions contained within this report, I hope that Target Schools will be working much more effectively in the future.