



Freshers' Fair 2007

Report to OUSU Council

Michaelmas 2007

Sam McGeever

I — Introduction

1.1.1 Freshers' Fair 2007 was a great success. It saw record levels of involvement, with more student stalls than ever before, as well as great community involvement, with a presence from many organisations that had never previously been represented.

1.1.2 Initial feedback from stallholders is very positive, and it seems that the innovations at this year's Fair year helped make the event run more smoothly for everybody. For the first time ever, statistics have been collected showing how many students actually attended, and e-mail addresses were collected from all first-year students. The OUSU stall took up a more prominent position than it has in previous years, and a strong presence from members of the Sabbatical Team made visitors to the Fair feel welcome.

2 — Appointments and Initial Process

2.1 Fair Organiser

2.1.1 The Freshers' Fair Organiser, Sam McGeever (Hertford), and the Fair Organiser's Assistant, Justine Ramsden (Worcester) by the outgoing OUSU Business Manager.

2.2 Senior Stewards

2.2.1 It was decided that given the time commitment involved with being a Senior Steward, this would be a paid role. Applications were invited and Nick Edwards (Oriel), Rose Goddard (Somerville) and Tom Rackham (Wadham) were appointed in mid-September.

Recommendation 1 Senior Stewards should continue to be recruited to work for all of 0th week.

2.3 Initial Meetings

2.3.1 A meeting was held between the Fair Organiser, the OUSU Business Manager, Vice-President (Finance) and President (last year's Organiser), and the Exam Schools, which was a very useful introduction to the way the Fair works. Maintaining close contact with Exam Schools staff throughout is vital to the success of the Fair.

2.4 Long Vacation

2.4.1 It is not necessary for the Organiser to be in Oxford for all of the Long Vacation, but there were often occasions when enquiries from stallholders required a rapid response. This year, the data relating to these queries was very inaccessible (see §3.2 below), which meant that it was impossible to provide an adequate response to enquiries for several months. This problem was exacerbated by the absence of many of the General Office staff during the Long Vacation.

2.4.2 The resultant *ad hoc* methods of checking records led to confusion and a poor level of service to some stallholders. In particular, those who wished to modify their booking were affected by the lack of access to booking data.

Recommendation 2 Ensure that there is somebody available in the OUSU Office who knows enough about the Fair to be able to handle basic enquiries by phone or in person, and ensure that there is a proper system in place for handling queries. Both of these measures need to last from the middle of Trinity term through until the event itself.

3 — Stallholder Booking

3.1 Online Booking

3.1.1 Stallholders were able to book their stalls at www.oxfordhandbook.com from fifth week of Trinity Term. Taking bookings online is an improvement on paper-based reservations and presented few problems for the majority of stallholders, but the system used was designed several years ago and is now out-of-date.

3.1.2 In particular, it proved impossible to update the site to collect new pieces of data, or to cancel the automated confirmation e-mails that contained text referring to previous years' events. No instructions were provided to the Organiser about how to access the data, but it later transpired that the files containing the data were available on a public part of the website.

3.1.3 Having the system on a website that was not part of the regular www.ousu.org domain also caused confusion, particularly for external stallholders. The fact that much of the content at www.oxfordhandbook.com is also outdated did not make the organisation of the event look very professional.

Recommendation 3 The online reservation system needs to be completely redesigned, and needs to be extensible so that future Organisers can modify it where necessary.

3.2 Reservations Database

3.2.1 A custom-built database, *FairSys*, dating from the same era as the website, also exists, and is also unsuitable. No training was provided in its use, and so a series of other spreadsheets were used. These were not particularly suitable for use in an environment where several people needed to be able to access the data, often simultaneously, and this led to there being inconsistencies in the data.

Recommendation 4 Ensure that the data produced by the new system created in Recommendation 3 is in a format that is (a) remotely accessible (see §2.4 above); and (b) suitable for collaboration.

3.3 Pricing

3.3.1 The same prices as last year were held for stalls. For reference, they were:

3.3.2	Number of Desks	Price
	1	£20
	2	£85
	3	£120
	4	£300

3.3.3 Last year, it was suggested that some of the income from four-desk stalls be used to cross-subsidise a decrease in the cost of two-desk stalls, allowing more organisations to take these. However, this year's Fair was very close to capacity and if substantial numbers of stallholders had wanted to upgrade to two desks then there would not have been space.

Recommendation 5 Continue using the current price structure, making adjustment for inflation where necessary.

3.4 Late Reservation Surcharge

3.4.1 Implementing Recommendation 9 from the report into Freshers' Fair 2006, a surcharge of £10 was introduced to incentivise prompt booking, and anecdotal evidence suggests that it did reduce the number of late bookings received.

3.4.2 However, there was considerable confusion in the General Office about when the cut-off date was, meaning that some late bookings were not charged at the increased rate.

Recommendation 6 Continue to charge a surcharge for late bookings to reflect the administrative burden involved in processing them, but make sure that the deadline is very clear.

3.5 Charities

3.5.1 Once again, the question of whether or not it was appropriate to charge charities for stalls was raised. It was felt that the cost of desk at £20 was not prohibitively expensive for all but the smallest of organisations. In consultation with the Vice-President (Charity & Community), the fee for a small number of locally-based charities was waived. All other charitable organisations paid the regular rates.

3.6 University Departments

3.6.1 There was a certain amount of confusion about whose responsibility it was to take reservations for stalls from other departments of the University (e.g., OUCS, the International Office).

3.6.2 In practice, this was straightforward to resolve because most of these organisations are very experienced at the Fair, but in future care needs to be taken as it is important that OUSU maintains good relations with them.

Recommendation 7 Decide whether University Department stalls should be arranged by the Business Manager or the Fair Organiser.

3.7 Communication with stallholders in the run-up to the event

3.7.1 The most useful method of getting in touch with stallholders was by e-mail. A considerable amount of information was placed on the OUSU website, to which many enquiries were referred. This went a long way to reducing the administrative burden of handling enquiries.

Recommendation 8 Continue to make use of the OUSU website as a resource for disseminating information about the Fair.

3.8 Stallholder Regulations

3.8.1 The *Stallholder Regulations* used were those from previous years and were published before this year's Organiser had a chance to examine them. While this did not cause any major problems, it would be wise to review this document before next year's Fair.

Recommendation 9 Review the Stallholder Regulations annually.

3.9 Payments

3.9.1 Cheques from stallholders were again processed by the General Office staff, which was a useful practice which should be continued.

4 — Preparation for the Fair

4.1 Layout

4.1.1 The only copies of the layout of desks in the Exam Schools were on paper and dated back to 2005. New plans were drawn up, which allowed slightly more space to be found in some rooms. Having digital copies of the plans was also an advantage as it allowed detailed maps to be prepared for Stewards, stallholders, and others

Designing the layout of the stalls in the Fair was a very time-consuming process. In particular, it was difficult to know how much space was available as commercial stallholders were not confirmed until the last minute.

4.1.2 Some stallholders complained that they felt like they received less attention in rooms downstairs. In part this is due to perceptions: the North and South Schools are bigger and more crowded, so *feel* busier, but there is an extent to which Rooms 6, 10, 11, and in particular 12, all of which are '*cul-de-sacs*' on the route through the Fair.

4.1.3 Unfortunately, space at the Fair is very limited, and with the number of stallholders, the choice is either to reduce the number of desks on several stalls to use fewer of these rooms, or to have some stalls in less optimal positions. Although it may not be much comfort to current stallholders, rotating the organisations in these less favourable locations from year-to-year might be a fair solution.

4.1.4 However the problem of having limited space is resolved, a serious review of whether or not Room 12 is suitable for the Fair should be considered.

Recommendation 10 Consider ways of avoiding using Room 12.

Recommendation 11 Pay close attention to the number of stalls to avoid over-filling the Exam Schools.

4.1.5 The layout information was sent to the Exam Schools at the latest possible date as efforts were being made to accommodate every single stallholder, but this caused some problems for them.

Recommendation 12 Ensure that the Exam Schools receive the plans of the different rooms in a timely fashion.

4.2 Final Confirmations

4.2.1 Each stall was asked to provide a named contact for the Fair, who received an e-mail containing final details of their reservation. There were some problems with organisations not realising the importance of choosing an available contact person, which is something that might be made clearer in earlier communications.

Recommendation 13 Impress upon Stallholders the importance of their Stallholder Contact to be available, and remind them that this does not necessarily have to be their President or Secretary.

4.2.2 E-mailing confirmations was very useful as it meant that the twelve or so stalls with which there was a problem (incorrect number of desks, missing payment and so on) promptly identified themselves.

4.2.3 Arrangements were made with the University Messenger Service to dispatch paper confirmations to those organisations whose stallholder contacts had addresses in Oxford Colleges and Departments. This was found to be helpful to those who had not received their e-mail confirmation, but in the future, it would be desirable to move to an entirely paper-free reservation process.

Recommendation 14 Continue to improve personalised e-mails to stallholders so that paper-based confirmations can be avoided.

4.3 Booking IDs

4.3.1 Each stall was given a Booking ID. This was very useful as several organisations have similar names or are known informally by different names (e.g., 'OU Cricket (Mens)' and 'Mens' Blues Cricket' are the same stall). The ID sped up handling enquiries as it allowed the relevant information to be found quickly. It also sped up the check-in process for stallholders on set-up day.

Recommendation 15 Expand the use of numeric Booking IDs so that stallholders are aware of them sooner.

4.4 Set-up Slots

4.4.1 At the recommendation of last year's Organiser, stallholders were invited to set up in specific hour-long slots, rather than opening the Exam Schools for a much longer drop-in period.

4.4.2 Slots were confirmed to stallholders in their Individual Confirmations (see §4.2 above) and arranged so that adjacent stalls were not setting up at the same time, which made the process quicker and easier in the North and South Schools in particular.

4.4.3 Only a very small minority of stalls requested an alternative slot and this was easily arranged, although it is something that in general should be discouraged.

Recommendation 16 Continue to divide up the set-up period so that adjacent stalls set up at different times.

4.5 Literature

4.5.1 Again at the recommendation of last year's Organiser, stallholders were not asked to submit printed materials that they intended to distribute for vetting for the first time this year.

4.5.2 Instead, they were asked to leave all literature at the stalls for inspection before the Fair opened, and all stallholders were invited to submit any material that they thought might have been in breach of the Regulations. This was a sensible policy as, in addition to saving a good deal of time, it meant that those stallholders whose literature was potentially in breach were able to receive guidance in good time.

Recommendation 17 Do not ask for literature to be submitted for vetting in advance, but leave the possibility open for those stallholders who request guidance.

4.6 Freshers' Packs

4.6.1 This year the production of the Freshers' Packs was entirely outsourced, so the finished packs, consisting of branded carriers with the OUSU logo on one side and the Fair logo on the other containing copies of the *Oxford Handbook*, the *Survival Guide* and various other items arrived on site complete. This was a vast improvement on collating these packs by hand.

4.7 Stallholder Passes

4.7.1 As with last year, generic stallholder passes were produced with no mention of the stall that they were issued for. There was no system of keeping track of lost passes, so there were certain occasions on which duplicate passes were issued. There is no suggestion that anybody attempted to gain access to the Fair with malicious intent, but because the passes were generic there is a feeling that some stallholders were careless with

them. Others may simply have been trying to get more people in to run their stall, something which must be prevented for safety reasons.

4.7.2 A system of passes that showed the name of the stall so that it would be impossible for stallholders to obtain extra passes by claiming to have lost theirs would be more preferable.

Recommendation 18 Investigate the possibility of reintroducing passes that show the name of the stall, potentially along with a system for logging lost and stolen passes.

5 — Ticketing

5.1 Ticket Distribution

5.1.1 Initial contact with College administrators was made by the General Office Manager. This proved successful, as OUSU already had details of the appropriate contacts in each College, and relieved the Organiser's workload.

5.1.2 Unfortunately, as mentioned at §3.2 above, the General Office staff were away for most of the Long Vacation, and there were several problems about where the relevant information was stored.

5.1.3 Tickets were distributed to College administrators in the internal post in the week before the Fair with a manifest confirming the number of tickets for incoming undergraduate, postgraduate and visiting students, as well as an invoice where necessary.

5.1.4 However, it seems that communication within some Colleges was poor, leading to a lot of enquiries from concerned Common Room Presidents and Freshers' Week Committee reps to whom the tickets had not been passed on. This system needs to be improved on in future years, as part of a review of the ticketing structure for the whole event (see below).

Recommendation 19 Either find contact details for the relevant individual in each College and distribute the tickets directly to them, or make it clear to Colleges that the tickets must be passed on to the relevant person in good time.

5.2 Timetable Clashes

5.2.1 There were a lot of problems with Colleges reserving tickets in slots that not all of their students could attend. In the case of large groups, such as incoming PCGE students, liaison between the Organiser, the Vice-President (Graduates) and the relevant Department allowed for alternative arrangements to be put in place, but in other cases, *ad hoc* arrangements had to be made at the discretion of the Stewards on the gate.

5.2.2 Attempting to make individual arrangements for every single irregularity was too time-consuming to be plausible, so Stewards working at the gate were asked to use their discretion. Obviously, turning genuine Freshers away from the event is unacceptable, but a balance must also be struck which allows the event to remain safe. This problem was illustrated when one College gave all of its JCR Freshers the wrong session time, and over one hundred students turned up at once displacing those already in the queue with the right type of ticket.

5.2.3 Finally, given the information in §8 below, it seems that some students do not attend at all, which is something that needs to be investigated.

Recommendation 20 Impress upon Colleges the importance of not double-booking Freshers' Fair with other activities during 0th week. Consider investigating alternative arrangements for ticketing.

6 — Stewarding

6.1 Senior Stewards

6.1.1 As mentioned at §2.2, Senior Stewards were appointed in mid-September, and were each responsible for one of the main areas of the venue (the downstairs rooms, and the North and South Writing Schools).

6.1.2 In reality, all three Senior Stewards often worked outside of their own area, but at times it was very useful to have a named individual in charge of each area.

6.2 Volunteer Stewards

6.2.1 There was a team of over one hundred Volunteer Stewards, with up to around 20 stewards working at the same time. These were recruited via e-mails to Common Rooms, the OUSU mailing list and to stallholders who already had enough members to run their own stall.

6.2.2 Volunteer Stewards were invited to a briefing on site with staff from the Exam Schools, and were asked to confirm their shifts. During the Fair, a system of regularly briefing and de-briefing Stewards at the beginning and end of their shifts was implemented, which greatly improved their knowledge of procedures.

6.2.3 The vast majority of Volunteer Stewards were very dedicated and did their best to help to the good running of the Fair. Inevitably, there was a very small number of Volunteer Stewards whose behaviour was problematic, but there is little that can be done to avoid this.

7 — Data Collection

7.1.1 One addition to this year's Fair was the collection of the e-mail addresses of visitors to the Fair at the request of OUSU. This was to ensure that mailings could be sent to all freshers and those returning students who registered at ReFreshers' Fair.

7.1.2 The small marquee at the entrance to the Fair contained eight computers which ran a custom-designed piece of software which invited students to give their name and College, before proposing their most likely Herald e-mail address. The student then had the opportunity to either accept the suggestion, or make a correction.

7.1.3 The system worked very well save for a few problems. Firstly, names containing punctuation (e.g., O'Reilly, Smith-Jones) were not well catered for and it is probable that there are several inconsistencies in the data of this kind. Secondly, on one occasion the Fair was opened before the systems were ready to accept new input from students, which resulted in a temporary re-closure of the gate.

7.1.4 As this is the first part of the Fair that students visited, attempts were made to make it a welcoming space. However, not all of the Volunteer Stewards were as well-informed as

they could have been about the event or OUSU in general. In the future, it would be useful to carefully select the front-line staff who welcome people to the Fair.

Recommendation 21 If data is to be collected in the same way in future years, consider carefully the placement of this exercise. If it is to be at the start of the route through the Fair, ensure the environment is suitably welcoming.

8 — The Event Itself

8.1 Queueing and Flow

8.1.1 The same route through the Exam Schools that has been used for the past several years was employed, with more signage to help guide students at key points. This obviated the need for some stewards to work directing students and freed them up for more important roles.

8.1.2 Two 'Information Points' were installed, one on the landing between North and South Schools, and another downstairs, which proved very popular with students. They had detailed maps of the event, lists of where all of the stalls were located and other useful information. This also meant that all other stewards could refer students to these points, rather than carrying all of the documentation with them.

Recommendation 22 Continue to have Information Points at key locations.

9 — Attendance at the Fair

9.1.1 For the first time this year, actual attendance at the Fair was monitored. This was done by using a clicker to count the number of people passing the gate and by checking the number of people who registered their e-mail address.

9.1.2 The attendance data is summarised below:

Session	Tickets Distributed	Entries	Percentage Attendance
Wednesday AM	1217	744	61.13%
Wednesday PM	2031	1458	71.76%
Thursday AM	2347	1549	66.66%
Thursday PM	1899	1496	77.83%
Friday	n/a	1851	n/a

9.1.3 On average, this means that only around two-thirds of the Freshers that were expected to visit the Fair did so. Information about whether or not students visited with the correct ticket was not recorded, so it is not clear whether this is a problem that affects some Colleges more than others.

9.1.4 This is very concerning because it means that roughly 30% of incoming students are missing out on Freshers' Fair. There are also implications for the organisation of the event itself, because at times the Exam Schools were very full, despite not all of those who were expected actually attending.

Recommendation 23 Investigate why attendance is not as high as expected and take appropriate action.

10 — After The Event

10.1 Exit Checking

10.1.1 A new system was designed to ensure that egress from the Exam Schools was rapid and that no damage was left. Each stall was given a personalised Exit Checking Form that was signed by a Steward when they were satisfied that the desks used were clear and that no rubbish was left in the immediate vicinity of the stall. Stallholders then presented their signed form as they left the Exam Schools.

10.1.2 This system was a highly efficient way of incentivising organisations to leave their stall in an acceptable state, and the number of abandoned stalls was very low. It also means that a paper record documenting the state of the stalls at the end of the Fair exists.

10.1.3 Over 98% of stalls completed this process, leaving only a dozen stalls for whom the deposit cheques will be cashed.

10.2 Recycling

10.2.1 In co-operation with the Exam Schools, provision was made for recycling for the first time this year. Ten large bins were made available on the quad, eight of which accepted paper and card rubbish for recycling. This was an excellent development as the majority of the rubbish that the Fair generates is of this kind.

Recommendation 24 Continue efforts to improve recycling at the Fair.

11 — ReFreshers' Fair

11.1.1 Attendance at ReFreshers' Fair was once again disappointing, although anecdotal evidence suggests that footfall was higher this year.

11.1.2 Last year's Organiser commented that a serious review of the nature and timing of this event was necessary and this remains the case. Improving the publicity around the event may be part of the solution, but expecting the Organiser to take charge of this as well as organising the event is unrealistic.

Recommendation 25 OUSU should conduct a serious review of the costs and benefits of ReFreshers' Fair and consider whether some of the services to stallholders (such as reaching a wider audience) could be delivered in other ways. This should ideally be done during Michaelmas 2007, but is not a decision that should be left to the next Fair Organiser.

12 — Commercial Tent

12.1.1 The roles and responsibilities of the Fair Organiser and the OUSU Business Manager interact in a complicated way with regard to commercial stallholders.

12.1.2 Currently, the Fair Organiser's job is to arrange for the provision of facilities for commercial stallholders, such as the marquee, electricity and so on, but does not liaise with them directly or co-ordinate their arrival and departure.

12.1.3 This often led to confusion on the part of clients, especially when information was not properly communicated from the Business Team to the Fair Organiser, which in turn reflected badly on OUSU's part in the eyes of some commercial stallholders.

12.1.4 The absence of the Business Manager during the week before the Fair led to a number of problems, and the workload was so great that a Senior Steward was drafted in a week early to complete some of the last-minute preparation. Not only was this a burden on the Organiser and the Senior Steward in question, there are inevitably some repercussions in terms of relations with clients who see their point of contact for this large event changing just days before it is due to open..

Recommendation 26 Full- or part-time staff members directly involved in the running of the Fair must be available to work during regular hours for the week before the Fair. Full-time staff that this affects should refrain from booking holiday at this time.

13 — Summary Of Recommendations

- 1 Senior Stewards should continue to be recruited to work for all of 0th week.
- 2 Ensure that there is somebody available in the OUSU Office who knows enough about the Fair to be able to handle basic enquiries by phone or in person, and ensure that there is a proper system in place for handling queries. Both of these measures need to last from the middle of Trinity term through until the event itself.
- 3 The online reservation system needs to be completely redesigned, and needs to be extensible so that future Organisers can modify it where necessary.
- 4 Ensure that the data produced by the new system created in Recommendation 3 is in a format that is (a) remotely accessible and (b) suitable for collaboration.
- 5 Continue using the current price structure, making adjustment for inflation where necessary.
- 6 Continue to charge a surcharge for late bookings to reflect the administrative burden involved in processing them, but make sure that the deadline is very clear.
- 7 Decide whether University Department stalls should be arranged by the Business Manager or the Fair Organiser.
- 8 Continue to make use of the OUSU website as a resource for disseminating information about the Fair.
- 9 Review the *Stallholder Regulations* annually.
- 10 Consider ways of avoiding using Room 12.
- 11 Pay close attention to the number of stalls to avoid over-filling the Exam Schools.

- 12 Ensure that the Exam Schools receive the plans of the different rooms in a timely fashion.
- 13 Impress upon Stallholders the importance of their Stallholder Contact to be available, and remind them that this does not necessarily have to be their President or Secretary.
- 14 Continue to improve personalised e-mails to stallholders so that paper-based confirmations can be avoided.
- 15 Expand the use of numeric Booking IDs so that stallholders are aware of them sooner.
- 16 Continue to divide up the set-up period so that adjacent stalls up at different times.
- 17 Do not ask for literature to be submitted for vetting in advance, but leave the possibility open for those stallholders who request guidance.
- 18 Investigate the possibility of reintroducing passes that show the name of the stall, potentially along with a system for logging lost and stolen passes.
- 19 Either find contact details for the relevant individual in each College, and distribute the tickets directly to them, or make it clear to Colleges that the tickets must be passed on to the relevant person in good time.
- 20 Impress upon Colleges the importance of not double-booking Freshers' Fair with other activities during 0th week. Consider investigating alternative arrangements for ticketing.
- 21 If data is to be collected in the same way in future years, consider carefully the placement of this exercise. If it is to be at the start of the route through the Fair, ensure the environment is suitably welcoming.
- 22 Continue to have Information Points at key locations.
- 23 Investigate why attendance is not as high as expected and take appropriate action.
- 24 Continue efforts to improve recycling at the Fair.
- 25 OUSU should conduct a serious review of the costs and benefits of ReFreshers' Fair and consider whether some of the services to stallholders (such as reaching a wider audience) could be delivered in other ways. This should ideally be done during Michaelmas 2007, but is not a decision that should be left to the next Fair Organiser.
- 26 Full- or part-time staff members directly involved in the running of the Fair must be available to work during regular hours for the week before the Fair. Full-time staff that this affects should refrain from booking holiday at this time.

14 — Acknowledgments

This project would have been impossible without the hard work of Maria, Gill and the rest of the office staff, so a big thank you has to go to them – my apologies for the temperamental databases!

The team who worked at the Fair itself were absolutely second-to-none and consistently went above and beyond the call of duty to deliver a successful event. So thanks to Justine

for being an administrative powerhouse, Rose for pulling out all the stops with BAM, Tom for being the voice of experience and Nick for getting all the IT together in record team.

From the OUSU Sab Team, Rich was one of the best line managers that I could have asked for, patient and understanding as well as confident enough to let me get on with it. Dave romped home with what was in the end an amazing Commercial Tent, despite a few bits of dodgy wiring. He also kept us smiling for the whole of the Fair, which can't be underestimated.

The Volunteer Stewards were absolute stars, and deserve the highest of praise for their dedication and enthusiasm, especially at 8 am on a cold October morning. In particular, Biscuit kept the performances running like clockwork with the minimum of fuss.

We had a lot of help from understanding suppliers. In particular, Rupert at Oxprint and Ian and his team and CP Group both went the extra mile to help us have everything ready on time.

Playing a small but vital role was Jack from Eclectic Collective who valiantly took time off his stall to go and get my glasses fixed, which made my life a hell of a lot easier.

Finally, I'd like to thank Keith, Steve, Amba and the rest of the team at the Exam Schools, whose experience and tolerance for having so much going on in their building made the whole thing possible. They saw some of the lows (like soaking marquee floors and very, very early starts) but I hope that they shared in some of the highs as well.