



Oxford University Student Union

RENT NEGOTIATION PACK 2010

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INTRODUCTION:

Welcome to the OUSU Rent Negotiations pack. This guide aims to:

- ☑ Provide an understanding of the rent negotiation process
- ☑ Provide responses and strategy to overcome common bars to negotiations
- ☑ Provide tactics, to guide you through the negotiations

We hope that detailed rent statistics and information on the Oxford Colleges Costs Index (OCCI) will follow, but these cannot currently be circulated.

If you have any queries please contact Charlotte Carnegie, OUSU's Rent and Accommodation Officer, at rentandacom@ousu.org or Stefan Baskerville, OUSU President, at president@ousu.org.

STEP 1: CAN YOU HAVE RENT NEGOTIATIONS?

If your rent is not frozen:

In most colleges, rent negotiations take place on an annual basis. Each common room must decide what approach they wish to take to negotiations. You could either:

- a) Pre-empt the rent discussions that will be held by finance committees in your college by preparing your own rent proposal, based on the concerns of the students in your common room.
- b) Wait to respond to the rent rise suggested by college, by preparing a counter proposal or choosing to accept.

If you are contractually bound to a rent freeze:

Some common rooms will have agreed with college that rent will be fixed for a certain period, or that there will be a predetermined rent rise for that year. Although this may preclude rent negotiations it is useful to introduce the idea of rent negotiations to your common room. A common problem in colleges with fixed rent or fixed rise agreements is that a culture of negotiating rents is lost. It is therefore important to maintain this culture by presenting the idea of rent negotiations to your common room, even if this year you cannot negotiate with college.

If your college just has no culture of rent negotiations whatsoever, it is important to begin to establish one. This has been a problem in the past. The first step is important psychologically and things will get easier once the process has begun. The best thing to do is to open discussions with the college, even if they are not expecting it. Practically, this means setting up a meeting and raising the issue you want to discuss. How a JCR sees itself is really fundamental, and particularly whether you and your

committee perceive yourselves as legitimate elected representatives whose job it is to engage with college on issues that matter to the people you represent. Once it becomes accepted that issues in college are the subject of negotiation and discussion, rather than the subject of policies imposed by college, then that leads to a lot of other benefits in different spheres.

STEP 2: GETTING A CORE TEAM TOGETHER

A crucial part of successful negotiations in the past has been the formation of a core team of students who share the responsibility for preparing for negotiations. Having a core team in the form of a Rent Committee can provide you with crucial support when you have lots to do and read. A Committee can take responsibility and share the burden of research, developing arguments and communicating important messages to students.

In order to know who to involve in the core team it is important to consider:

- Who you are representing
- Who you are negotiating with
- What information you will need

Who are you representing?

When entering a negotiation, having support from large numbers of people bolsters your case and makes it more persuasive. You can demonstrate this support by showing that you represent your common room, which has hundreds of members. It is important to recognise that whilst the core team may be a small number of people it is not only you who has a vested interest in negotiating the best deal. Try to make your core team as representative as possible, so that it represents and can reach the largest number

of students in your common room.

Include people who are able to show that they represent people, for example, those with electoral mandates. Equally, common room members who aren't on committee can play an important role on your core team by showing that individuals are engaged in the issue and have a vested interest in the negotiations. Additionally, they may have particular skills that can benefit the team. Often, expertise in negotiation, in economics (e.g. inflation) and in computing lots of numbers, will be held by people who are not on committee. Using the skills of your students could really help you improve the outcome for your constituents.

You can then emphasise to college that the negotiations are being conducted by the core team, but on behalf of your whole common room.

The expertise point here is really important - accounts are just very hard to go through and budding economists normally enjoy this sort of thing. What do you guys think about a case study of what we're getting at here? I know Stefan was really impressed with Katy Minshall's team at Exeter when he spoke to her over the TT vacation last year and it might make it a bit clearer what a rent team actually does which I think isn't always clear to people.

Who are you negotiating with?

It will be helpful to consider who college may involve on their side of the negotiations. Domestic, home and finance bursars will almost always be involved. Most colleges also have a finance committee which may include both administrative staff and fellows. When putting together your team it can be helpful to identify who these people are and who, in your common room, is best placed to negotiate with them. If particular members of your common room have positive relationships of trust or understanding with your college's core team counterparts, it will

be important to have them on board.

It will also be important to identify which of the people involved on the college side are the key players with most influence over the final decision, and who might be allies. Think about each stage of the process and where your allies are at each. It might begin with discussions with a Bursar, and then move to Finance Committee. Who sits on that committee? What do they teach? Can you get students to go and speak to them?

What information will you need?

Key pieces of information in a rent negotiation include: a history of rent issues at your college, experience of the people representing the college in the negotiations, and awareness of what is happening elsewhere. Talk to your predecessor and your treasurer's predecessor, find a friendly fellow who has been around for a while and can tell you about the history of discussions. OUSU will circulate detailed information as soon it is possible to do so, but as a starting point, your college will hold Governing Body minutes which contain what has been decided each year on the issue of rent.

If there are people who have observed, or been active, in successful rent negotiations before in your college, it may be helpful to get their advice. If there have been less successful negotiations it will also be useful to talk to those involved in order to ascertain what the bars were to a successful deal. Additionally, if there are people in your common room who are not on committee or haven't been involved before but have a particular interest in the topic, it is worth involving them as they may be willing undertake research on the issue as it interests them. Often, unelected students will have key skills that can help when going through rent statistics, drawing up arguments, or lobbying fellows.

JCR/MCR Co-operation

It may also be essential to coordinate with your counterpart common room in college, since unity across a college community strengthens your case, by increasing the numbers you represent, drawing in more support, experience and expertise, and may provide additional links in to the people you'll be negotiating with.

STEP 3: GETTING THE SUPPORT OF THOSE YOU REPRESENT

When approaching your college what you say will have greater resonance if you can say it on behalf of the whole of your common room. If college is aware that it isn't dealing with a small group of individuals, but an organised common room in support of your rent proposal, they have greater cause to listen.

There are many different ways in which you can get students involved in rents negotiations:

Meetings:

Discuss Rent in common room Meetings

Sound out opinion on the subject, and levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction. It is important to keep students informed on what is happening, and to keep the issue of rent high on the agenda. You may want to make rent a standing item on the agenda from now until negotiations are concluded, in order to keep the issue in people's minds. A motion passed by a JCR or MCR expressing discontent with current rent rates is a potent signal to college authorities, and allows you to formally state that the JCR has voted on the content of what you are putting to college.

Common Room meetings

Issues arising as part of the negotiation can be publicised through Common Room meetings or other meetings. Motions to Common Room meetings can raise awareness of the issue and promote discussion, as well as giving you a mandate to take to your college. Once rent negotiations are underway it is vital that you provide feedback to these groups and that you continue to consult with students about each step.

Bringing SCR members to common room meetings, to explain college's rent proposals and to hear from your common room, is also an option. This can be really effective if managed right, in increasing students' understanding of where college is coming from, in conveying students' feelings to college officers, and in scrutinizing college proposals. See section below 'college comes to your common room'.

One to one meetings

Meeting with people individually can solidify their support for your proposal. You should hold a number of one to ones with your core team, to ensure that you know why they wanted to be involved in rent negotiations and what they hope to get out of them. This helps you identify the talents and interests of your core team, and so use their abilities in the best way for the negotiations. You could also hold one to one meetings with fellows, your dean or senior tutor, explaining to them why you are holding rent negotiations and explaining your objectives, allowing them to relate on a personal level to your concerns.

Keeping people informed:

Face-to-face

Face-to-face is the best form of communication – people are generally much more engaged in a conversation than they are with email or posters. So use face-to-face methods as much as possible. For example, go to eat lunch or dinner in hall with your rent committee, and speak about the issue with people in the queue for food and over the meal. Don't underestimate how quickly messages can spread by word of mouth (though you should be clear on what your messages are, in order to prevent miscommunicating).

- Mini-pamphlets or notices to hand out

You can also print off, for example, 50 paper notices of A5 or even A6 size, with your key messages, either to aid face-to-face communication (have a conversation and then leave someone with a paper summary) or to hand out in a lodge during the morning rush to lectures, or in the queue for food in hall.

Email bulletins

It might be a good idea to have a series of emails which you send out to your common room, informing students that rent negotiations are taking place, what the proposals are/asking for feedback and suggestions of possible proposals, notifying them of progress or lack of progress. It may be good to have a key word or phrase that can be identified with the campaign and in the subject line of the email. Emails can keep students up-to-date and may also help raise awareness.

Poster Campaigns

You might want to use notice boards around college to run a poster campaign. You could have posters with slogans on to raise student awareness of the issue and to show student opinion. Note that depending on what posters you choose, such a campaign could leave you open to the charge that you are trying to force

student opinion rather than simply canvassing it. Try to encourage students to wear stickers with slogans on. You might also want to encourage students to put up posters in their windows advertising their interest in the outcome of rent negotiations. This is an easy way to send a powerful message to college authorities.

☒ Using the Press

A press campaign can be very difficult to pull off effectively and it is not guaranteed to improve your situation. Whether you want that attention, and how the college and your students will react to it, is a delicate matter, and one that needs careful thought.

☒ Press Releases

A good press release should aim to grab the attention of the journalist reading it, inform them of the story, and give them a quotation to base a story on and a contact to further pursue the story if they are interested. A press release should also try to ensure that a story is covered in a particular way so that the angle you want to stress is given prominence. This does not mean an attempt to fool the journalist – rather an attempt to ensure that important facts and concepts are given due prominence in a story.

Active tactics:

Most people think of campaign ‘action’ as involving placards and shouting. Sometimes this is effective, often it is not. Action can be big or small, and might involve quiet but effective face-to-face meetings with fellows as well as letter-writing or a stunt.

If and when you decide to act, make sure your action has a specific target. What are you trying to achieve by acting? Have you chosen the most effective means? Your action should be aimed at getting a particular response or generating a particular outcome, and should be tailored to that aim.

- Face-to-face

Again, face-to-face lobbying can often be the most effective way to gain support for your CR within governing body. You can arrange meetings with key fellows or college figures, such as members of committees, the head of house, the senior tutor, the chaplain, the dean. All of these people have a greater or lesser impact on the eventual outcome. Engaging with your own students and getting them to take action can also be highly effective. If every student in your common room effectively communicated their concerns to their subject tutor at the end of their tutorial, that can have a big impact.

Letter-writing Campaigns

Encourage students to write to college and to their tutors to express concerns over proposed rent rises. This requires a bit more commitment from your students but will mean that college has to register student opposition to rent proposals. This is likely to grab a lot of attention and could prove quite effective in communicating concerns to sympathetic fellows. A similar campaign might be to use postcards with the arguments against rent rises outlined on them and make sure you have space for people to add their own comments.

Boycotts

Organise a boycott of some area where college makes money out of the students. For example, you could encourage people not to eat in hall for a week or not to attend formal halls. If you can take action that affects the college's finances for a week or on one occasion, then bursars will certainly sit up and take notice.

Stunts and Protests

There are a whole range of stunts you can organise to draw attention to students' opposition to rent rises. Examples include:

A 'Tents Not Rents' campaign where students sleep in tents instead of in rooms, either outside or in corridors.

A 'Big Noise' style event where students make as much noise as possible during a meeting of Governing Body whilst rent rises are being debated.

A silent protest where you stand with banners & posters as members of Governing Body walk in to their meeting.

With a bit of imagination you can think of all sorts of stunts and protests that will raise awareness of your opposition. The key thing here is to get people along - a protest with very few students attending isn't likely to have a huge impact.

Make sure that the stunt does not damage your credibility and undermine your campaign. Do not organise a stunt for the sake of it – only do so as a means of kick-starting stalled negotiations or strengthening a weak bargaining position.

More passive tactics:

Questionnaire or Survey

A questionnaire or survey into students' finances or their feelings about rent can be a good way to involve students and raise awareness of the issues at stake. As well as a paper questionnaire, you can also invite feedback through email or a website. If students feel they are being consulted, they are more likely to get involved.

Petitions

Collecting a petition from the student body which expresses their dissatisfaction with rent rates is a good way to raise awareness and bolster your case. It can show the college the strength of feeling amongst the students, and requires relatively little initial commitment from those who sign up. A covering letter with the petition can outline your arguments in full.

STEP 4: USING YOUR SUPPORT - YOUR COMMON ROOM TALKS TO COLLEGE

Your college comes to your common room

Once you have got support from the people you represent you may be able to invite a representative from your college administration to a JCR/MCR/SU meeting. You need to ensure that this is publicised and people are organised to get there.

What to do at this meeting?

1) Allow the common room to put forward its proposal, stipulate what you would like to achieve. Making it clear:

- What your proposal is
- How you have come to this decision
- Who supports this

This final point can be best illustrated by having a strong presence at the meeting. Allowing a representative from each year group to say why they agree with your proposal, or how a high rent rise would negatively impact on them is a powerful way of showing the common room's support for your proposal.

2) Bring in outside help

Other colleges may have had had low rent rises, or rent rises around the figure which you are lobbying for. Try to encourage someone from that college to come along to explain to the common room and college representative why this was decided and how it has been beneficial. Alternatively, you could request that a representative from OUSU attends the meeting to provide comparative information.

3) Make a direct request to the college representative

It is important that you then ask the member of the college administration directly if they will consider your proposal. If they agree to it at the meeting, you will have plenty of witnesses should they renege on their promise. If they agree to consider it, ask them what the action points will be to ensure that this consideration occurs, and arrange for their attendance at another meeting to check that they have followed through. If they refuse to listen to any of your suggestions, you could consider direct action (above), or alternative methods of achieving a low rent rise (addressed later in this rent pack).

4) Ask college to explain their proposal

Presumably the person taking a lead for the college (usually the bursar) will have drawn up a proposal for what the next year's rent should be. Ask them to explain it to your common room at a common room meeting. If the explanation is sound, it should have no trouble being explained to – and even supported by – students. It will also be useful to write an email to college announcing the agreement.

Your common room goes to college

If you cannot encourage any of your college authorities to attend a meeting they might assent to meeting with a small group of common room representatives: your core team.

What to do in this meeting?

1) Prepare

When entering any meeting with college administration you should expect them to have their own objectives, which will be easier to counter or reach compromise if you are clear about your own aims. Ensure you know:

- What your proposal is
- How you have reached this figure/decision
- Who is supporting you and who you are representing

2) Be aware of tactics which may be used by college in negotiations

As well as knowing who is likely to be on your side, it is also useful to consider who will oppose you and what arguments they will use. Anticipating their arguments or their tactics and preparing responses to these might be wise (see below).

3) Make a direct request to the college representative

It is important that you ask the member of the college administration if they will consider your proposal. If they agree to it at the meeting, clearly stipulate final terms, and insist that a separate record is made of them in the meeting. If they agree to consider it, ask them what the action points will be to ensure that this consideration occurs, and arrange a follow-up meeting.

Options if they refuse are discussed below.

STEP 5: RESOLUTION

Hopefully, you will get to the end of rent negotiations swiftly and without too much anguish on either side. When you reach the end of negotiations, you should make sure that you:

- ☑ Clearly stipulate final terms, and insist that a separate record is made of them in the meeting.
- ☑ Write up your agreement in full. It might be a good idea to get both the student representatives and senior members involved in the negotiations to sign it.
- ☑ Discuss and define any terms that might be ambiguous when recorded.
- ☑ Include a schedule of implementation in the final agreement you come to.
- ☑ Always make sure you check with the student body that they are satisfied with the agreement that you have reached, explaining carefully any concessions you have made and justifying why you think this is the best possible deal.

You'll have to judge when to end negotiations: stop when you think the College might start to retract offers, or when you believe that you have achieved your goals.

TACTICS TO USE AND BE AWARE OF

Common room: Approaches to negotiations

There are some general approaches which are worth remembering, such as ensuring that your arguments are supported by trustworthy evidence from a range of sources, and

trying to get to grips with college figures and accounts. There are, however, some more specific approaches which you may wish to adopt:

1. Comparability

As mentioned earlier, when assessing how fair your bursar's proposals are, a useful approach is to make comparisons with rents at other universities and, particularly, at other Oxford colleges.

In 2008-2009, OUSU gained access to previously unreleased rent data from across the university. This data includes many statistics which can help in almost any negotiation. Contact rentandacom@ousu.org to obtain this information.

Drawing comparisons with other colleges is a good approach to use if the proposed rent increase will put you near the top of the list of Oxford rent levels. If this is not the case, then you should defend the merits of maintaining rents at a cheaper level than other Oxford colleges. It should be noted that differences between colleges' average rents do not necessarily correspond to variations in the quality of the facilities provided. Often this is where unfairness across colleges arises.

Data on rents will be published in the OUSU alternative prospectus, and this is a fact you may wish to draw to the attention of your college. There is a likelihood that comparative data across colleges will be increasingly available in coming years, and it is likely that colleges will not want to compare unfavourably with their peers across Oxford.

2. Fairness and Affordability

One way to approach the issue of rent increases is simply to ask whether students can actually afford higher rent. It is not

unreasonable to suggest that a fair rent rate requires that all rooms in college are affordable for all students.

It is certainly well worth spending some time to see if you can prove that rents are becoming unaffordable for some students (for example: those who don't receive a Bursary, but whose parents don't earn enough to provide sufficient funding – an often-neglected 'middle band'). You can begin by looking at the 'income' students receive from their loan, and then see whether it adequately covers all their essentials (food, books, travel, fees) plus the projected rent increases that your college is proposing.

(Need to add here about what Sanjay and Laurence did)

3. Unreasonable or Inept Budgeting

Many common room presidents are immediately told that their college is in financial difficulty, that extra revenue is needed, and that by raising rent, the college can garner that revenue. As long as the broader economic situation remains bleak, this is an argument which college bursars will deploy more and more. A productive approach when faced with this is to work with college to find out where savings could be made without passing the financial burden onto students.

Look closely at your college accounts with your team and see where savings could be made, or where more revenue could be gained:

- Does the college spend too much on entertainment, both for fellows and students?
- Does the college make as much money as it could out of conferences and tourism?

These are lucrative areas for Oxford colleges, and there is

potential, if they are imaginative, to make a lot of money here. There are problems, though, with increased conferences: for example, vacation residence for students may become more difficult to obtain. Don't be too short-sighted in the suggestions that you make, but also make sure that revenues are being maximized if college is strict about students leaving immediately at the end of term,

Is there one area of the college finances that is a particular weakness?

In some colleges this might be identifiable as building works or catering. If so, is it fair that rents should rise to cover that - and is there a better solution to the problem? In the past, colleges have tried to explain rent rises by reference to ongoing capital projects and new buildings. There is a strong argument against this: capital projects should be fully costed and funded, and this should include the opportunity costs of lost conference income as a result of building works. Ask questions about whether it was stated when the capital project was approved that it would be part-financed by rent increases on current students. A further argument is that the costs of capital projects should not be borne by the current cohort of students, as a building project can be viewed as an investment in quality for future rather than current students.

Are all the members of college sharing the financial burden equally?

If there are financial problems in the college then it is probably fair that all in college should 'do their bit' but that no group in college should suffer disproportionately, whether it is staff not being paid enough or students being given a heavy rent burden.

· Can college make itself more energy-efficient, and thereby make cost savings?

The energy efficiency argument can both reduce your college's

carbon footprint and reduce costs (and therefore the pressure to increase rent). If you can make practical suggestions that college could implement, this will assist college authorities in finding savings that could come in place of rent rises.

3. Access

One of the main misconceptions that Access Officers come across when they visit schools and Further Education Colleges is that Oxford is a more expensive place to study than other universities. Prospective students assume that Oxford's academic elitism must be accompanied by financial elitism. With current living costs, it is possible for Access Officers to show that Oxford is not necessarily a more expensive to live than other universities.

However, continually rising rents will increasingly undermine this argument and make it difficult to argue that Oxford's living costs are less than prospective students assume them to be. Rent prices are required to be in the public domain – as noted above, they are in the Alternative Prospectus - so more expensive colleges will be unable to hide this fact. It is not in the college's interest to price prospective students out of applying. In a climate of economic uncertainty, this is a particularly salient point.

4. Student Satisfaction

Generally speaking, authorities do not want their students to feel negative about college life. Students are the public face of the college, they talk to prospective students at interviews and open days, and disillusionment with a college does not reflect well on it. Many colleges also ask students to help with telethon fundraising: whilst it is not necessarily encouraged to moan at alumni about rent increases, it may be worth reminding college that its current students are an important tool for generating income, and may be less inclined to do so if they feel unhappy with its rent policy.

Current students are also the source of a huge amount of future income for the college through donations they will make as alumni. Colleges should be aware of this, and trying to foster positive relations with students during their time there. The goodwill towards college that generates donations in the future is dependent on students feeling well-treated by their college, and college authorities should be made aware the high rent increases may erode this.

The arguments that you use may be on two fronts: there is no harm in at least trying to appeal to the better nature of college authorities, with respect to the affordability and fairness of rents, but you should also appeal to their reputational and financial interests.

5. The University's Obligations to the Council

There is an Oxford City Council plan for 2001-16 which highlights that colleges have a duty not just to consider the effect of their accommodation plans on students, but also on the wider city. If students choose to live out in order to get a better deal, then the University may not be accommodating enough students to meet its obligations under the Local Plan (which stated that not more than 3000 students should live out by 2008).

If the University is unable to keep to its obligations, the Council may penalise it by denying planning permission for further development. The document also states that student accommodation cannot be converted into market housing, undermining bursars' arguments that they could fetch higher rent if they privately rented the rooms. Further useful extracts of the plan can be accessed by contacting OUSU.

6. UUK Guide to Student Housing

The Housing Act 2004 introduced licensing for houses of multiple occupations in England and Wales. Higher education institutions are exempted from licensing providing they sign up to a code of practice that has been approved by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

The UUK Accommodation Code of Practice can be found at:

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/Guidance/AccommodationCodeofPractice/Pages/default.aspx>

There are standards set in all sorts of different areas – health and safety standards and procedures, maintenance and repair regimes, environmental quality, landlord and tenant relationship, Student welfare, anti social behaviour and disciplinary procedures. The document does not take long to read and is very clear about the standards to which colleges should be adhering.

If your college hasn't abided by these requirements you may be able to use this in rent negotiations to bolster your case. You may well wish to refer to a range of standards set in the document, for example when it says that Universities should have 'policies and procedures in place on the relationship between managers, as landlords, and students, as tenants or licensees' which include 'how accommodation charges for each academic session are determined, and which body within the establishment has responsibility for setting charges' (p.14-15).

College: Common Negotiation Tactics

Hopefully your negotiations will follow the pattern outlined above: you decide to hold rent negotiations, you get together a core team, get support of your common room, make a proposal to college, and it is accepted or altered in a manner amenable to your aims.

However, this will not always be the case, and it may be that college try to use the following negotiation techniques to affect the discussions. There are three sections: during the meeting, the content of their proposal, and when they hold discussions.

During the meeting

Referring to a Higher Authority

This technique is generally used to stall, and to absolve negotiators' responsibility when backtracking on concessions. Senior members might say they have to talk to the head of College or speak to the governing body before they commit. If they renege repeatedly, you might be justified in asking to talk to someone who can actually make real offers. Otherwise, remember that you can use the same ploy, saying that you are unclear how the Common Room would feel about something, or that you'll have to consider it with your committee.

Threats

Some threats the college might make are to close negotiations, or abandon the concessions already agreed. Colleges can also threaten to tighten the restrictions on students living in college during the vacations, among other things. This can be more or less subtle depending on circumstance, but you can deal with it by either being sympathetic to their concerns, or by making it clear that you too can make threats (if, of course, you feel that you are in this position). A threat made like this is probably more about scaring you than actually closing negotiations, but do be wary. Don't be afraid to make clear how you are able to affect their interests: students often run college open days, assist during interviews and participate in telethons.

Being insulting and unreasonable towards you

Many negotiations will be conducted politely even if the position taken by the college appears unreasonable. However, in some negotiations the college might try to insult or undermine the student representatives. If this happens, remind those at the meeting that you are the elected representative of the students they work for, and that you have your Common Room/Student Union backing. Always remain polite and do not get into 'back-biting'. It can work to be blunt - simply saying that you're not prepared to be talked to in a certain way can be very effective, particularly if you are being reasonable and polite, and you explain how and why you want to resolve negotiations amicably and meet the interests of both parties.

The 'No Concessions' approach

If your college indicates that they are not willing to make any concessions, you should highlight the importance of consulting the student members of the college, and taking their views into consideration. It is unreasonable to force rent increases onto students with no proper negotiation, especially if this is not accompanied by an increased college investment in facilities. You can point out that this approach is more likely to result in direct action by the students (something the college will be keen to avoid).

In their proposal

Unsubstantiated Statistics

Don't be afraid of asking where certain figures have come from, and query them. Don't assume that the figures you are offered - especially in terms of college finance - are correct and unbiased, and don't be afraid of asking for access to the sources.

Illogical offers

If college expects to discuss things with you productively, then they should be prepared to detail the logical and financial basis of their offer/s and demands. Ask for explanations, and ask to be taken through the logic if you think this will help.

Baffling you with statistics

Senior members may actively try to confuse you with figures or accounting concepts, or you may become confused anyway even if they try to clarify. Ask for explanation, and don't agree to anything before you are certain of what is being discussed. It is OK to say that you haven't fully understood and that you need more time. Ask for another meeting if you want to check through college's methods or numbers before agreeing to anything substantial. This is why it is important to have developed a core team with different skills from you. Try to get someone who knows what they're doing (e.g. an economist or accountant you may know) to have a close look at the accounts. Make sure you take notes in a meeting in order that you can accurately relay what has been said to your committee or your common room. There are also benefits to this if you need to refer back authoritatively to earlier discussions at a later stage in the negotiations.

When they host negotiations

Time of year

Colleges often try and hold rent negotiations at a time least convenient for students, usually before exams or when a new JCR/MCR/SU committee has taken office. Where possible, try and make sure that negotiations take place in Michaelmas term or early Hilary and at a time most convenient for students. Remember - your academic wellbeing should be the College's number one priority so don't be afraid to object to the timing of negotiations for the sake of your degree.

Common Argument and Potential Responses

☒ 'Oxford has shorter terms, so comparability is useless'

It is often suggested that because Oxford has eight-week terms and students only pay rent for the time that they are here, that drawing comparisons between Oxford and other universities is useless. This is not necessarily the case; many students in Oxford do stay on during vacations (e.g. some colleges have arrangements whereby students keep their rooms during Christmas and Easter vacations).

Furthermore, examining costs on a weekly basis at other universities give a suitable indication of what 'market rents' are at other institutions. Shorter terms at Oxford should not provide justification for higher weekly rents than at other universities. Additionally, colleges should not assume that their students do not have to pay rent out of term time – to parents or landlords with whom they live during the vacations. It is therefore unreasonable to expect them to pay higher rent just because terms are shorter: they may well have to pay rent for just as many weeks as anyone

else – just not solely to college.

- ☒ 'Students take the most expensive rooms so they must be able to afford them'

You can point out that students might choose the expensive rooms because they want to live with their friends and not on their own in a cheaper area of college. What is more, it is understandable that a student would want to live in a nicer room, and you may wish to establish whether students do so with the result of either having to make savings elsewhere (e.g. cutting down on expenditure on food, books, travel etc) or getting into further debt. There may also be arguments to be used about segregation of students by income.

- 'We agree with you on social justice, that's why we are eliminating the universal subsidy and targeting subsidies at students from the lowest-income households'

This argument can be a hard one to respond to if you are unprepared for it. Key questions to ask include: How do we know that the targeted subsidies are (a) reaching their intended target? and (b) sufficient in supplementing incomes?

You may want to compromise and agree on further elimination of subsidy in exchange for concessions in other areas. However, be careful with this approach. Once a subsidy is eliminated, your successors are highly unlikely to win it back. A subsidy is valuable and shouldn't be given away lightly!

You may also wish to point out that:

- ☒ Students are unable to work during term time

Oxford colleges firmly posit that students should not do paid work

during term-time (and students often find they do not have time). It is worth noting, as such, that Oxford students cannot earn money during term time whilst students at other universities might be able to.

☒ 'Kitchen Fixed Cost should not be taken into account with rent'

Kitchen Fixed Cost (KFC) is a fixed cost, and students pay it regardless of whether they do or do not use the canteen and other college facilities. Moreover, there is no real way to opt out of it. You might challenge the fairness of this system (especially given the regressive nature of fixed costs), and you may wish to ask college if they could clarify what exactly KFC goes towards and see if they can give you a breakdown. A key question might be to ask what method is used for calculating the fixed charge.

☒ More expensive rooms becoming unaffordable

You can also suggest to the College that, if rents continue to rise, there will come a point at which students will not be able to afford the expensive rooms. Therefore college cannot base their long-term financial strategy on the assumption that students will continue to keep paying more. If college rooms are very expensive, it may become cheaper for students to live elsewhere and this will have an impact on lots of things that college holds dear, including a cohesive academic community and proximity to libraries and academic resources.

GLOSSARY AND SUBJECT SPECIFIC TERMS

Rent negotiations involve getting your head around the various charges involved and terms used. In different colleges different charges will work in different ways, although there are some common terms that you might find thrown at you:

Subsidising

This is an argument often deployed by college Bursars when seeking to raise rent. A large number of colleges face annual deficits of around £1 million. This is generally absorbed by college endowments but is clearly not sustainable in the long term. When college running costs are shared out between Fellows, conference income and students' fees, it is usually suggested that student fees do not balance the costs of living and therefore that rents are subsidised by the college, and that the gap between cost and rent must be closed.

Room Banding

In some colleges, a system of room banding operates where college rooms are allocated points on their desirability. These factors are then taken into account by the college when determining the rent charge for a particular room. Many of the figures detailing rent rates across the university are based on

averages – including the new data made available this year (ask 2008-2009 Rent and Accommodation Officer for this information – rentandaccom@ousu.org). There is usually scope for student representatives to have quite an input into the banding of different rooms.

☒ Inflation

Inflation is measured in several different ways to keep track of how the price of goods and services rises every year. The main way that inflation is measured is using the Retail Price Index (RPI). This is an index which monitors the cost of 100 goods which are commonly purchased as a way of evaluating inflation. RPI is used most often when setting budgets and projecting expenditure, this is what the University and your college will use. As a result of inflation, rents in college usually rise every year (at the time of writing [latest report February 2009], the inflation rate as measured by the CPI is 3.2%). See www.bankofengland.co.uk for up-to-date statistics.

Note: One common tactic used by bursars is to use a different index to calculate the inflation of room rents from the ones they use to calculate costs. For example, a bursar may use whichever inflation index gives the highest figure when calculating rent rates, but whichever index gives the lowest figure when calculating how much to pay staff etc. The best way to check if this is happening is to look at your college budget, checking that the inflation index used by your bursar is the same across all its sections.

☒ KFC

KFC stands for Kitchen Fixed Charge. Not all colleges have KFC, but the vast majority do. Kitchen Fixed Charge is ostensibly there to subsidise the food that students eat in canteen. Some see it as a 'hidden cost' in rent, as it is charged regardless of whether students use the canteen or not.

☒ 'Market Rents'

During the course of your negotiations, one of the things that your bursar might mention is that rent rates are currently lower than 'market rents'. It is important to clear up a distinction here about what is meant. There are two different sort of rent rate:

a) Cost-price Rents: This is where your weekly rent & KFC fully cover the costs you generate by living in college, which mostly includes running and maintaining your room. Your rent may also contribute to other aspects of college life which students use (porters, gardens, kitchens etc). By and large, if the rent you pay is equal to the cost you impose on a college, and no more, then it is fair.

b) Market rates: This is where students' room rents are charged at the same rate as other accommodation on the commercial marketplace. In practice this is an unfair target to aim for. First, the aim of commercial rents is to make the owners money, something which Oxford colleges are not expected to do with accommodation for students. Secondly, as the colleges own a large proportion of the property market in central Oxford, property prices are artificially inflated, making it difficult to draw valid comparisons between the colleges and the local commercial marketplace. Colleges may also claim that market rates are identical to cost-price rates and that landlords profit from the appreciation of property – but in the current economic situation, with property prices mostly static and sometimes falling, this is manifestly not the case.

CONTACTS

OUSU

The President and Rent & Accommodation Officer will be happy to advise with any negotiations or provide further information. The Student Union maintains a number of records relevant to rent negotiations. We would also like to be kept informed of any changes in a college's situation: to contact OUSU telephone 01865 (2)88450.

The President, Stefan Baskerville, can be contacted at president@ousu.org

The Rent and Accommodation Officer, Charlotte Carnegie, can be contacted at rentandaccom@ousu.org

General Legal Advice

In the past some students have been threatened with legal action. This is very rare, and would normally only occur as a last resort by an SCR. Nevertheless, to check if an action is legal you may wish to seek legal advice. If the problem is complex and your college affiliated to the NUS then you can approach their Union solicitor. However, this solution is not ideal, as their legal department can be relatively unfamiliar with Oxford-specific issues. You should also contact the Citizen's advice bureau or Community legal advice service.

Legal Reference

For a detailed overview of the specific legislation, rights and obligations involved with Higher Education you may wish to browse through 'Higher Education Law' (2nd ed. 2002) by David Palfreyman (the Bursar at New College) and David Warner.

Hardship

If, despite your best efforts your college experiences a large Rent increase then it is important that any students suffering financial difficulty are made aware of sources of help. There are usually funds available both centrally from the university, and also from colleges. The Student Union VP (Welfare and Equal Opportunities) will be able to advise further and is available email welfare@ousu.org.