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Transcript

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Hello and welcome to our Oxford Student Voices, a podcast by the Oxford Student Union. Here we bring together students and the people shaping the university to ask questions, share ideas, and imagine the future of Oxford together. My name is Wonto. I am the president for postgraduate at the University of Oxford Student Union. This series was created as a special project from our office with one simple aim, to bridge the gap between university services and the student unit, and to make sure that every student knows that the structures of Oxford are listening and responding to them. Conversation has always shaped the life of this university, and in these episodes, we renew that tradition by placing students at the center of our voices. Today, we are focused on career and professional development, a team that always resonates with every student preparing for life after Oxford. I'm delighted to welcome Jonathan Black, the director of the Career Service with a career that spans engineering, consulting, publishing, and business leadership. Gina Don brings not only decades of experience, but also a deep commitment to helping Oxford students find their paths. Welcome, Mr. Blacks. Very great pleasure having you. have been the director of the Career Service since 2008, such a very long time. Looking back, what would you describe as its biggest success in helping Oxford students prepare for life after university? And what would you think are the very, you know, what would you consider challenges that still remain in that perspective?

Jonathan Black

Right, a few big questions there. So when I arrived, it struck me that students were saying, show me, don't tell me. So I want to have a go at doing things. I want to try things out. Don't just take me to the Randolph Hotel and sit me down with canapes and drinks and tell me all about, let's say, consulting or banking or the law and expect me to make a decision based on that. So we set off with a number of projects, many of which are still going, but some have gone and we've added others to give students that experience, the opportunities to, well, to have a go. So whether that's our insight programmes or the internships that we run exclusively for Oxford students. All of these are ways that students can explore options and to gain, well, partly gain experience, partly meet other students who they wouldn't normally meet, but also, you know, to get

a toe in the water for the business or organisation world. The challenges within the careers service is always to reach more people. I don't mind if people don't use us. Well, I kind of do. But what I do mind is if they don't know about us. And there's nothing worse than a student who says, gets the end of, let's say, their final year and says, I didn't realise there was a careers service, even though they're getting weekly emails and the colleges are helping, the departments are helping and so on. So awareness is #1. So there's always a few more people to reach. That aside, our other challenges are to address more industry sectors. So it's not just the classic. And we do that with the Creative Careers Week, with policy, with medicine, with government, with charity sector, all sorts of other sectors. There's always some more sectors. We're looking at doing a whole programme on film and TV next year, on policy this year and so on. And then I suppose outside Oxford, we've got two major challenges. We have the economy at the moment, which is obviously, obviously we can all tell it's got a bit static. I mean, there are still jobs out there to keep this in perspective for a second about... Three and a half thousand people leave Oxford each year and go into work. So that's about 2000 undergraduates. We used to have about 9000 jobs on our system in a year. Now it's down to about 5000, but that's still more than there are students. And I know they're not exactly the right jobs for people, but people find jobs in other ways. So that's number one. Number 2, the other one, of course, is AI.

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I definitely would love to hear more about how is AI, you know, as an incredible tool, a progressive tool in our world, transitioning the essence of career advancement for students in opportunities and powerful.

Jonathan Black

Right. I mean, there are several elements to AI. It's going to change the work that people will be doing and employers, recruiters will be expecting students just as they 10 years ago, have you got Microsoft Office skills? And before that, it was already a calculator. Now we're going to assume, or you're going to demonstrate you've got decent AI skills, or that is coming, depending on the job. Will it remove some jobs? Probably, but it's just going to change other jobs. It's a bit like if you said, now, oh, let's take all the PCs and the laptops away. No one would ever dream of doing that. But at the time, they were new and people said they will threaten people's jobs. All it did was change the way we work. We can argue whether it's for the better or not, but that's a different issue. So that's one bit. And then it's how you use AI to apply for these jobs, how to find them in the 1st place. Because we know students are doing it. We talk to employers where half of them say half the employers in our survey said we don't want people using AI. And yet many of those companies say, but when you get here, we want you to use AI. So we can't answer that one. It's very interesting. But in terms of using AI, it's a brilliant research tool. Give me 500 words on private equity as though I was an 18 year old and in

plain language, brilliant. It does it in 10 seconds and you've got the answer. But that's kind of an introduction. The advice is when you come to write things, don't rely on it and don't just use AI because it makes everyone look the same. It goes to the centre of the bell curve and takes the average of what people write over the last few years. So your personal character will not show. And I think there's a broader philosophical issue about AI, which is think about what an employer wants, anyone. It could be your PI who's recruiting you to do graduate studies. It could be for doing a master's. It could be for getting a job in public government or whatever it may be. That person, the other side of the table is going to think, is this person curious, interested, energized, thought about this job they're coming to do or the industry we're in? And the only way you'll get all of that is using your basic research skills, your human skills, if you like.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

I do know the career, you just spoke about the career guide. What are some of the opportunities out there that students can look up for, existing students, incoming students in terms of career fairs? What is extremely captivating about if I'm a student, what should inspire me to be at a career fair?

Jonathan Black

Why should you go to a fair? Because they're not, most of us find them quite intimidating and noisy and busy and what do you do with them? And I'm afraid if you can overcome all that, especially if you're neurodiverse and it's an uncomfortable place to be, I would still recommend trying to find your way, come early or come late when it's quieter perhaps. But it's the most efficient, time efficient way to collect lots of information. It opens your mind to, and I would say one message to all students is keep an open mind. Don't think I want to become this industry. Because you never know, you never know. At this stage in your career, just keep an open mind and think, entertain ideas that you might think are mad. Like, I'll join the army, or I'll go to a defence company, or I'll go to banking, or I'll go to whatever. One of the biggest problems is people self-select out of jobs because they think, it's not for me. So at the fair, go up and talk to people, practice talking to recruiters. You can download the fair booklet a week before off our website to see which recruiters are coming, which organisations, and what employers really, well, they commend our students actually every time when we ask for feedback. So do please keep this up, is our students are really well prepared. Compared with other universities, they ask great questions. They've prepared. They don't ask questions that people couldn't find out easily on the website. They're asking about the culture of the organisation or very specific projects they might work on. And one of the benefits of going increasingly is that people on the stands will be looking out for you and will actually if they're impressed, if they like what they're talking to you, you've asked intelligent questions, they'll probably take your name and they'll probably note it down so that if you apply, then they'll be looking out for your application when it

comes in. So the line then is, if you're going to a fair, you know, just be sort of clean and presentable. You don't need a suit. You don't even need the smart suit that you've got on today, Wontoe?

Wontoe T. Wontoe

But sometimes there's primarily some recruiters look at, like if you're going for the corporate role, perhaps wearing a suit maybe may help.

Jonathan Black

It may help, but they also know your students. Come on. So you might have just been playing rugby. I mean, they might, if you've had a wash, that's a good idea. But They know your students, so that's okay, and they were students once. Employers will usually see if they can dig up an Oxford graduate who's working for them, because then people understand the pressures that our students are going to be under, because they've done it themselves.

Wontoe T. Wontoe

Is it open to all students that each of these career fairs? Are there also specialised career fairs?

Jonathan Black

They're specialized by industry. Everybody's welcome at these. You don't have to be reading a STEM subject. You don't have to be an MPLS or medical sciences to come to that. If you're, I don't know, if you're very mathematical, but you've decided to do a humanities subject, science and engineering companies still need marketing people and they still need humanities people.

Wontoe T. Wontoe

Usually, what is the attendance like?

Jonathan Black

It's usually pretty busy. That'll be about 800 to 1000 students. undergrad and graduate students. You don't have to book, just turn up.

Wontoe T. Wontoe

Oh, that's good.

Jonathan Black

All you need is your BOD card. And we actually need your real BOD card. Please don't bring a photograph of it because we can't scan it. But we can scan it and then we give

you a label. That makes it really easy for employers to say, oh, I see you're reading chemistry, second year, great. And it helps to start a conversation.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

As A postgrad student, I'm I did my first master in public policy at Oxford, second in comparative international education. So I have a fair deal of some of the challenges when it comes to career. With postgraduate opportunity, there's a first year master and there is DPhil. Do you provide like specialised services to bend the needs of these two groups?

Jonathan Black

Yes, we do. And as we were talking before this, you know, there are more graduate students and undergraduates in this university, have been for a couple of years now. One year masters have a real challenge because, so what we do with that is they will be getting a dedicated hello and introduction to the career service in their inbox. and in years gone by that has a very high open rate. So people really open that because what we're trying to do is encourage the one-year masters to, before work kicks in and college life and social life and all the rest, do something about your career. Get that going now because in three weeks time you'll be overwhelmed with work and you'll be doing other things. So block some of that stuff in and then Later on, particularly with the DPhils, as you say, well, several of our careers advisors have a DPhil from Oxford, so they're very familiar with what it must have been like, what it is like to actually get through that DPhil over 3, four years. And 2 of them really focus on supporting DPhils and research staff as well. So, and again, all the programmes, the talks, the workshops, everything's open to everybody. Internships as well.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

That's very good to know. I think a lot of students don't realise that the services at the universities extremely applicable to all of them. I'm obviously an international student, so I do believe this in totally. The international students, which now makes up 45% of the student body population, I think they face very extreme difficulties and hurdles in getting to not just visa registration, but also unfamiliar recruitment systems. What support does the Career Service offer them, both for UK-based roles and opportunities abroad?

Jonathan Black

Right, yeah, and it's 45 overall, but it's 65% of graduate students are international. And the biggest five countries, China and the USA, about 2 1/2 thousand each from those two countries, and then Canada, India, Germany. So we have a page dedicated, which is labelled international students on our website, which has the wealth of information everything we do. There are a number of events, I imagine the most interesting one is

called visas for staying to work in the UK, that we co-deliver. Now we're not allowed to give visa advice, so we co-deliver that with our colleagues from the University's Student Immigration Service.

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I think one of the one of the incredible strain of Oxford is the magnificent way that the university is able to attract talent from abroad.

Jonathan Black

So we then have other talks like how to find employment in the UK, how to find employment in your home country, plus the regular, because it's going to be different from one country to another, our regular talks on how to write a CV, resume, cover letter, interview preparation. And we all see, I mean, I do this as well as careers advisors, see students of whatever sort and have a look to help on these sorts of things. We have subscriptions that students access for Going Global, which has 120 guides and 500 employment resources. Prospects.ac.uk, Target Jobs, all have country guides. So yes, we like international students, we want to support them. Again, all these, I think on our programmes like Oxford Strategy Challenge and so on, all students like really benefit from working with people from other cultures, backgrounds, because they bring different experiences.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Sure. And the other aspect I do want us to talk a bit about is the alumni association. Of course, one of the most on top resource at Oxford is the alumni association. But how can students make the most of the alumni association network for mentorship, for gardens and networking with our feeding overwhelmed, because I think this, if we get this right, this could probably bring thousands of employment opportunity there also, if not millions.

Jonathan Black

Right. Yes, alumni, there's probably 250, 300,000 Oxford alumni out there. About, well, the data I saw a few years ago was 3/4 of them are still in the UK, but that still leaves 75,000 outside the UK and in every continent. And there are alumni chapters, groupings of them, in the major cities of the world. Alumni are a resource. I think they can be incredible for careers advice. The question is how you reach them. So once upon a, I can think of a student I was talking to a few years ago who said she'd done some work in Spain on her course and she wanted to go into film subtitling in Spanish to English films. I know nothing about film subtitling. I mean, I read subtitles, but what's the, I mean, it's a very clever art because you can't transcribe everything, but you've got to get the essence over and it's got to be short enough people can read it before the next scene comes on. So she went on probably LinkedIn, she went to her college and she went to

her department to try to find an alum who was working in this field already to get advice from them. And that's really what I would use alumni for. The other places to go are your college, alumni office, and your department. Anybody you meet. So who, 5 to 10 years ahead of you, is working in this field who could give you some advice? So that would be what I, that's how. So I would use alumni. Work out what you want to find out about. In her case, it was film subtitling. But for others, it could be sustainable development or what have you. Who's working in it? And then say, I'm also at Oxford. I see you at my college 10 years ago. Could you spare 10 minutes of your time for some advice? So a classic information interview.

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Will you probably argue for a central database? Because Oxford is a very unique governance culture. I mean, obviously, each constituent colleges have their own independence to some extent.

Jonathan Black

Yes, there is a central development and alumni relationship system called DARS. It's mostly about development, which is known as fundraising. So it doesn't really collect information on people's careers. And it's used by a central university to record engagement. Now, I think, if you think about mid-career alumni, people in their 40s, they probably don't have that much free money. They've got families, they've got houses, they've got whatever, they're working on a job, but they still feel warmly to Oxford and they've got time or they can find some time to give a student advice. And what can be more flattering than being called up by a smart student at Oxford to say, I'd really value your advice. And so, you know, in 10 minutes you can write an e-mail to say, I would recommend you look at this, that and the other. I'm happy to review any document you've got and we could have a chat about actually that sector is not a great one, but this is really emerging as a great field. What a great way to help Oxford with no money changing hands yet, but one day it might. But even if it doesn't, it's a great treasure.

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I don't know if this already exists with the career service, but internal career opportunity where university staffs and systems and different offices can offer at least two students, an opportunity to intern, but they start already working in a career service programme. I think that's extremely effective.

Jonathan Black

Yes, so we run, we have within my group, we have the internship office that runs last year, this year just finishing, over 2,000 internships, which are exclusive to Oxford students. So this is on top of internships that, let's say, Deutsche Bank or whoever run

and are advertised widely. These are, you're only competing with other Oxford students. And that falls, they fall into three types. There is the summer internship programme, only about 400 of those, but they're long. They tend like 4 to 12 weeks. They tend to be outside the UK. They are research or business related. They might be based in the university or a research institute or in a business or a charity. They're generally financially supported as well. Very popular 6 to 1 application rate. They will start opening in January. Oh, that's really nice. Some of them come from alumni, some come from people we've used for years and years and years. And they are all over the world and students get an enormous amount out of those. So that's about 400 or so. And then the rest, well, no, then there's about 1500 micro internships, which are one week. generally, at the end of every term. So it's like 9th or 10th week of term. They can be remote or they can be local, could be in London, could be here. Our furthest away is South Australia. That's come from an alum, actually, an alumna who runs a food company there. And she's had lots of projects with the micro-interns. So that's a one-week project. And again, very popular, something for the CV, something about business that you can talk about, an exposure to something. And then there are the Crankstart internships for Crankstart scholars, undergraduates who've come from poorer social backgrounds. So they've got their own money and they can say, I want to work on this sort of company, like a fashion magazine in Helsinki. Okay, let's try and find you a way to do an internship. So as for, yes, some of those micro-internships have come from the university. They've come from the Bodleian Library, the Ashmolean, those sorts of places. And indeed, summer internships have occasionally come from those institutes as well.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Sure. And are there like specific internships from university services and offices. Because that part of it, I was literally thinking about this, because I'm very much interested in the career service. I do think, let's say for instance, you have internship in the RT service every year providing 2 students. You probably in the diversity of face, you have two students. As far as in a VC office too, I think that that's an incredible way to be able to help students.

Jonathan Black

That would be good. Mike, we do have micro-internship projects that happen in places like, well, we've used them for particular projects. The thing about our internships is you're not just turning up to help out in the office. It has to be a dedicated project with a supervisor. Who's that you're going to work on this, maybe with another student?

Wantoe T. Wantoe

He seems to have extremely huge experience, and obviously, seven a decade also means there's so many experience. I like us to ship a bit to undergraduate. There's a

very fascinating cultural year. Some undergraduate feel pressure to follow visible careers, path like consulting, law, finance, or some other career. How does the Career Survey help them discover and prepare for less visible sectors such as credit, industry, non-profit or international development?

Jonathan Black

Good point. I think 50 years ago we were, I think this issue has been going on forever that people think all we do are the city jobs, ABCL, accounting, banking, consulting and law. I think that's partly because all those companies spend a great deal of money to promote. Why do they spend the money? Because I can say something, I could question whether law firms are really that different from each other or banks or consulting companies compared with media companies. But anyway, so they spend a lot of money, so they look very visible and they get out of the blocks early. So students might feel peer pressure, they're at dinner and their friends down the table are saying, oh, I've already landed my internship at this bank or this consulting company. And people who don't want to do that feel, oh, I'm behind the curve, I'm missing out. And please, don't feel that. One of the biggest challenges for students is peer pressure, and after that is parental pressure. And indeed an internal pressure to think, well, I got 45 IB, I got 5A stars at A level, I got whatever, and now I'm at Oxford. I should be on this trajectory that's taking me to, you know, the Foreign Office, Goldman Sachs, McKinsey, whatever. There are lots of jobs out there that are very valuable. And as you mentioned, so the people you won't see at the careers fairs are people who don't need to be there, like the BBC, National Trust, Oxfam. Everyone's heard of them and knows how to apply to them. So they won't How do we help by broadening the range? So the insight programmes we run, which are hands-on workshops, insight to publishing, into creative writing, into pharmaceuticals, into medicine, our Making a Difference programme, which we launched last year, I thought, well, you know, this is all about understanding, learning and doing a real project in the third sector, charity or social enterprise. and we thought we could probably, if we have 50, we could make it work. Well, 150 applied. Oh wow. So I thought, okay, we're on to something. I know. So we took 50 and it ran really successfully. And then we thought, well, We are meant to be here for education, so we better double the size of this. So this year, we've squeezed the programme, all the workshops and everything's in there still, 50 this term and another 50 next term in Hillary's, that'll be 100. So if you don't want to apply this term, apply next term. So that's called making a difference because increasingly, we see students who say, I'm attracted to the city or to this, but actually what I want is a job with real purpose that I want to get up in the morning and do. Now, similar to that, our Creative Careers Week, which is next term, is all about creative careers, whether it's film and high-end TV, or it's publishing, or it's journalism, or arts and heritage sort of areas. So again, for students who want to do that, then there's that. And then just to loop back to DPhils and researchers, in 10th week of Hillary term is our annual careers beyond academia. And if

I were to add a broader point for everybody, and that is, Work, your academic work and research is not separate from your career. Use these skills that you're developing in the curriculum, in your studies, in your tutorials, if you're an undergraduate, in your supervisions, in your bodleian research. Those skills are all valued by employers. So don't think, oh no, that's not for, that careers is different. It's all part of, you're all one person. So use those skills.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Sure. And a lot of students often ask how to build employability skills outside of their studies. How do you think programs like Oxford Strategy challenge and the insight, for instance, how do you think this program schemes help students to gain practical skills and what feedback Have you seen from participant?

Jonathan Black

So that program started within a term of me arriving. Actually, two students came to me and said, we should do something like this. In those days, it was a four-day training program and it ran all terms. The students, the strategy, the student consultancy, it was called. COVID arrived. So that ran every term. COVID arrived and we thought, well, obviously we do it online. So it became a week. Excuse me. Became a week. And that's how it continues and it's sort of a mixture of in-person and online. Let's back up to your question. What are employability skills? What do employers look for? Well, your academic degree is, if I may say, a sort of ticket to the game. So, yep, and it gets you in the game that you've got an Oxford degree, whether it be undergraduate, masters, postgrad, whatever. So that's a good start, but that is not enough to get a job. You can't just say, I went to Oxford. I mean, some people may think that, just not true. You are up against Cambridge, Imperial, Stockholm, Sorbonne.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

So the discipline is just getting a degree from Oxford is not sufficient to get a job.

Jonathan Black

It's certainly not sufficient. If that's one message to take home, that would be good.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

That's probably a very interesting message. We're probably going to. make this like a headline message. Just going to Oxford is not sufficient to get a degree. I probably agree with you though.

Jonathan Black

It's a bit negative. However, yes, it isn't enough, but don't worry because you are gaining all those other skills.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

What do we mean?

Jonathan Black

What do we need for employability skills? We have a list of these on the website. We've picked on 8. If you look at the World Economic Forum, they've got like 20. It depends who you ask. But let's go with the eight we've used for a few years. And this is a side from, obviously, if you're going to be a doctor, you do need the medical qualifications. If you're going to be an accountant, you need those qualifications or chemist. But generally, employability skills they'll be assessing are things like teamwork. So can you show that you work, can you demonstrate that you work well in a team? And of course you can, because you've played sport. Even if it's like second rugby team in for college, or you've rowed in the third boat, or you've played squash, whatever. Or it could be music, or it could be drama, or it could be volunteering. Anything, teamwork, leadership, communication, problems, you're already picking up. Many of the skills, by just surviving an Oxford education, you are definitely showing communication because you have to in tutorials for undergraduates. You have to show planning. You've got to plan your week very carefully to achieve everything and so on. But the ones I would love people to focus on are the ones where our employers tell us our students are weaker than average students. And they are teamwork and business awareness. So it's about demonstrating these skills. So don't feel you've got to go out and join a sports team if that's not your thing, but your thing might be music. Anything that shows you have to turn up and stay and join in whatever the weather. And business awareness doesn't mean you read the Financial Times cover to cover every day or The Economist or whatever. It just means the subject you're studying or the industry you want to go into. Let's do a bit of background reading around that particular thing. What are the issues facing the law industry at the moment? AI is obviously one. What about accountancy? What are the issues there? What's going on? We do run programs, introduction to business and strategy and business and so on. So again, to give you the basics of what, how a business works, it's not difficult. So, but it is just getting vocabulary.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Sure, and finally, I can believe we reached our final point of discussion. How can the Student Union work more closely with the Career Service to make career opportunities more visible and accessible? And what message would you like to leave Oxford students with as they think about their pathway and possibilities?

Jonathan Black

Well, we want to work with anybody and the Student Union is an ideal place because of your contacts with students to get over the messages about what what opportunities

are out there. So just get engaged. One of my colleagues says, her one piece of advice is go and use the careers service early in your university career, because at least you'll know what's on offer. And open the weekly e-mail. I mean, 65% of people already do open it, but just check, is there something coming up here that could be useful? You'll be very, very busy, I know, by 4th week there's a lot going on. But if there's a talk, or whatever in the subject, then do go. And to work with you guys. I think the other thing we could learn with the student union is in the other direction. You're closer to students. I mean, we see them every day, but you're closer to them in a way and you'll be able to feed back to us. This is what they're really worried about. They're worried about the economy, about AI, about visas, about the effects. So we can keep that conversation open that you can feed that back to us. The message to leave Oxford students, I think I've mentioned some of these already. Keep an open mind, get involved early and talk to people. Yeah, practice. So the other thing I suppose is if you think where do I really want to be in five years time or 10 years time before I'm 30, well I'm 28, whatever the time period is, that will help you. And you don't have to define the exact job, but if you say, I want to do roughly this, I want to be having a purposeful job, helping other people in the sustainable energy sector, write it down, put it away, and then somehow the unconscious mind goes to work to show you, go to this lecture, go to that talk, get involved in that, don't waste your time with this. So that can help you. But yeah, go to the career service, read the newsletter, Come to some fairs, even if you then don't, we don't see you for, three months while you get on, and please focus on your academic work, because without that, the other bit doesn't really work.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Great. Thank you so much to Mr. Black for such a very practical conversation. Thank you for the rich and practical conversation. Your insight on opening pathway and creating possibility for all students are deeply appreciated. So that listeners, our Oxford Student Voices, is a student-led podcast series by the Oxford Student Union. It was developed by the Office of President for Postgraduate to create a space where student decision makers engage directly on the issues that shape the university life. Each episode brings student priorities in the dialogue with the university, helping us imagine and build a more cohesive Oxford together. This has been an incredible time sitting with Mr. Jennyton Black, the Director of Career Service at the University of Oxford. My name is Wonto T. Wonto. I am the President for Postgraduate at the University of Oxford Student Union. Thank you so much.