

# The Schwarzman Centre: Students, Humanities, and the Future of Knowledge at Oxford

## Transcript

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

What does it mean actually to study the humanities at Oxford right now? And who is this place for? Those are questions I've been sitting with a lot lately and they are exactly what I want to dig into today's episode. Welcome to our Oxford Student Voice, a podcast by Oxford Student Union. My name is Wonto Tiawonto, and I'm the President for Postgraduate at the Oxford Student Union. This series exists for one reason, to put students in direct conversation with the people who are actually shaping this university, so we can ask the questions that matter to us directly. Every episode, I sit down with someone whose decision ideas or leadership affect the over 26,000 students at Oxford. Not to give them a platform to deliver prepared remarks, but to have real conversation. The kind where we both say something we did not expect to do. Today's guest is Professor Daniel Grimley. He is the professor of music at Oxford. And since 2022, he has been head of the humanity division, which means he leads research, teaching, and governance across one of the broadest and most story parts of this university. He is also the academic lead for the Stephen A. Swartman Center for Humanities Division, which is one of the most significant developments Oxford has seen in years and which most students, if honest, still don't understand fully. What I want to explore today is not the institutional story. It is the human one. Professor Daniel grew up at a state comprehensive school. His research is about how landscape and environment shape how we think and how we feel. He has supervised over 19 doctoral students to completion, which is extremely impressive. And the student union recognized him for assistance in postgraduate supervision, which is a vote of confidence from students themselves, not from colleagues. That tells me something impressive. On a personal note, I've had the privilege to sit with Professor Gremley across multiple senior leadership committees in the university, from council to prac. And so this is a very fascinating conversation, which I'm very much excited about. And also, we have an incredible collaboration with the Humanity Division, directly supported by Professor Gremley for the postgraduate series. Professor Daniel, welcome. I'm glad you made it time to join us today.

Professor Daniel Grimley

Hi, Wonto. It's really good to be with you. Thanks for that very kind introduction.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

Thank you very much. Before we, you know, get into building a strategy, I want to start somewhere more personal. You grew up growing in a state comprehensive school, and now you are heading one of the most prestigious academic divisions in the world. How do you hold those two things together?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Oh, that's a really great question. So, when I look back, I think about my own family background. My dad came from a very working-class family, was first-gen university. My mom was a nurse. So, going to university gave me a really powerful sense of education as a form of social mobility, the way it can really transform people's lives. And I think that has meant that I've always felt very committed to access and widening participation, and also to making that opportunity available to others. But I think for me it meant that I went to university without that sense of confidence, that was a place that was really for me. And I think going through that experience, developing that sense of self-reliance, that's what's really stood me in good stead and I hope that I can pass that on to my students and colleagues.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

That's very incredible. The other aspect of this story is your research is about music, which is very interesting. When I first saw it online, I was like, oh, wow, I didn't know Professor Grimley is involved in music. But the music and landscape, how does the environment, which we are currently shaping, make you feel and think about music? And does that lens ever travel with you into leadership work?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yes, I think it probably does. So I think for me, I cannot imagine a world without sound and music. Sound and music shape almost everything that I feel that I do in the world and my relations with my friends, with my colleagues, my students, and everyone around me. So thinking about the way that music and sound can give us insights into the environment around us, that's part of what I think is underpinning my research. And then how do I take that? into my leadership? Well, I think one of the things to say would be, I think it's about listening and trying to respond to those signals that you get from the world around you. And also maybe thinking about how to bring people so that they're working together more effectively as an ensemble. That's something that musicians do all the time whenever you're playing in a band or an orchestra or singing in a choir. It's that sense of the added value that operating as a community gives you. And that seems to me to be a really strong model for how we can work together to make life better for all of us.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

Yeah. And one of the very interesting aspects is that you have a very long-standing relationship with the student union. That's way back, I think it was in 2016 or something. So the student union voted you and recognized you for excellence in postgraduate supervision, which students themselves voted, not your colleague. That means something which is not ready, you know, talk about a whole lot. But the other thing is, how do you think they saw in your approach that made a difference? And how does they, you know, build that understanding of students with the work you do?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yes, well, I was hugely flattered with that award, and it was completely unexpected. And I don't really understand why I was nominated, but thank you to the students who put my name forward. So I've always felt that I learn as much from the students as they're ever going to learn from me. So for me, supervision teaching is very much about a dialogue. And I think my approach to postgraduate supervision in particular is about trying to help my students to find and articulate their own voice so that they are able to explore their own ideas, their arguments, as rigorously and as clearly and as robustly as possible. So it's really about helping them with their projects rather than trying to shape them in any kind of preform template.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

That's very interesting. Could you maybe, give a broader example about this aspect, like finding their voice? It's a very interesting topic, especially with Oxford, which a lot of students primarily are looking for means where they can be able to find their voice, where they can be able to, you know, articulate. Probably on a personal note, part of the reason why we created a podcast in the 1st place so that students can have that direct understanding with our senior leadership members of the university, giving them a voice, but also interacting with them on how they can be able to find their voice across the university. So are there specific, you know, kind of example you would like to illustrate?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Absolutely. I think it's really important that we have that space for students to to speak, to talk about what's important to them, to say this is what makes a difference. And then for us as senior leaders to understand and explore with our students how we can accomplish that together. And so for me, thinking about that experience of working with a really diverse range of different kinds of PhD projects, from students with very, very different kinds of backgrounds, I think I'm always struck by how much I am learning in the first year about what is it that a student wants to do, how they want to write, what it is that they feel is important about their project. And so I think for me, one of my first students was a Turkish student who wanted to write about Finnish music. And that was such an amazing conjunction of very different kinds of cultural worldviews. And that

made me really think again about my own research field, how I understood cultural difference, how I understood the way that language and history work. And I think really helping him to articulate what his project was, was a really formative experience for me. And I think that was one of my very first experiences as a doctoral supervisor. And I think I've learned an awful lot since then from my students after him.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

That's really, really, really detailed and impressive as well. One of the other interesting aspects is the Swarthman Center, which is one of the most impressive accomplishments in the history of the university. And I want us to talk a bit about it. A lot of students know it as that expensive new building, glamorous, and full of new art and space. But beyond that, if you do have one minute with a first-year student who primarily never heard of it before, what would you want them to know?

Professor Daniel Grimley

So I think the first thing is that this is a space for them. This is a space for our students. And I think what's really transformative about it is it's the first time that we've had seven humanities faculties under a single roof. Just so that coming together of students from all sorts of different subjects and disciplinary backgrounds and cultures in different parts of the world, That's an extraordinary opportunity and it allows you to meet people you'd never ordinarily meet in another capacity. So I think that sense of come into the building, be open, meet people, have those conversations, that's really what a university should be about. And I think the Schwarzon Centre is really there to accelerate that process of encounter and exchange.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

Yeah, and I do think there's also a lot of opportunities that primarily a lot of students don't talk about, which is institutional as well. Just looking at the project in itself, do you think there are specific kind of avenues that students should embrace, that should be anticipating as well?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yes, so I think one of the things that the Schwartz Centre does is it means that there are lots of different kinds of teaching opportunities, different kinds of seminars and conversations that are happening in the building all the time. And for the first time, we can timetable those centrally as well. So this means that as a student, you've got the opportunity to go and hear lectures outside your own subject field, which could really change the way that you think about your own discipline. But over and above that, the other thing about the Shorteston Centre is it has an amazing suite of performance venues. So we have a theatre and a concert hall and cinema, a black box, which is a digital immersive space. We have a cultural programme that is going to be curating

events in those spaces. And we really want the cultural programme to be working with our students so that we are co-creating a programme of events with you. That's Going to be something we'll have to work on together, so we're still learning how to do this. I think one of the things I often say about the Schwartzman Centre is, although we are 850 years old as a university. The Schwartzman Centre is very much a start-up. So we're going to have to do it from scratch. But that's really exciting. So we want to have that conversation, come be part of that, help us shape this new space together so that we really own it as a community.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

Yeah, and just talking about a cultural event, I did see online that one of the guests that's primarily come here is the actress, Cynthia. I think from Black Panther or something, which is a lot of students are primarily excited about it. But one of the things that I capture from what you highlighted, Professor Gremley, is that it brings together performance, scholarship, and public engagement. But when a student walks through the door, what does that actually look like in practice? What might they do there that they could not do anywhere else? Because there are multiple buildings, and Swatman is primarily one of the kind of state-of-the-art building that transitioned academics in different dimensions. Just in a way, when I walked there as a first-year student, what I may see it in the center that I may not see in a Life in Mind building or in other buildings across also.

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yeah, that's That's a great question. So the first thing that you see when you walk into the front door from either side, because it's got front doors of both the north and south, is you come into the Great Hall, which is under this beautiful glass timber dome. And the Great Hall is a space for gathering, for people to come together to have those incidental conversations. You can grab a coffee, you can get some lunch, you can have an informal meeting, you can bump in somebody you haven't seen for weeks, you can meet new people. And I think what you'll be struck by is just that buzz of activity that's already in the building. And I think that's a really great tribute to what the humanities does. Humanities brings people together in a space that's not intimidating, but is inspiring. And it's a place that is shaped by that human scale, but also speaks to the idea that together we can achieve more than the sum of our individual parts.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

Great. And I found this connection very interesting because your research is about how physical spaces shape how we experience meaning. So in the context of that, do you think that the Swatman Centre as a space in itself is actually going to change how students think, not just what they do, but how they think practically in a kind of student perspective?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yeah, I hope so. And I hope that it can do that by supporting conversations by supporting the idea of the student voice. So we've thought really hard about, well, the physical acoustics of the building. So it is a place where you can hear yourself think and speak. It's not a place where you're going to feel drowned out. And I think it's really important also that we ensure that that isn't just a physical sense of being drowned out. It really is true students feel that they're able to have their kinds of challenging conversations, which university is all about, where you're encountering people with very different opinions and you can have that dialogue in a respectful, intensive, dignified way. And that also these conversations can then be taken out and can engage a broader public. And that seems to me to be one of the great things that the Schwarzon Centre could achieve because it's a public as well as university space. It's bringing those very different kinds of audiences and communities together. And for me, I think we all benefit from that kind of encounter.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

You know, that's a very interesting way also. One of the other things that's primarily, and it's not just unique to the Swartman Center, is this idea of, you know, being participant and spectators. There is a bigger break here with flagship building spaces that student feels like spectator rather than participants. And giving help, with the cultural center, which is extremely impressive. How do you, How will you stop that from happening with this space? And I see the well intention where you as a champion for students being recognised by the student union. I'm sure this is something that primarily the Swatman Centre looks to be able to change from inclusively generating students from being participants to also curating that space as well.

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yeah, that's a really important one. We absolutely don't want to fall back into the old template of the spectator versus the participant. It has to be a much more collaborative space. So I think this is where the idea of having a dialogue and a conversation becomes really critical. So we want to talk to student groups about how we can work together so that they can use the spaces for rehearsals, for workshops, for performances. That doesn't mean to say that we'll be able to offer spaces all the time, because there will be conflicting demands on those spaces, but I think understanding what are the really key student needs and how can we support those, how can we work together with you as a student community so that we are really helping to advance what it is that you want to do, I think that's really important so the building is truly animated by that student participatory presence. And then also bringing students into our curating and our programming, so meeting with students on a termly or monthly basis. So we can talk to you about what is it that you would like to see? Who would you like to

come and talk to? How can we open out some of those performances so that they aren't simply spectator events, but they become more discursive? I think that's the kind of thing where we've got amazing potential. And we're really good at this in university. The Schwarzon Centre just gives us a whole new platform for creating that sort of collaborative framework.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

Yeah, and I'm truly excited about this issue, but I'm very fascinated about this centre. I've had the privilege of being there and I've had the privilege of being supported as a student union with projects as well. So this is very fascinating. Professor Graham, one of the biggest conversations across Oxford is AI, artificial intelligence. It's a very fascinating kind of conversation. AI is everywhere right now. And a lot of humanities students are having a particular complicated relationship with it, not just unique to humanities students, but across the university. Some feel a bit threatened about it, some are excited about it, many are just confused about it, where it fits in disciplines, and they are fundamental about human meaning as well. You know, I always say this all the time. We do not have all the answers, but we are bracing for you as a university. Where do you sit on that?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yeah, I think those are really pressing questions, Wonto. And I think you're quite right that we don't have all the answers to those challenges yet. So I think this is a learning opportunity for, well, for the world, of course, because the technology is moving so fast. What I do think AI gives us is a moment to reflect upon and treasure what it is that human beings can do uniquely that machines will never be able to reproduce. And that is around empathy, around a depth of connection, around a kind of... critical approach to knowledge and how we use and share knowledge that I think is going to become ever more important. And alongside that, I think also respect for the material. So if we are thinking about the world as a born digital space, How can we then treasure and value the analogue, that sense of the tactile, the human-made, those things that cannot be recreated in electronic or digital form? So those are all, I think, questions about values, about ethics, about human agency. And those are all questions actually which lie at the very heart of what we do as humanists, as humanities researchers and teachers. So in some ways, I think there's a great deal of consonance here between the way in which our disciplines have evolved and the space in which AI is now emerging. But of course, I think there are very, very practical considerations which we're going to have to work together to try and address effectively. And that includes things like the anxieties around plagiarism, around assessments, around interviews around access, around digital equity. We don't have the answers yet, but we are working as hard as we can to listen to our students, to our teachers. learning from other institutions, trying to engage the wider AI community in conversations about how we can take forward a responsible

model for AI. That's going to take time. And of course, this technology is moving very fast. But the more that we are talking about it and addressing those challenges upfront, the better prepared we can be.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

I agree. I agree. And there's a practical nature of it as well, that curriculum have to transition because of AI. Is the division actively retaking how humanities are taught in response to that, or is it still in the early days?

Professor Daniel Grimley

No, I think we've been thinking about it for a while now. And I think what it's done is it's made us think again about the importance of the in-person educational experience, whether that's in lectures or in seminars or in tutorial groups. I think it's also about giving both our teachers and our students the tools, the training, so that they understand how to use AI responsibly. It's in no one's interest to use AI to try and gain or cheat the system, but you can use AI to advance or accelerate certain parts of your learning through the analysis of big data sets or through other kinds of access to data that simply wouldn't be possible otherwise. So think about the way in which we can adapt those tools, shape them so they're really supporting our core questions, that seems to me to be what we have been doing and what we'll continue to do in the coming months.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

That's really a very unique way to place it. I'm also thinking that there's going to be a lot of transition across a lot of divisions as well with the nature of AI, new courses, new discipline, new jobs, rethinking jobs in so many ways as well. Access is something that I care deeply about, and I imagine you do too as well, given your own background. But I want to push you a little bit. Access often means getting students through the door. The harder questions is whether they actually belong once they are inside the door. What are you doing about that? And especially with the Swartman Center, access will be very critical as well. Is this something that you are thinking of redefining? with the new challenge as well.

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yeah, those are really foundational challenges, aren't they? I mean, I think that's that question of the point you rightly make about it's not just about the admissions process, it's also about taking care of our students once they're on course and ensuring that their experience in Oxford is as positive and productive and that they feel as well supported as they possibly can be. I mean, that was That was very much my experience as a student coming from my background and feeling, to be honest, all at sea when I first arrived. And I am so grateful to the tutors and my future doctoral supervisor who took

such great care of me. That's why I got through and went on to my career. So I think there are a number of things there. One, I think, is being really careful about the language that we use and trying to be as accessible and as transparent. In the way that we talk to our students, talk to each other, and creating that culture where students feel able to articulate their anxieties, their concerns, and that they feel they're being taken seriously. And I think really taking care of those spaces so that the student voice is heard and responded to, that's really critical. I think the other thing is working with our students so that we have strong student representation in our committees, so that if there are system problems or processes that aren't working, we can identify those and work with our student colleagues together so that we can try and fix them. And again, I think that's about delivering on that commitment that we have to you as students, as universities, so that you feel valued and that your student journey through the course also really matters. And then I think the final thing is really to ensure we deliver on that collaborative opportunity that the Schwartzman Centre offers. And that will mean working with our student colleagues so that we make spaces available when we can in a way that is sustainable so that we can support student activity, whether it's part of degree course learning, or it's extracurricular activity, which we know has all sorts of wider social benefits for well-being, mental health, and so on.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

I agree. And I do believe with your background from the state comprehensive school, you probably do understand a lot about access. The other thing that is also very fascinating about Oxford that I've very much seen a lot in is the tradition year. Also carry a lot of tradition, which is genuinely valuable, and you can also feel like a war? Or how do you balance preserving what's worth keeping and making room for what needs to be changed?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Oh, yeah, that's a great question. So I think it's really about holding on to values. And when I think about what the humanities represents, and how that's reflected in our traditions, I like to think that our traditions are based on fundamental commitments to respect, to dignity, to the value of learning, to education, to that curiosity, that openness to new ideas and to different points of view. And I think those are the reasons why traditions should be sustained. And I think that's also the basis for innovation and thinking about how we can change the way that we do things too. So for me, it's articulating what those values are, understanding them, sharing them, talking about them. That's the way in which we can resolve that tension. So it's a much more constant process.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

Sure. And I do agree. Also, primarily, we will shift a bit to where we started, which is the Swartman Center. And I want us to, you know, end where we started with the students. When a student walk into the Schwabman Centre for the first time, maybe nervous, maybe not sure specifically whether they belong there, what do you hope they feel in that moment, specifically around that aspect, which is pretty much a common theme? A lot of students are so much excited about the centre and they are primarily looking at how they fit in. What would you want to share to them?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Yeah, it's exactly that sense of excitement. and curiosity. It's what's going on in here? What is that conversation about? What is that show going to give me that's going to change the way I think about the world? How is going to a concert or a play this evening, how is that going to change my life? And it might be in completely unexpected ways. It might be the conversation you have with a person sitting next to you in the audience that suddenly makes you think completely differently about some music. thought you knew. It might be that chance encounter with somebody whose work you've been following for a long time. It might be a sense of, oh my goodness, I could put together a seminar or a conversation or a colloquium or a talk on those subjects. Or going there for an award ceremony or some kind of public event. It's that sense of the unexpected that changes the way you think about the world. That's what I think I want to hold on to.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

That's very interesting. This has been a really, truly fascinating conversation. Is there something primarily that you want to share in a final closing?

Professor Daniel Grimley

Oh, I want to say just how grateful we are to the Student Union for everything that you do for our student colleagues and how much we appreciate all your work, Bonte. So thank you for that.

Wantoe Teah Wantoe

Daniel, thank you. What I've been taking away from this conversation is that Swarthman Centre isn't just about a building. is a question Oxford is asking itself about who the humanities are for and who gets to shape them. I hope our student list didn't feel like that question includes them. You have been listening to our Oxford Student Voice, a podcast by the Oxford Student Union. If this conversation may you think, share it with someone who should be part of it. We'll see you next time. And it's been a tremendous privilege hosting a Professor Daniel Gremley year at the Oxford Student Voice. Thank you.