

# Transcript

Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast.

My name is Stephanie Nowak. I am a research associate at the University of Oxford, and together with my colleagues, Dr Aliya Khalid

Shaliya Rahman and Nadia Talukder we lead the John Fell funded Oxford Hope project, where we look at how marginalised students think about hope and aspirations towards education and precarious contexts.

Today we're focusing on British, Pakistani and Bangladeshi families and their aspirations towards elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge.

And this matters because even though these students often have high aspirations and strong academic results,

far fewer go on to top universities than we might expect.

And that gap tells us something important we're not fully understanding or supporting the journey into elite higher education.

And too often these communities are labelled as hard to reach without really questioning whether

universities themselves are doing enough to engage in ways that are culturally sensitive and relational.

By looking at how aspirations are shaped within families, how structural barriers are actually experienced,

and how universities can build more reciprocal relationships with communities.

The research gives us insights into how we can create more inclusive pathways into higher education.

And as part of this mixed Methods projects, we held two family centred workshops here at the University of Oxford.

One at Lady Margaret Hall and another at Jesus College.

And these brought together parents and young people and shared spaces for storytelling,

open dialogue and the chance to engage more directly with university life.

Building on those conversations, I am really pleased to say we're joined today by two wonderful guests.

First, we have Mitsu Khan, a British Bangladeshi father of a student who's currently in sixth form whose family migrated to the UK in the 1980s.

He's currently an insurance professional and brings a valuable perspective on education from a Bangladeshi viewpoint.

And we're also joined by Sadaf Yassir, a British Pakistani mother of a student who's currently in year ten.

Sadaf is a PhD scholar and a postgraduate teaching assistant at UCL Institute of Education.

She also works in the charity as an employment advisor and supports women refugees from various countries to start a new life here in the UK.

Mitu, I'll start with you with my first question and I'm really curious.

We met at the family workshop at Jesus College and yes,

you powerfully said that your life is a continuation of your father's and that we owe so much to our parents.

Now, my question is twofold. Firstly, could you expand on what you meant by this,

and particularly how hope and aspiration towards places like Oxford are intergenerational but also collective?

And secondly, why is it important for universities to engage not only with students but also with their families?

Yes. No. Thank you so much, Stephanie. And I just want to say it's a real pleasure to be here.

And it was a great pleasure for me personally to actually visit Oxford.

And to answer the first question. I mean, I really do think that there can be sort of barriers for Bangladeshi students and families.

And my own story began when I was about seven years old.

My sort of father asked me, you know, what do you want to do when you grow up, son?

You know, and I sort of thought, oh, okay, well, I'll give you an answer that I think he's going to like.

So as we said, dad, you know, I think I'd like to be a chef.

And in my head I thought, well, I can kind of help him with the restaurant. And he really wasn't, didn't seem too happy, you know.

Was it kind of too impressed by that answer? So, so then I sort of said, dad, well, you know, what would you recommend?

And he, he sort of said, son, I think you should be a barista.

And that kind of took me a little bit by surprise, because at that time I was really struggling at school.

I wouldn't really learn to read properly till I was about 11 years old.

And, you know, I had special needs, and I just was someone who's completely not interested in education at all and not any good at it either.

So, you know, for me, it was a really pivotal kind of conversation early on.

And um, years later, I would ask my father, you know, what made you have this idea that, you know, I should be a barrister?

What? You know, what kind of, um, how did that idea pop into your head?

And he sort of said, well, son, you know, I wanted to see the world through your eyes.

And, you know, I'll always remember that because I feel like he didn't have those opportunities in his life.

And so, in a way, he wanted to maybe live some vicariously through me.

And, uh, when I actually went on to do the bar and I was called as a barrister of Lincoln's in 2004, which is before I was at the School of Law.

At that time, when I was studying at the bar, he actually had a brain haemorrhage and several strokes and other things.

But, you know, when he so that, you know, of course that affects you.

But as a young man, you know, he, he used to, uh, volunteer to help people in the.

Filling in forms and writing letters for them, and people used to refer to him as their barista.

And you know, my both my parents work exceptionally hard and through difficult times with the business.

My mum would help in the restaurant whilst looking after the five of us.

Me and my siblings and father always used to say dedication will reach your destiny.

And so he really gave me a goal, you know, something to aspire to.

I used to, I was so behind at school, you know, and I knew that I sometimes I'd feel like I was trying to climb Mount Everest.

You know, so during the summer holidays, I knew that I had to catch up.

And everyone, even everyone in the class, you know, was way ahead of me.

So I'd set myself homework during the summer holidays.

And it's sort of an effort to kind of try to get a bit better at school.

And as the years went on, I consistently did this.

And I remember still being disappointed when I got my GCSE results.

You know, I got like Fauci's four BS and an A, but then it really paid off.

By the time I got to college, I'd actually had the biggest discrepancy between GCSE and A-level results out of everyone in my college.

So I got three A's in my A-levels. And then I applied to King's College London and that's that's where I studied law.

Yeah. You know, I went on to do a masters degree,

but it really it really all stemmed from this conversation and all the help and support I had from my parents, which was really pivotal.

And, you know, all the hard work I could see that they're doing, it's really sort of part,

I think, of an immigrant story and it has ripple effects, you know.

Both my sisters are solicitors. My youngest sister only actually works for her older sister in her law firm.

I believe that all of this demonstrates how our journey in life is inter-generational.

It is collective and it is relational.

In terms of the second part of your question, why is it important for universities to engage not only with students, but also with their families?

I think this is very important because, as you say,

there may be sort of barriers that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu researched this idea of cultural capital and,

you know, that sort of not economic capital, but it could be your education level, the way you speak, people, you know, just you know, how you act.

It's sort of, you know, subconscious in subconscious ways.

And all of these things could potentially help you succeed within society.

And I would argue that, um, due to sort of just cultural differences and various other things, when you grow up that could be missing that there,

there could arguably, there is a deficit in this cultural capital with whether you're Bangladeshi, Pakistani or even from working class backgrounds.

And by reaching out, I think, you know, institutions like Oxford University are making a huge difference in terms of access.

It makes the process more meritocratic.

It also signals to parents that, you know, they're welcome, that their children will be not only academically looked after,

but also that they're welcomed and that they'll be understood for, you know, for who they are.

And these conversations about education, about higher education, they don't happen in isolation.

They happen sort of in the families dining table.

And when you include the family, I just think it helps build trust.

It demystifies the institutions. And, you know, it's it's also great, as we live in a more globalised world,

to have different perspectives, to have people be comfortable in their own skin.

And I think potentially I haven't done the empirical research, but I would argue that varying perspectives,

you know, having broad perspectives can potentially increase the richness of academic research.

And certainly it's great for sort of wider social cohesion and just sort of, you know, making a more just and fair society.

So, yeah, that would be my take on your question, Stephanie.

Thank you. Made some of these really, really thoughtful reflections.

I'm turning to you now, said of um, and I'm really curious to hear what what you have to say.

A core finding from the workshop at Lady Margaret Hall was that families teach and learn on their own terms,

with mothers often acting as guardians of educational aspiration and architects of home based learning.

Um, we found that they not only protect their children's hopes, but actively shape them as teachers.

Um, as. Mentors. How should universities respond to and support these forms of family led aspirations and learning?

I'd also pedagogy, I guess. Thank you. Stephanie. Thank you.

Thank you. Me too.

I agree with your points, and I will just say a little bit about myself and my daughter before I just come to your questions with funny.

So I was my daughter's first teacher when we started homeschooling for her early years of education.

And then I kept supporting her through primary school and the 11 plus preparation.

Um, I have always been involved in my daughter's educational journey and formal schooling.

Oh, and also, uh, I've been encouraging her to participate in different co-curricular activities, various writing competitions and literary debates.

Um, and then I would just think, and I still believe that my daughter's success is something tied to my own achievements in life.

So that's how, uh, as you mentioned, it's relational.

It's not individual. Um, for us, when coming to your question, how how universities should respond to that.

So I would that I think that universities need to start by recognising that inspiration does not begin with them.

It is already being built and carried within families, and it's often over many years.

And and very often mothers are central to that process.

Um, because they are not just encouraging their children in a general sense, but they are teaching and as you mentioned, like guiding.

And and they themselves are making sacrifices and helping, um,

their children to imagine a future that may not always feel very easily available to them, and especially in our context.

So for me, the first step is the recognition that universities need to recognise that families are already doing educational work and,

um, that they are not empty spaces waiting for the university to step in and create ambition or direction,

because a lot of work is already happening at home, for example, in everyday conversations, in care, in discipline,

and even in the encouragement and in the ways families help children keep going, even when the system makes things difficult for them.

So I think this matters because, uh,

universities often still work with quite narrow ideas about where learning happens and what counts as valuable knowledge.

They tend to recognise formal learning, institutional language and official forms of support,

but they do not always see the quieter forms of learning that happen in homes and communities.

And that can be especially true for migrant families or racialized families and working class families,

who are often viewed through a deficit lens as if they are somehow lacking or.

But they actually actually, I will just say many of these families are deeply invested in education and education of your children.

They may support it differently and speak about it differently.

Or, for example, practice it differently, but it doesn't make it any less meaningful.

So I think this is also about a relationality, as Mita already mentioned, that learning is not just individual, it's relational.

It's shaped through family and the community, the history and the responsibility to others.

So if universities really want to support students, they also need to understand the relationships that sustain those students.

That means not treating the families as separate from higher education, or just only involving them at the point of admissions or outreach.

Um, but it means seeing them as part of the wider ecology of learning.

So all parents and um, students and university working together are sort of in that relationship.

Um, I also think reciprocity is also important here.

Uh, universities often expect families to learn how to navigate the institution,

but they do not always ask what they themselves need to learn from the families.

So, uh, for me, reciprocity would mean here the engagement should not be one way.

It should not be just about universities giving information or advice to families, but it should also involve,

uh, listening, learning and allowing families experience to shape how the university generally works.

That could be through more meaningful forms of outreach, for example, more accessible communication and more family inclusive spaces, for example.

Uh, yeah. And but also to a deeper willingness to question institutional assumptions, um, at this point.

So for me, reciprocity, uh, means what families get from these relationships or universities simply asking families to trust them, um, adopt to them,

or support um students through systems that remain quite exclusionary, or are they actually building relationships that are respectful and mutual?

If. It is only one way. Then it is not really support.

It is just another form of institutional expectation.

So these are like, you know, um, I would just say the role or the universities can respond or um, in for example, three connected ways.

I would just say like recognising the families, um, family led aspirations and the home based learning is real and valuable.

And secondly, by building relationships with families that are based, uh, on respect rather than assumptions.

And uh, thirdly,

by practising reciprocity so that engagement becomes a two way process where universities are also willing to listen and learn and set up.

Thank you so much. I think you've really powerfully captured how universities can do better.

And with, with with so much richness and, um, diversity in your response, I think that's really powerful.

So my last question is for both of you and said, I'll start with you again.

Um, you've now given some really concrete recommendations of how universities can step up and change their approach to have it more relational,

to include the family, to recognise home based learning and the role of the mother, and not assuming, um, a lack of aspirations.

I think those points are really important. After attending the the the workshop at Oxford.

Is there a core message that you would like other parents or other families to know?

Um, something that stuck with you, something that changed your perception about Oxford or something that you would like other parents to know?

Thank you. Stephanie, I will just share my own experience. Like how?

Like before attending the workshop, I think I saw a place like Oxford is quite distant.

Uh, almost as if it belonged to other people. And it felt like a space with its own culture, language and confidence,

and not somewhere like families like us, uh, could easily imagine themselves to be there.

And even when, you know, universities are open to everyone in theory, in practice they can still feel closed off.

Uh, especially if you have not, uh, grown up around those spaces or do not know how they work.

So it can feel a bit distant. So after attending the workshop, my perception shifted.

Uh, the whole experience, I would just say. And so Oxford still carries that history and that sense of prestige,

but it no longer feels untouchable in the same way it used to feel before, uh, we attended the workshop.

And what changed for me was not just seeing the university as a set of old buildings or a symbol or status,

but as a place made up of people and where the conversations were possible and the possibilities were possible of different kind.

So being in that space and hearing different experiences, um,

and reflecting together with all other parents, made it feel more human and more open that I had imagined.

Or perhaps I would just, um, imagined before attending the workshop.

Even so, uh, I would also want the parents to know that their role really matters.

And and we had made it clear that they own the workshop as well, like all of us.

And the encouragement, the believe and support they give it home can shape how their children see the futures.

Uh, even in relation to places that may seem far away.

Um, and for children, I think the message is that these spaces are not only for a certain type of person,

but they should be able to see themselves as thinkers,

learners and contributors in those places too, so they can find their place in the in these institutions too.

So this was sort of a change of my perception after that, and we thoroughly enjoyed the whole day of the workshop.

It was one of the, uh, fun day for me and my family.

So thank you, Stefan. Thank you said for those reflections.

Me too. I'm curious to hear from you.

Yeah, yeah, I mean, I before I say anything, I just wanted to say I really agree with everything that's sort of just sort of outlined there,

particularly this idea of a two way exchange between very famous institutions, established institutions like Oxford University,

but, you know, between them and not just students, but also their of families.

So in this context. So I think that's such a good idea that the more that can be done, you know,

in that field it seems so obvious that communication is always so important.

But yeah, I think that definitely more can be done. Yeah.

My my own view is interesting because it's really changed.

My view of Oxford University definitely has changed.

But at the same time, it would be wrong to sort of say that I would never have thought of applying to Oxford,

because actually I did try to apply in the 1990s.

I wanted to study law at Oxford and just the whole process.

I didn't know anything about it.

And I remember speaking to my history tutor, who is also my former tutor and who was also the Oxbridge representative at our college.

And I remember sitting down having a conversation with him and him sort of saying, look, me too.

You know, I'm sort of very supportive of you, but your GCSE grades just aren't good enough for us to submit your application.

But the ultimate decision, the final decision is yours. You know, I mean, do you really want me to say no?

Don't submit the application. But I disagreed and I said no.

You know, I want to. I still want to submit the application.

What do I do next? And in the end, he just sort of said to me, well, I'll get back to you.

And unfortunately, I'm still waiting. You know, for me, ultimately somewhere that's very visible but not really accessible.

And I think that whole mindset has changed for me because, you know, I mean,

I it just reminded me of like an interview with Roger Federer once and he sort of said

that it really affected him early on in his career to see someone like Martina Hingis,

another Swiss player, when there weren't that many really Swiss players around.

You know, you've got German tennis stars and American tennis stars, but to have someone as well,

number one, he sort of made him believe that maybe one day he could become world number one.

And I think in a very similar way, when I had privilege of, you know, being at Jesus College, Oxford,

and being hosted so generously by by the Education Department there and by yourself, Stefanie and the team, I felt, uh, really grateful just to be there.

And I think I was very I'm very inspired by everyone I spoke to and by the Bangladeshi, Pakistani students and faculty members that I met.

And really, the message that I would want to give to parents is that Oxford University or Cambridge or these institutions, they are there.

It's it's a really positive place and it's somewhere that actually is open to every student and open to every community.

So yeah, that would be my message. Thank you. Me too.

And thank you sort of as well.

I think a couple of points that stood out to me that while I was just reflecting while you were speaking, is that representation really matters.

Um, if you see someone like yourself in these spaces, it really, really matters.

And we are also conducting student interviews as well right now.

And that's a core finding that we think is is important.

Um, another thing that stood out to me was that you really need that one person who believes in you, you know,

in meta, when you were speaking about you still waiting for that person coming back to you at some point then.

But, you know, I think you pushed through and that shows a lot.

And I think it's, it's it's just to keep in mind how important these things.

I think we know them, but it's coming. You know, the evidence is really clear that these things are really important.

And on that note, will gently bring today's conversation to a close.

I would like to thank you both again, really from the bottom of my heart set up for me too, for such a thoughtful discussion.

And thank you to all of you listening for tuning in.

I also wanted to share that we will have an event coming up on the 13th of June, where we'll be sharing the core findings from the larger mixed methods research.

So that also includes the surveys, the interviews we're having with students,

but also the the the data that we've gathered from from these family workshops and will bring together families,

university and policy representatives for joint discussions here in Oxford.

And if you would like to find out more about the projects in general, do take a look at the links in the show notes.

Thank you again for listening.

You've been listening to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast. To find out more about the research featured in today's episode and everything else the Deanery has to offer, visit our website and sign up to our newsletter.

You'll find the links in the show notes.