

The 'Tanner Scheme' at Hertford College.
Widening Access, Reforming Oxford, 1965-85

Lawrence Goldman
St. Peter's College
Oxford

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Introduction:

For some twenty years between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, Hertford College, Oxford admitted approximately 450 undergraduates using what became known as ‘the Tanner Scheme’, named after one of its originators and its most tenacious advocate, Neil Tanner, Hertford’s physics tutor. Most of these students came from schools without a history of sending pupils to Oxford or Cambridge; many would not have applied to Oxford if the scheme had not existed. Controversial but highly successful, this alternative method of bringing talented young people to the university, women as well as men, changed their lives and transformed the standing of Hertford College inside a generation. It also influenced other colleges and ultimately led to the reform of undergraduate admission to Oxford as set out by the Dover Committee in 1983, a university commission of enquiry which established some of the methods and practices still used to admit undergraduates today. While the prevailing approach now to the perennially controversial issue of admission to Oxford does not favour all the methods of the Tanner scheme and of others like it that developed during the same period, their collective success may help in the design of new programmes to make the university more accessible to students from less-favoured schools and backgrounds.

The Tanner Scheme is certainly not forgotten; it has been celebrated in Hertford College and was recently discussed in an article on Oxford admissions in a national newspaper.¹ But as the procedures for entry to Oxford and other universities change, and as public debate over ‘access’ becomes yet more acute, the telling of its history may make a contribution to thinking afresh about how to make the ancient universities more open to all potential students. It was in order to find academic ‘potential’ in hitherto neglected schools and locations that the Scheme was designed. As the report that follows will demonstrate, Neil

¹ Hertford College, Oxford, ‘Celebrating the Tanner Revolution in Hertford and Oxford Admissions’, 5 September 2015. Dia Chakravarty, ‘Success at Oxford is about work ethic, not background’, Sunday Telegraph, 26 May 2018.

Tanner and his colleagues were not crusading social reformers but college tutors looking for talent. Though the Tanner scheme is associated with a single college, it actually emerged from experiments with undergraduate admissions that several Oxford colleges had begun in the early 1960s before Hertford. Meanwhile the success of the Hertford scheme itself in the 1970s influenced many colleges in Oxford to adopt its characteristic procedures; so many, in fact, had begun to follow Hertford's example that it became necessary to reform the admissions system as a whole twenty years after Hertford began the widening of access to the college. For these reasons, the Tanner scheme is not a peculiarity of a single college, but is of wider significance to the whole debate on Oxbridge admissions today, and offers examples that could be followed now and in the future to deal with a set of present-day problems that were familiar to Neil Tanner when the new procedures began. As one Hertford alumnus who came to the college in 1969 on the Tanner scheme recently reflected

I now work with young people from state schools on the verge of going to university and find it interesting how even the more academically talented don't bother to apply to Oxbridge because they think they will not fit in or not be able to manage the work. The university has such a high-status and intense image that those without the self-confidence engendered by their school or family shy away.²

The report that follows was written while the university was debating how best to respond to criticisms in July 2018 from the Office for Students, the university sector regulator, of its over-representation of students educated in private schools and under-representation of those drawn from educationally and socially deprived backgrounds.³ As my research has drawn to a close, Oxford has announced two new schemes to address these imbalances, designed to better prepare students from maintained ('state') schools for the level of academic work required as undergraduates: Opportunity Oxford and Foundation Oxford.⁴ The former will provide structured preparation, including a summer school, for incoming state school

² 2015 survey of Tanner Scheme Alumni conducted by the Hertford College Development Office, Oxford, for the 'Tanner Day', 5 September 2015.

³ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/oxford-and-cambridge-singled-out-access-new-regulator>

⁴ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-05-20-two-new-oxford-initiatives-help-students-under-represented-backgrounds>

undergraduates before matriculation. The latter will offer a full foundation year of preparation for potential students. This history is timely, therefore, and may provide perspective on both the problem of Oxford's unbalanced intake, and the solutions being tried.

The report is based on research in the archives of Hertford and several other Oxford colleges, as well as the Oxford University Archives which hold the extensive collection of the Oxford Colleges Admissions Office, the body that oversaw admissions during the period of the Tanner scheme and with which Neil Tanner was in frequent, sometimes intense, though generally good-natured, conflict. These archival sources have made it possible to reconstruct the administrative history of the Tanner scheme, and its place in the life of Hertford and in the university over the span of a generation. Unfortunately, the college has no lists of those who came annually to Hertford under the scheme, probably because none were ever compiled, let alone kept. It's an omission that says a lot about the aims and spirit of the scheme, as I discuss below. I have benefited enormously from talking to former tutors in Hertford College who administered the scheme, and to those who knew Neil Tanner more widely. The most compelling sources are the recollections of those who were themselves admitted as undergraduates via the Tanner scheme. In 2015, in preparation for the college's 'Tanner Day' which celebrated Hertford's initiative, many 'Tanner students' sent in their memories of the scheme and of its chief designer. Subsequently, 38 alumni responded in detail to a questionnaire sent out in 2018 and I am especially grateful to them. These sources have been used extensively, notably in section 6 below, to investigate the experience of coming to Hertford by this unorthodox route. To spare blushes and protect the innocent the quotations and reminiscences are presented anonymously.

1. Origins and Context of the Tanner Scheme

The Tanner Scheme emerged at a singular moment in the history of British higher education, the expansion and modernisation of the university system in the early 1960s. More students were being accepted by more universities, among them the seven 'new universities' founded in this era: York, UEA, Sussex, Essex, Kent, Lancaster and Warwick. Expansion won political support from the government's Robbins Committee on Higher Education in 1963 and its articulation of the famous 'Robbins principle' that university places 'should be

available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment'. The question was whether Oxford would be attractive and open to this new generation of undergraduates.

Up to this point there was no unified Oxford admissions system; candidates applied to colleges individually – often to several simultaneously – and each college had its own procedures and entrance tests. To keep up with the national changes, therefore, Oxford and Cambridge joined UCCA (the Universities Central Council on Admissions 1963-1993, now UCAS) which organised a national system of university application and acceptance. Within Oxford, the Oxford Colleges Admissions Office (OCAO) was established in 1963 by the colleges acting together. Each college paid an annual levy to maintain the new office, which had a small permanent staff. Policy and procedure were determined by a management committee of academics answerable to the colleges as a whole. As before, undergraduate admission was a college responsibility and each college made its own decisions on whom to admit, but collective decisions and actions were now expected and gradually became the norm. It is interesting to note that the first unitary Oxford prospectus for admission, containing information on all courses, departments and colleges, was issued as late as 1965. Nothing can better demonstrate the complexity of Oxford admissions and the impenetrability of the university up to that point than the booklet prepared for those wishing to begin their undergraduate studies in the previous year: 'The Procedure for Admission to Men's Colleges of Oxford University and of the Entrance Awards Offered by Them'. Byzantine in its detail and obscurity, it will have deterred all those who did not already know Oxford.⁵

In Oxford, the investigations of the Franks Commission in 1964-6 into the structure and organisation of the university – really, the origins of the modern Oxford we know – quickened interest in change of all types and gave reformers a chance to influence the university's procedures. Franks took evidence on the admissions system then in play and on the restricted social and educational background of the undergraduate intake. The questionnaire the commission sent out to colleges on teaching and research included a long section of inquiries on the admission of undergraduates, including one on the consideration of

⁵ See 'Other Booklets on Admissions', AD 2/2/1a, Oxford University Archives.

the social background of applicants.⁶ The questionnaire asked whether '(7) In making admissions decisions, does your college give special consideration to (a) Those who have not taken A-levels and are in the second year sixth, or (b) Those whose social background may have placed them at a disadvantage'. Hertford's reply was a portent of the Tanner Scheme: 'We attempt to consider the potential of each candidate and certainly take into account disadvantage such as 2nd year VI form or social background. At the moment we are exploring the possibility of making special arrangements for such candidates'.⁷ The university was not only accepting more undergraduates at this stage but also expanding its academic staff across all subjects, and many colleges elected new, younger fellows at this time. This was certainly the case in Hertford itself, where the new tutors were dissatisfied with the academic performance and reputation of the college, its low position in the Norrington Table, and its reliance on applicants from a comparatively narrow range of fee-paying schools. Neil Tanner 'jibbed at the quality of students who were applying from independent schools.'⁸

There are several different versions of the origins of the Tanner Scheme. Julian Tanner recalls that his father visited a northern grammar schools and sat at lunch between two clever seventeen-year-old physicists to whom he offered places at Hertford on the spot. He expected to have to explain himself to his colleagues on his return to Oxford, but they welcomed the initiative and built on it.⁹ Keith McLauchlan, the Chemistry tutor, recalls the incident and confirms it, but thinks it occurred later, once the Tanner scheme was already underway.¹⁰ Meanwhile, a Hertford alumnus, who matriculated (came up) in 1962, some three years before the scheme was formally launched, recalls being

recruited directly by Neil, initially by telephone in response to a letter I wrote him, and I joined a substantial number of undergraduates admitted from Northern grammar schools that year. Perhaps we were part of an unofficial pilot scheme of his?¹¹

⁶ Lord Franks (University of Oxford: Commission of Inquiry) to all heads of societies, 14 July 1964. See Principal's Collections, Hertford College Archives (hereafter HCA) 34/2/13/3. Laurence Brockliss, *The University of Oxford. A History* (Oxford, 2016), 563-71.

⁷ Hertford College, Reply to the Franks questionnaire, 'Oct. 28/2', HCA 34/2/13/3.

⁸ Interview with Dr. Robin Devenish, Hertford College, 27 March 2019.

⁹ Interview with Julian Tanner, London, 15 March 2019.

¹⁰ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, Hertford College, 28 March 2019.

¹¹ Tanner Scheme Alumni, 2015, Hertford College.

This would suggest a degree of experimentation, flexibility, informality and rule-breaking was already part of the Tanner *modus-operandi* some time before the Tanner Scheme proper was devised and set in motion.

Alongside Tanner's own initiatives were more formal efforts by the college to address perceived academic weaknesses. In this narrative the scheme emerged from the deliberations of an ad hoc Academic Standards Committee of the Hertford Governing Body established in Michaelmas 1964 to consider how best to improve Hertford's academic life and performance, and recruitment to the college.¹² As it explained in an interim document for the college's Governing Body in December 1964, 'The Academic Standards Committee has been considering the possibility of improving the average quality of applicants for admission to the College and will be reporting on this in due course.'¹³ It comprised the then Principal, Sir Robert Hall; Neil Tanner, Physics Tutor and Secretary for Admissions¹⁴; Brian Steer, Tutor for Mathematics; Felix Markham, Tutor in Modern History; and Peter Ganz, German Tutor.¹⁵ According to Keith McLauchlan, then the newly appointed Chemistry Tutor in the college and a close colleague of Neil Tanner's, Ganz played an equal role in devising the Hertford scheme which would be better known, in his view, as the 'Ganz-Tanner Scheme', therefore.¹⁶ (Indeed, there are some alumni who know it as a 'Warnock' initiative after Sir Geoffrey Warnock, Principal 1971-88).¹⁷ As McLauchlan recalls, a younger and expanded fellowship,

¹² Robin Devenish, 'The Tanner Scheme: a view from a colleague', Hertford College Magazine, no. 95, 2014-15, 23-25.

¹³ 'Academic Standards Committee. Middle Common Room', 2 Dec. 1964, HCA 34/2/13/3.

¹⁴ The title Secretary for Admissions was changed to Tutor for Admissions in Hilary Term 1969. See Hertford College Governing Body (GB) Minutes, 19 Feb. 1969, HCA 4/1/4.

¹⁵ Robin Devenish, 'Addendum in Admissions: Admissions before the "Tanner Scheme"', The Hertford College Magazine, 2015-16, no. 96, 60.

¹⁶ Keith McLauchlan, 'Admissions', e-mail sent to author 6 March 2019. Peter Ganz stood in as Admissions Tutor in 1966-67 when Neil Tanner spent a year at CERN in Geneva.

¹⁷ 'I didn't actually hear of the alternative admissions route being referred to as the 'Tanner Scheme' until many years after I graduated. At the time it was referred to as a 'Warnock' initiative. At a Warnock Society lunch about 15 years ago, Lady Warnock shared with us her husband's embarrassment that he was continually given credit for Neil Tanner's ground-breaking work on admissions policy'. Response to author's questionnaire, 2018. See also Strawson, P. (2004, September 23). 'Warnock, Sir Geoffrey James (1923–1995)', philosopher and college head. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

which doubled in size in the 1960s, had ‘a collective determination to improve the college’. Throughout the duration of the Hertford scheme, ‘the key thing was the fellowship and its support’.¹⁸ Neil Tanner himself recalled, only slightly in jest, that at the outset Hertford had ‘more than its fair share of angry young Fellows’ and ‘was in that rare state, for an Oxford college, of being ready for change.’¹⁹

The Academic Standards Committee drew on experiments and initiatives made by Hertford tutors in the recent past. It made a co-ordinated attempt to make contact with grammar schools, many of them in the north of England, to discover what could be done to attract applicants from them. The Committee duly arranged a ‘Schoolmasters’ Conference’ at the college in March 1965 to discuss these issues, an event that marks the start of what became the ‘Tanner Scheme’.²⁰ According to the minutes of the Governing Body meeting of 13 March 1965: ‘6. It was agreed to accept Dr. Tanner’s suggestion for the procedure of recruitment of exceptional candidates from maintained schools. This was to be put forward at the Headmasters’ Conference on March 19.’²¹ As the letter of invitation explained

For some time we have felt that our admissions’ organization is not altogether suitable for many schools. Would it be possible for you to come to a meeting of about twenty headmasters, and the tutors of this college on Friday 19th March 1965 to discuss admissions?...If there are any particular points about the Oxford or Cambridge admissions procedure that you feel inclined to put in writing, we should be very glad to have them before the meeting.²²

The list of participating schools at the conference included Longton High School in Stoke-on-Trent; Brigg Grammar School in Lincolnshire; South Holderness County Grammar School in Hull; Longcroft School in Beverley, East Yorkshire; Leeds Modern School; Greenhill Grammar School in Oldham; two schools from Welwyn Garden City, and three

¹⁸ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, Hertford College, 28 March 2019.

¹⁹ Neil Tanner, ‘The Hertford Scheme’, n.d. (speech likely delivered in the early 1980s).

²⁰ ‘Academic Standards Committee. Meeting of 8 March 1965’ records the organisation of the conference, HCA 34/2/2

²¹ Minutes of the GB meeting, 13 March 1965, HCA 4/1/3.

²² Invitation to a meeting of headmasters on admissions, 6 Feb. 1965, HCA 34/2/2.

schools from the new town of Harlow, two of them comprehensives. There were also some more established ‘southern’ schools including Lord Williams’s Grammar School, Thame, but the aim of the conference was to reach out to schools with no experience of Oxford.²³ In the subsequent months the new procedures were discussed and then prepared. The first applicants were interviewed in September of that year, 1965, for entry in October 1966.²⁴

Yet Hertford was not alone in seeking to make links of this type and to find new ways of reaching out to talented students. What became the Tanner scheme was almost certainly influenced by other schemes in Oxford which slightly pre-date it. Indeed, over the twenty years under consideration, 1965-85, there were several Oxford initiatives of the Tanner type, most of them designed to bring students from less-privileged backgrounds to the university.

2. The Precursors to Tanner: The West Riding and Northumberland Schemes

Of these, the most significant was the West Riding [of Yorkshire] Scheme which was planned in 1963 and which admitted students from schools in that local education authority as from October 1964. Three Oxford colleges – Merton, University and St. Catherine’s - and three Cambridge colleges – King’s, Clare and Churchill – took two undergraduates each from this district who were chosen by the West Riding LEA after nomination by their various schools. No examinations were involved. The boys were chosen early in their sixth form career on the basis of headmasters’ recommendations and an in-depth interview in Oxford or Cambridge. Their places were not conditional on subsequent grades in A-level examinations. Instead the schools they came from were encouraged to provide them with a wide and varied curriculum as a preparation for university studies. The occupation and economic status of their parents and guardians were also taken into account: ‘the boy must come from a home

²³ Programme of the ‘Headmasters’ Conference 19 March’, in the minutes of the Academic Standards Committee, 8 March 1965, HCA 34/2/2. In the following year, 1966, the list of schools invited to attend the second headmasters’ conference also included Bede Grammar School, Sunderland; Hessle Grammar School; Holt High School, Liverpool; Altincham County Grammar School, Lancs.; Crewe County Grammar School; Chesterfield School; Bemrose School, Derby; Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Darlington; and Greenway Comprehensive, Bristol.

²⁴ Invitation to a meeting of headmasters on admissions, 6 Feb. 1965, HCA 34/2/2. The meeting took place on 19 March 1965.

which, generally speaking, falls within the Ministry of Labour occupational grades 3, 4 and 5. That is to say the father must be a skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled worker.²⁵

Merton took the lead in the negotiations with the West Riding LEA and in May 1963 agreed to launch the scheme.²⁶ The college admitted the first two students for matriculation in October 1964. University College and St. Catherine's took a pair each from October 1965. Later, Merton increased its intake under the scheme to four students per year, with two undergraduates recruited specifically from rural grammar schools in the West Riding. As the management committee of the OCAO reported,

Certain colleges in Oxford and Cambridge are operating a scheme in agreement with the West Riding Education Authority which enables that authority to nominate one or two candidates to places in the colleges at some stage before they have taken A-levels. The nominated candidates are given special treatment by the education authority. A main purpose of the scheme is, by removing difficulties over entrance in this way, to make it easier to equip promising candidates who would not come to Oxford because of a restricted background and absence of connections between their schools and the University. The committee understands that there are not more than twenty candidates admitted in this way to the two universities in one year.²⁷

The architect of the West Riding Scheme was the LEA's Chief Education Officer, Alec (Alexander) Clegg, later Sir Alec. An exceptional and progressive administrator, the author of notable works on education, including the influential *Children in Distress* (1968), and the recipient of three honorary degrees, Clegg had studied modern languages at Clare College, Cambridge and become a teacher.²⁸ He has his own entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of*

²⁵ 'An experimental scheme of admission of West Riding pupils to colleges of Oxford and Cambridge', 1 April 1964, Education Department, West Riding County Council, Wakefield, HCA 34/2/13/3.

²⁶ Alec Clegg, 'An experimental scheme of Admission of West Riding Pupils to Colleges at Oxford and Cambridge', Oxford University Archives (hereafter OAU), AD 1/48, 'West Riding and Similar Schemes'.

²⁷ 'Report on discussions held between the Management Committee of the Admissions Office and the Committee of Cambridge Tutors at Churchill College, Cambridge, on 24 October 1964', p. 2.

²⁸ Alexander Clegg and Barbara Megson, *Children in Distress* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968).

National Biography, a rare distinction for an education officer.²⁹ He gave evidence to the Franks Commission to which he explained that

The purpose of the scheme is to find some solution, however limited and experimental it may be in the first instance, to the fact that children of working-class parents...do not gain admission to the university in the proportion which might be expected from their numbers in the population and their measured ability.

As Clegg computed it, 'there is in the West Riding about 1/25th of the children in the country, but at a very rough estimate the county provides about 1/200th of the pupils of Oxford and Cambridge'.³⁰ And among those it did send to Oxbridge, the majority came from a small number of independent and direct grant schools, though the A-level scores of those pupils who came to the two universities from the local grammar schools were better.³¹ According to the then Senior Tutor of St. Catherine's, Wilfrid Knapp, Politics tutor,

I have visited the area and the schools in question and readily believe that boys from a working class background in that area who are intellectually bright nonetheless face an overwhelming task in raising themselves to the competitive level for university entrance while at the same time securing an education in the broader sense.³²

Simultaneously, Wadham College launched 'essentially an experimental scheme' in 1964 with grammar schools in Northumberland, described by Maurice Bowra, the famous Warden of Wadham, as 'a harmless exception' to normal Oxbridge entrance procedures by written examinations taken in November each year.³³ Two students 'from economically disadvantaged backgrounds' who attended local schools in Northumberland were nominated

²⁹ "Clegg, Sir Alexander Bradshaw [Alec] (1909–1986), schoolteacher and educationist." [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#). September 23, 2004. Oxford University Press. Date of access, 18 Apr. 2019.

³⁰ Alec Clegg, 'West Riding Special Admissions to Oxford and Cambridge', AD 1/48, OUA.

³¹ Out of 24 West Riding pupils who went to Oxbridge from maintained schools in 1963, 15 obtained at least two A grades at A-Level. Out of 23 from Direct Grant schools, 10 had at least two As. But among the 20 from independent schools who were chosen in 1963 none had as many as two As.

³² Wilfrid Knapp to L. Styler, 19 Jan. 1965, AD 1/48, OUA.

³³ Maurice Bowra to L. Styler, 22 Dec. 1964, AD 1/48, OUA.

annually by the LEA, and given their similarities, the Northumberland scheme was largely treated in Oxford as coming ‘under the aegis of the West Riding Scheme’.³⁴ It continued for fifteen years, the last pair from Northumberland entering the college in 1979.³⁵

These schemes were unpopular with several other Oxford colleges that complained about the alternative method of entry, without examinations and unrelated to A-level grades. It was argued that they were a new type of ‘closed scholarship’. These, between the university and specific, privileged schools, were a particularly controversial and notorious aspect of Oxbridge entrance which were gradually being dismantled in this period. Though the West Riding and Northumberland schemes were designed to admit students from a diametrically different social background, they still smelled of privilege, be it a form of inverted privilege.³⁶ It was also argued that all colleges should be bound by majority opinion and decisions, and follow agreed procedures.³⁷ In reply, the four colleges defended their initiatives as experiments, and they did not wish ‘to give them up before they had time to judge their success’.³⁸

And successful they were. When the West Riding Scheme was terminated in 1971 it was not because of opposition elsewhere in the university or any educational shortcomings among the students admitted, but because it had self-liquidated. It had always been hoped that by starting a link with Oxford and Cambridge in this unorthodox manner, the habit of applying to the two universities would take root, thus ending the need for the special scheme itself, and so it proved. As the Merton historian, R. H. C. Davies, expressed it in 1965, ‘Last

³⁴ Ian Crombie, senior tutor of Wadham, to L. Styler, 2 Nov. 1964, AD 1/48, OUA

³⁵ E-mail correspondence with Jeffrey Hackney, Keeper of the Archives and Emeritus Fellow, Wadham College, Oxford, 2 April 2019.

³⁶ ‘Record of a Meeting of the Management Committee of the Admissions Office with College Representatives held in Brasenose College on 25 Feb. 1965’, AD 1/48, OUA. For example, ‘Dr Parkes said Keble would deprecate any extension of the scheme at present as they felt it was a re-introduction of the closed scholarship scheme just when colleges were trying to get rid of it; the scheme also involved accepting candidates without examination. Mr. Maclagan (Trinity) and Mr Mackesy (Pembroke) shared Dr. Parkes’ views’.

³⁷ Minutes of the Management Committee Meeting, Oxford Colleges Admissions Office (OCAO) 14 March 1966, item 2 (3), AD 1/48, OUA.

³⁸ Paper entitled ‘From the Management Committee of the Admissions Office to College Representatives: West Riding and Similar Schemes, MC/234’, AD 1/48, OUA.

year Oxford and Cambridge colleges had given 24 places to candidates from the West Riding maintained schools, this year they had given 54. When the West Riding was sending a normal quota of candidates to Oxford, the college [Merton] would start a similar scheme with another area.³⁹ St. Catherine's took a similar view: the scheme would 'prove its success by working itself out of existence; that is to say when the West Riding puts its bright young men into Oxford and Cambridge in the normal way and they prove to their fellows that places and awards are within their grasp, the Clegg scheme will be less necessary.'⁴⁰

Five years later Alec Clegg wrote to the senior tutor of St. Catherine's College to explain that finding good candidates for the scheme was proving difficult because 'a considerable number' of the boys thought to have potential were now sitting the regular entrance examinations for the two universities.⁴¹ The college concurred: 'So many boys appear to be taking the Examination in the normal way (very largely due to the publicity of the West Riding Scheme) [that] perhaps the situation has changed'.⁴² The experiment, having proved itself, was ended by mutual consent in 1971. Clegg noted that it had not only been of value to the boys chosen for Oxford and Cambridge but had 'indirectly given encouragement to those at their schools'.⁴³ The story is the same for the Wadham-Northumberland link: 'It is most likely that this scheme also ended because it was mission accomplished, and that we had managed to persuade them that we did not all think that civilisation ended just south of Banbury or west of Oxford.'⁴⁴

The West Riding and Northumberland schemes were not the only attempts to reach less privileged students and districts in this period. Led by John Albery, Chemistry Fellow and Tutor at University College, and later Master of the college, five colleges (with one or two occasional additions) were party to an arrangement to admit students drawn from schools in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) to study for science degrees between 1978

³⁹ 'Record of a Meeting of the Management Committee of the Admissions Office with College Representatives held in Brasenose College on 25 Feb. 1965', AD1/48, OUA.

⁴⁰ Wilfrid Knapp to L. Styler, 19 Jan. 1965, AD 1/48, OUA.

⁴¹ Sir Alexander Clegg to Brian Fender, 10 Dec. 1969, 'Clegg Scheme for Admission', St. Catherine's College, Oxford archives, B IV, 14 (B)

⁴² E. B. Smith to Sir Alexander Clegg, 12 Jan 1970, *ibid.*

⁴³ Sir Alexander Clegg to E. B. Smith, 22 Jan. 1970, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ J. Hackney to the author, 2 April 2019.

and 1985.⁴⁵ This scheme depended on an interview and an offer conditional on attaining specified grades at A-level, though the grades required were set at a realistically lower level than normal to take account of the relatively weak science teaching many of the students were receiving at their schools.⁴⁶ From among the successful candidates who met or exceeded their offer, those deemed weaker entrants were invited to a short but intensive summer school before coming up to begin their studies. (It is interesting to note that this idea has very recently been revived by Oxford under the title ‘Opportunity Oxford’, and residential preparation each summer will be provided for some state school entrants between A-level results and matriculation each year in order to prepare them thoroughly for their courses to come).⁴⁷

A similar scheme to draw undergraduates from ILEA schools to read for PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) degrees was also run during these years and involved five colleges - Corpus Christi, Keble, Mansfield, Oriel, and Somerville – later joined by Pembroke, St. Catherine’s, St. Hilda’s and St. Hugh’s.⁴⁸ Initially mooted in the summer of 1978 and planned from 1979, the first cohort of students matriculated in October 1981 and the last in 1985. They were given places on the basis of school reports, interviews and a short written examination taken in Oxford.⁴⁹

The two schemes each brought about a dozen undergraduates a year to Oxford. Judging them is difficult because they were comparatively short-lived and small scale. The

⁴⁵ The colleges involved were University, Magdalen, St. Catherine’s, St. Hilda’s, St. Hugh’s. New College and Lady Margaret Hall occasionally took students. See ‘ILEA Scheme’, UC:CO1/10/A3/1, University College, Oxford archives.

⁴⁶ In an age when A-level grades were lower than today, and many undergraduates came to Oxford with AAB and ABB, the standard conditional offer for the ILEA science scheme was BCC. This was exceeded by several entrants.

⁴⁷ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-05-20-two-new-oxford-initiatives-help-students-under-represented-backgrounds>

⁴⁸ See ILEA Schools Scheme, PPE, 1979-84, OCAO, Oxford University Archives, AD 1/51.

⁴⁹ Judith Heyer (Somerville) to Edward (‘Ted’) Baskerville, 1 March and 25 April 1979. See also [Judith Heyer] ‘To: Committee to review Undergraduate Admissions. Submission by Representatives of the Five Colleges involved in the ILEA/PPE Admissions Scheme, started in 1980’, AD 1/51, OUA. On details of the ILEA/PPE scheme, see also the *Daily Telegraph* 22 Nov. 1979 and *The Times*, 4 Dec. 1979.

PPE scheme with ILEA was always planned to last for five years only, after which it was mooted that the scheme would transfer and work with another LEA, elsewhere in the country, which also had limited contact with Oxford.⁵⁰ In fact, both schemes came to an end in 1985 for two quite different reasons. The new, unified admissions system introduced following the Dover Report outlawed all such initiatives and variations from the norm involving only some of the colleges, including the Tanner Scheme, as we shall see.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the abolition of the Greater London Council by the Conservative government in 1983 saw one attempt at that time to disband ILEA. It was eventually disbanded by the 1988 Education Act, its functions passing to the individual inner London boroughs.

University College also pioneered a scheme from 1973 that brought Scottish students to Oxford, though this had a different aim entirely. If other schemes in this era were driven by a desire to redress educational inequality in areas of the country with no tradition of sending pupils to Oxbridge, the Scottish scheme sought to attract south of the border some of the best products of an excellent educational system.⁵² For this reason, it attracted some adverse publicity for stealing and poaching ‘lads of parts’ who would otherwise have gone to local Scottish universities.⁵³ By 1978 some 20 undergraduate colleges, including Hertford, were part of the Scottish scheme, and the final intake of Scottish students in October 1985 numbered 35, chosen from out of 87 applicants. In this case, the candidates were judged on their performance in Scottish highers, school reports, and Oxford interviews. More than half of the Scots admitted in this way ultimately achieved first class degrees.⁵⁴ A scheme that brought the young humourist, writer and director, Armando Iannucci, from St. Aloysius College, Glasgow to University College, Oxford must be accounted a success, though it, too, was ended by the Dover reforms in the mid-1980s. The Scottish scheme had added a welcome element of national diversity to the Oxford student body. Today, when an education

⁵⁰ Brian Harrison (Corpus Christi) to Edward Baskerville, 6 May 1982; ‘ILEA/PPE Admissions Scheme: Minutes of Meeting at CCC on Thursday 4 Nov. [1982]’, AD 1/51.

⁵¹ On the impact of the Dover Committee’s recommendations on the PPE scheme, see the letter from Baskerville to Michael Freeden (Mansfield), 24 April 1984, in file AD 1/51, mandating ‘the end of schemes which involve application to any of a limited number of Oxford colleges’.

⁵² See ‘Scottish Scheme 1977-85’, UC: CO1/10/A2/4, University College, Oxford archives.

⁵³ The scheme was opposed by John Pollock, secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland as a ‘backdoor method’ of gaining entry to Oxford.

⁵⁴ Susan Gordon, ‘Closing a Scottish Route to Oxford’, Glasgow Herald, September 1984.

in Scottish universities is free to its native sons and daughters, while higher education in England is not, it is rare indeed to meet a Scottish student in Oxford.

As this summary of different projects suggests, the Hertford Scheme was one of several collegiate initiatives to widen access to Oxford between the 1960s and 1980s. But while other schemes were short-lived, and, for each college involved, small-scale, affecting mere handfuls of students, the Tanner scheme, as we shall see, endured for a generation, involved hundreds of students, and had greater significance for the collegiate university as a whole. Nor was it a closed scheme reliant on nomination; in Hertford, though school recommendations were initially important, over time applicants applied in open competition and came from everywhere. Nevertheless, the Tanner Scheme at its inception chose students in essentially the same manner as the West Riding and Northumberland Schemes, and it emerged just after they were set in motion in the period 1963-5. The fellows of Hertford would have known about these experiments. Information about the West Riding scheme with an invitation to participate was submitted to the college in April 1964.⁵⁵ Details about each of the various admissions' experiments were reported and discussed at termly meetings between the management committee and staff of the OCAO and college representatives, usually Tutors for Admission from each college. Indeed, the meeting in Hilary Term 1965 at which the West Riding Scheme was debated, criticised and defended at length, was based on a paper about it circulated to every college in advance, and it occurred just weeks before the Tanner Scheme was inaugurated with the conference of headmasters at Hertford.⁵⁶ A year later, in January 1966, when 16 colleges voted to terminate the two schemes as from 1970, Hertford was one of five colleges (including also Merton, Pembroke, Wadham and St. John's) which voted to oppose their cessation.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ 'An experimental scheme of admission of West Riding pupils to colleges of Oxford and Cambridge', 1 April 1964, with a note: 'Submitted to Hertford, for consideration, after our Schoolmasters' Dinner, March 1964', dated 25 April 1964, Principal's Collections, HCA, 34/2/13/3.

⁵⁶ Record of a Meeting of the Management Committee of the Admissions Office with College Representatives, 25 Feb. 1965, AD 1/48, OUA.

⁵⁷ Eighth Meeting of the Management Committee of the Admissions Office with college representatives, 27 January 1966. At the meeting the representative from Merton declared that 'his college would wish to feel free to inaugurate similar schemes in the future for intellectually depressed areas if there was an obvious call for them.'

That the Tanner Scheme was probably based on these other initiatives elsewhere in Oxford does not detract from its importance or from the commitment of Hertford to make the scheme work successfully. The fact that in other colleges these were experiments, so-called, which ended relatively quickly, presents Hertford's commitment as of a different order of magnitude. In Hertford, the Tanner scheme was transformative; in other colleges widening access in these ways was admirable but marginal, though the example they provide of creative and sympathetic engagement with under-privileged schools and districts remains relevant to Oxford today.

3. The Tanner Scheme

In 1965, the best students in many grammar schools thought only of applying to local universities – Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds etc. Their schools had no tradition of sending boys to Oxbridge where the procedures were different from other universities. Undergraduate admission to both universities in the early 1960s depended on examinations and interviews and most applicants applied in the seventh term of the VIth form (what we might call the autumn term of Year 14 in today's nomenclature), after A-levels therefore. Whether successful or not, they would have to wait nine months before taking up a university place. Independent and direct grant schools provided tuition during this additional term in preparation for the exams, but there was no provision in many grammar schools. Those grammar school boys who did apply to Oxford, numbering 534 in the autumn of 1964, mostly took the examinations in their 4th term, and were at an obvious disadvantage. Even had there been provision for a seventh term, 'staying on' was alien and also unaffordable in many working-class homes where sons should either be at school or at work: the idea of an extra term of tuition and then months off before going up to university was a luxury.

Before launching the scheme Tanner canvassed the views and ideas of school heads. Their replies give insight into the many difficulties in realising the potential of pupils and the barriers, practical and psychological, which deterred them from applying to Oxford and Cambridge. The headmaster of Longton High School, Stoke-on-Trent, Mr. H. Beynon, wrote back to lament the difficulty in attracting good staff to his unfashionable region: 'I suspect, therefore, that the ability of some pupils will not have been fully exploited; especially as many receive little assistance or encouragement at home'. Oxford was unattractive to his

pupils and unattainable for several reasons, ranging from its insistence on studying two modern languages at O-level (examinations taken at 16 years-of-age and the ancestors of today's GCSEs) to its special entrance examinations. Because Oxford did not make conditional offers, his best scientists went by tradition to Imperial College, London.⁵⁸ The headmaster of Leeds Modern School, F. Holland, made similar points. The procedure for admission and the examinations

weight the scales overwhelmingly in favour of the bigger schools, with established 3rd year Sixth Forms...and severely against the two-year Sixth, day-school pattern common to many maintained Grammar schools and nearly all mixed or comprehensive schools...It can be argued that it is odd (or nugatory, or hypocritical, or merely maddening) for Oxbridge colleges to declare publicly that they would gladly offer entry to boys from a greater variety of schools 'only they just don't apply', while maintaining the conditions which effectively prevent them from applying with the slightest hope of acceptance. Many of these conditions are related to the 3rd year Sixth...

From the headmaster of the High School in Welwyn Garden City came another eloquent critique of the Oxford 7th term examination:

My school is a new one in which only three year groups have, to date, reached the point of university admission. Even so there is a marked reluctance to consider Oxford and Cambridge by the brighter and more ambitious pupils. Where we have persuaded people to sit scholarship entrance, it has so far always been at the disadvantage of not having completed an A level course and, with the prospects minimal, the pupil regards the matter as an 'aside' to his or her main objective of A level passes and U.C.C.A. application to other universities...At the end of a two years' course pupils who have fulfilled university requirements are faced with the uncertainty of the results of a third year for Oxford or Cambridge, against the certainty of a place now, elsewhere...You will, I judge, continue to miss our best and

⁵⁸ H. Beynon to N. Tanner, 26 Feb. 1965, HCA, 34/2/2.

most ambitious pupils until there is a clear willingness to consider pupils at a different stage in their schooling than at present'.⁵⁹

There was an opportunity here, as Tanner and others saw: if the college could induce applications from such schools it would be tapping into a vast new pool of talent. The standards in grammar schools, which were academically selective, were very high, regulated by A-levels which in this period were relatively more difficult and rigorous than they are today. (They were taken by fewer students overall and the proportions of A and B grades were much lower than now). The best students in these schools and this educational regime would be perfectly able to function in Oxford. To get them, Hertford decided to dispense with written tests. To ask students in the 4th term to sit the same examinations as those in their 7th term would be unfair; to make conditional offers based on A-levels attained after 6 terms would be no different from the provincial universities to which these boys usually applied. The aim was to get them early, before they applied to the local university.

The regime devised by Tanner and his colleagues involved headmasters recommending their best students and the college interviewing them thoroughly in the September of the second year of the VIth form (4th term) before their UCCA forms (applications) were submitted. Successful candidates would be offered what was effectively an unconditional place at Hertford, subject only to meeting the university's matriculation requirements which changed over the years but generally required passes in certain subjects at O-level (Maths, English, two languages in the 1960s) and two A-levels passed at any grade (i.e. grade E and above). For this reason, Hertford was said to be making 'matriculation offers'. But these were not without some degree of difficulty even for able grammar school boys. Several who were made matriculation offers had only been able to take a single modern language at O-level: one Hertford student 'needed to restart German and luckily the teacher who had got us through French so successfully offered to give me one-to-one tuition to get German.'⁶⁰ It was open to successful applicants in September to take the scholarship examination later in the autumn and win a prestigious (if not awfully valuable) entrance award, but if they chose not to they still had a secure place which they would take up a year later. Many of those unsuccessful in September interviews were encouraged to take the usual entrance

⁵⁹ Mr C. L. V. Gilbey to the Principal of Hertford, (nd, March 1965?), 34/2/13/3, HCA.

⁶⁰ Response to Tanner Scheme Questionnaire 2018.

examinations two months later, and it was perfectly normal for some of them to be admitted in this more orthodox manner.

At no point was the Tanner Scheme based on conditional offers – on an offer of a place subject to the attainment of specific A-level grades. Although a few such places were given by Hertford each year in the early 1980s (at which point approximately two hundred undergraduates across the collegiate university were admitted in this manner), the scheme from its inception was free of any formal examination or expectation of later A-level success. The college trusted its own judgment to assess candidates in lengthy interviews, and it also trusted the judgment of the head-teachers with whom it worked. They would only send to these ‘early interviews’ those students considered most able. As for the candidates, an application to Hertford was more direct than one to another college, and they knew the outcome swiftly. That said, from personal testimony it is clear that the college, or perhaps more accurately Neil Tanner himself, varied procedure as the situation seemed to require or as an opportunity arose. Thus one of the Tanner students ‘sat four entrance papers which were sent to my school in the summer term of the lower sixth.’ It would seem that he had been sent a set of scholarship papers from a previous year and his unofficial scripts were so impressive that a ‘matriculation place’ was offered a few weeks later.

As Neil Tanner summarised the basic scheme in a letter to headmasters following the initial conference in March 1965,

‘We aim to consider boys at the beginning of their second year of the VIth form. About the beginning of September we shall ask you to nominate some boys for interview and to send some comments on them. The choice of boys may be difficult, so we suggest two criteria:-

- (a) That the boys should be the most able of the second year VIth form
- (b) That the boys, if they were able to stay for a third year in the VIth form would be serious candidates for Oxford Scholarship Examination awards.

All the boys who are nominated will be interviewed here in the fourth week of September, accommodation if required being provided by the College. On the basis of your recommendation and the interview, we would endeavour to make firm decisions, which should be communicated to you in the first week of October. If a place is

offered it will be unconditional except for Oxford matriculation requirements. Very likely we shall ask boys who are offered a place informally to route a formal application to the College via UCCA. Boys who are unsuccessful will still have sufficient time to apply for University entrance (this College or elsewhere) through UCCA in the ordinary way.

We are prepared to consider all subjects with our admissions experiment, and hope to fill an appreciable number of our Commoner places in this way in 1965 (i.e. to come up in October 1966).⁶¹

In the event, as a subsequent letter to the schools explained, the college had interviewed 37 candidates and made 11 firm offers in the scheme's first round.⁶² As Tanner reported to the Hertford Governing Body,

The net impression from interviews in September and the Scholarship examination in December suggests that our 'Second year VI' headmasters were in general quite honest and did send us their best boys. The net yield was 2 awards, 10 good commoners and 2 weak commoners. Satisfactory, but we didn't strike gold in a big way. On the other hand, it seems we are able to recognise gold when we see it in an interview. The correlation between interview reports and Scholarship performance was very good.⁶³

Urging the college fellows to repeat the exercise in the following year and 'add another 30 schools to the list' of contacts, Tanner encouraged action in the form of school visits by college tutors: 'There is no doubt that we must go and get the boys. If we wait for the schools to appreciate our sterling qualities, we shall be taking Balliol rejects one hundred years from now.'⁶⁴

⁶¹ Neil Tanner to headmasters, 5 April 1965, HCA 34/2/2

⁶² Letter to schools, 30 Sept. 1965, HCA 34/2/2

⁶³ 'Report on Admissions Operations, September to December 1965', 1, HCA 34/2/2.

⁶⁴ *ibid.* In the matter of school visits, see also Tanner's characteristically direct note to the fellows of Hertford on 22 April 1966: 'Broadly speaking the schools on the list are those that habitually send us candidates, but less

This was a characteristically direct, pithy and energetic injunction from the Hertford Tutor for Admissions. As it suggests, for Tanner and the fellowship as a whole, the aim of the scheme was to raise the calibre of undergraduates in the college, and so raise the college in attainment and esteem as well. The motive is confirmed by Julian Tanner: ‘It wasn’t a conscious programme for social reform and social engineering: it was never political’. For his father ‘fairness and...finding the best students for the college went together’. College advantage and social mission were in alliance. According to Keith McLauchlan, ‘without a doubt the driving force was the improvement of the college’⁶⁵ and ‘the Tanner Scheme ‘turned round the fortunes of the college’.⁶⁶ Not all the fellows were comfortable; the two History tutors of an older vintage, Felix Markham and John Armstrong, disapproved of the Tanner Scheme.⁶⁷ But Andrew Goudie, fellow and tutor in Geography between 1974 and 1984 and afterwards Professor of Geography in Hertford, recalled ‘a certain attitude’ among the younger fellows, a camaraderie. There was ‘some naughtiness’ among a group who weren’t ‘stuffy Oxford dons. The college ethos was different.’ Criticism from other colleges had little effect on Goudie; it was ‘jocular, never unpleasant’ in his recollection.⁶⁸ Other fellows had a different experience, however: some colleagues from ‘jealous colleges’ made ‘rude and contemptuous remarks’, usually in the course of annual admissions in December.⁶⁹ It is recalled that Tanner and a fellow from another college got as far as instructing their respective solicitors over a claim of defamation.⁷⁰ As Keith McLauchlan points out, ‘Other colleges benefited from the Hertford scheme. When Hertford was successful other colleges received more applications as well...more regions sent candidates to more colleges.’⁷¹

This wider commitment to the reform of Oxford admissions was made plain in the winter of 1967-8. After three rounds of the Tanner Scheme in which Hertford had taken

than their best. The object of the visits is to extract the best...I should appreciate some record of the visits...(Better still, signatures of top class candidates on entry form)’, HCA 34/2/2.

⁶⁵ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, 28 March 2019

⁶⁶ Interview with Robin Devenish, 27 March 2019

⁶⁷ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, 28 March 2019

⁶⁸ Telephone conversation with Professor Andrew Goudie, 9 March 2019

⁶⁹ E-mail from Dr. Toby Barnard, 13 February 2019

⁷⁰ Interview with Dr. Keith McLauchlan, Hertford College, 28 March 2019

⁷¹ Ibid.

approximately 20% of its overall intake in this new manner, Tanner and Ganz started to explain and publicise the Hertford experiment across the university in the hope of winning support for change. At a time when applications to Oxford were actually falling in number, they wrote to the secretary of the OCAO to complain of the university's inaccessibility:

The substance of the admissions problem overall is to ensure that Oxford is accessible to the best boys from all schools and to ensure that the boys and the schools understand this... It is not necessary either to sell or to apologise for Oxford; there is little doubt that the boys want to come to Oxford, but are frightened away by the reputation of privilege and exclusiveness and bewildered by the organization. We suggest that the admissions procedure in general should be re-examined with a view to making it simpler.⁷²

The 'two foreign languages' requirement was one minor problem; the persistence of 7th term entry a more serious impediment:

Many boys, and their schoolmasters, feel that they don't stand a fair chance in a system which is patently geared to an extra year at school. Mild assurances of 'special consideration' are not very convincing and have not yielded much result. The solution we propose is to dispense with the requirement of a special examination and to offer unconditional places on the basis of school reports and of interviews at the beginning of the fourth term in the VI form. We should like to retain the scholarship examination in December both as an alternative method of entry and as a prize competition for boys who have already gained places in September.⁷³

Tanner followed this with two open letters to 'all Tutors for Admission' setting out the procedures followed in Hertford and seeking support:

Hertford is convinced that Oxford is not effectively open to boys who are unable or unwilling to spend more than two years in the VI form. The only solution we see is to offer places without examination to candidates in their 4th term in the VI form. Several

⁷² Dr. N. W. Tanner and Dr. P. F. Ganz to The Rev. L. E. Styler, OCAO, 1 Nov. 1967, Principals' Collection, 34/2/13/3, HCA.

⁷³ Ibid.

colleges already offer a small number of places in this way, based on close co-operation with a few schools. If we are to be fair, the great majority of Oxford places should go to second year VI candidates.⁷⁴

Up to this point the scheme had been a ‘closed’ one, working ‘by special arrangement with a few schools’ that had shown an interest in the project.⁷⁵ But now Tanner wanted to open up the new mode of entry to all comers. Hertford, he explained, wanted to alter its standard advertisement for applications as published in the *Oxford Gazette* and elsewhere to reflect its new procedures, and hoped ‘that other colleges will join us’.⁷⁶ When that draft text was presented to the OCAO in Hilary Term 1968 explaining that the college would ‘give a substantial number of commoner places on the basis of school report and interview’ and inviting ‘headmasters who have strong candidates...to write direct to the College...nominating their candidates’, the tinder was thrown on the fire. The general uproar over the text forced the calling of a special meeting of the Hertford GB on 16 March 1968 to consider the college’s response to widespread demands that the wording be changed, which it was.⁷⁷ As Robin Devenish recalled, ‘colleges were not alarmed when the new approach started. However, that changed when they realized the extent and success of the scheme.’⁷⁸ For the next two years the Tanner Scheme was the subject of intense debate and criticism across the university.⁷⁹

4: Neil Tanner

Neil William Tanner was born in Melbourne in 1930 and grew up in straitened circumstances in South Yarrow, a district of the city. His father had fought in the First World

⁷⁴ ‘Deferment of Entrance Awards and Other Changes in Admissions Procedure’, N. W. Tanner to ‘all Tutors for Admission’, 24 Nov. 1967, HCA 34/2/13/3.

⁷⁵ Neil Tanner, ‘Admissions to Hertford College, September-December 1968’, paper to the Management Committee of the OCAO, OUA, AD 1/52

⁷⁶ ‘Admission of Second Year VI Applicants’, N. W. Tanner to ‘Tutors for Admission and Management Committee’, 2 Dec. 1967, HCA 34/2/13/3.

⁷⁷ The revised text changed ‘a substantial number’ to just ‘a number of commoner places’. See Minutes of the GB, Hertford College, HCA 4/1/3, 16 March 1968.

⁷⁸ Devenish, ‘Addendum in Admissions: Admissions before the “Tanner Scheme”’, 60.

⁷⁹ The controversy can be followed in ‘Gazette Entry HT 1968’, HCA 34/2/2/1.

War, was wounded, and died when Neil was a teenager. As his nephew, a member of the Australian Liberal Party and former minister of finance has put it, ‘His achievement in rising from inner Melbourne lower middle class background to Oxford don in an era when few Australian kids went to university, much less to Oxford, is truly extraordinary.’⁸⁰ His Australian origins and nationality are important to this story: ‘he’d grown up in the more meritocratic culture of Australia. He didn’t understand the access of privileged students to Oxford – that public schools should just present candidates who were automatically accepted.’⁸¹ He graduated in Physics from Melbourne University in 1953 and with the award of an overseas scholarship by the Commission of the 1851 (Great) Exhibition he joined the nuclear structure group in the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge as a doctoral student, working there on the production of ¹²C in stars. A post-doctoral fellowship followed at the California Institute of Technology after which he returned to England to a research position in the newly established Department of Nuclear Physics under Denys Wilkinson at Oxford. A fellowship at Hertford as from October 1960 followed swiftly.

‘A rising star in Physics’ in the early 1960s, Tanner worked first on the theory of the giant dipole resonance and resonance fluctuations.⁸² An interest in pion physics led to work on the Synchrocyclotron at CERN in Switzerland in 1967-8 and 1975-6, and to a close collaboration there with Ernst Michaelis. Known in Hertford and across Oxford as a tenacious tutor and advocate of more open access to Oxford, his abilities as a physicist have perhaps been overlooked. But his close colleagues had no doubt about his skill for research, notable in the latter part of his career when he turned his attention to the study of the sub-atomic particle, neutrinos. He made crucial contributions to the design of the detectors used at the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory in Ontario, Canada, sourcing key materials that ensured that background effects in the huge vat of heavy water located down a mine shaft that was the used to detect the neutrinos were minimised.⁸³ He was especially good at making instruments and planning and executing experimental procedures.⁸⁴ Neil Tanner died in 2008. Six years

⁸⁰ Lindsay Tanner, ‘Celebrating the Tanner Revolution in Hertford and Oxford Admissions’, 5 September, 2015, programme, Hertford College.

⁸¹ Interview with Julian Tanner, London, 15 March 2019.

⁸² Interview with Keith McLauchlan, 28 March 2019.

⁸³ <https://www.hertford.ox.ac.uk/news/neil-tanner-the-nobel-prize-and-heavy-water> 21 Oct. 2015.

⁸⁴ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, 28 March 2019.

later, Arthur McDonald of the SNO and Queen's University, Ontario, in the name of the team as a whole, which included the Oxford group that Neil had led, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics.⁸⁵ As Neil's close colleague Robin Devenish has put it, 'he was a first rate research physicist'.⁸⁶

With the exception of periods of academic leave, Tanner was Tutor for Admissions from 1964-71 and 1980-89. Everyone recalls his humour, ebullience, charisma. To Keith McLauchlan, he was a 'rough and ready, argumentative Aussie' who 'enjoyed a good scrap' and 'the least politically-correct person you could ever meet.' He could 'talk on any subject, sometimes outrageously'.⁸⁷ 'He was tenacious and outspoken, although capable of charm'.⁸⁸ Eighteen-year-olds were not always well-prepared for their first meetings with him: he was 'somewhat intimidating at first, to be honest, but I ended up getting on well with him once I had developed a bit more confidence in myself.' Several students recall the poster of the rock star Debbie Harry that adorned his door. Everyone recalls the thick fog of tobacco smoke that hung about his room. According to one of his students, when called in to see him and offered a drink 'the stronger the alcohol the more trouble you were in. Grappa was bad news'.

But Neil Tanner had quieter virtues, also. One pupil appreciated 'his charm, intellect, kindness, wit and decency'. Another describes him as 'amusing, sociable, with a dry sense of humour'. Others recall him as 'an inspiring teacher', 'a particularly welcoming figure for all students', 'a major presence in the Hertford Quad', 'an enormous flamboyant presence', 'extremely direct... [with] a distinct twinkle in his eye', 'energetic, intense, genial', (though according to one student 'one of life's more relaxed individuals'), 'embracing, enthusiastic and encouraging... [with] an incredible love of life', 'energetic, good-humoured, very keen on Physics (!) and interested in his students', 'a memorable man, an unusual don... a real human being.' Julian Tanner recalls that on a trip to Scottish schools in the mid-1970s his father met a young woman who had just received excellent results in her Highers and who was then working in a supermarket. He interviewed her in Oxford and she started on course

⁸⁵ <https://www.hertford.ox.ac.uk/news/neil-tanner-the-nobel-prize-and-heavy-water> 21 Oct. 2015.

⁸⁶ Interview with Robin Devenish, 27 March 2019.

⁸⁷ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, 28 March 2019.

⁸⁸ E-mail, Toby Barnard, 13 Feb. 2019.

six weeks later.⁸⁹ In another case, one of the Tanner students who had effectively left home at 15 years of age and had nowhere to return to in vacations, had taken up nightly residence one summer in the Hertford television room. Neil found him a college room and an internship at the nuclear physics laboratory.

Neil Tanner's style was well-suited to the tutorial system. As one Hertford physicist recalls, 'He was a gregarious tutor, didn't often prepare for tutorials and had to work some answers out there and then. This actually turned out to be an interesting lesson in how to problem solve and was probably the most useful thing I learnt from him.' Another whom Tanner admitted to read Physics in 1983, captured his inimitable style across all activities thus:

As a tutor, he could be frustrating in the extreme, because he had little patience for the intricacies of answering specific exam questions. It was clear that he was a dedicated and talented scientist, but seemed to operate largely on the basis of an intuitive understanding of how physics worked. I remember him showing me the answer to one question by jumping straight to a generic answer. When asked to be more specific in his workings, he waved it away with the statement 'that's not physics, I leave the details of exact numbers to the mathematicians'. He taught me that the people who make change happen dive into things, know instinctively what is right, and let others worry about the details. It was how he did science, it was how he did admissions, and it was how he lived his life.

This chimes with the recollections of Julian Tanner about his father: 'He did everything from first principles, whether fixing the dishwasher or analysing the education system'.⁹⁰ As another of Tanner's physics students has put it, he was 'excellent at teaching physics, not so good at teaching how to get through exams'.

Another student who came up in 1985 at the end of the scheme to read a quite different subject, English, remembers Neil Tanner 'with a huge debt':

⁸⁹ Interview with Julian Tanner, London, 15 March 2019.

⁹⁰ Interview with Julian Tanner, 15 March 2019.

Without him and his vision - and, perhaps more importantly, the brief conversation we had in the summer of 1984 - I suspect my life would have been very different... Neil sensed my insecurities and doubts and, in the space of no more than 10 minutes, persuaded me I owed it to myself to give it a go, that Hertford WAS the place for someone of my background to target. Without that chat, I suspect I would never have even bothered. And I cannot imagine I would have enjoyed and experienced the life I have had.

An American who studied in Oxford recalls the Christmas dinner at the Tanner home to which he and other overseas students stranded in the college were invited:

Oxford can be a rather intimidating place for some. But among Neil's many sterling qualities was his commitment to 'humanising' this splendid place of advanced learning at the personal level. Never to be forgotten!⁹¹

These sterling qualities are not without relevance in the history of the Tanner Scheme because its architect and champion – indeed, Hertford College as a whole – required resilience and sheer bloody-mindedness to argue down the many opponents of the scheme at various times in its history. Neil Tanner could be stubborn in defence, playing, we might say, by 'Aussie rules' rather than respecting the local traditions, and wearing down the opposition, of which there was much across the university. He was tenacious in promoting its advantages for Hertford and in trying to get the university as a whole to adopt it. When, in 1982, the Admissions Office suggested that matriculation offers across the university 'should be restricted to schools with little or no experience of sending candidates to Oxford', Tanner protested in person because it would have meant sacrificing all the links that Hertford had already made and maintained with schools since the mid-1960s. 'Neil often lets off steam to me before a meeting, and is less heated on the day' explained the secretary to the chairman.⁹² When the Dover Committee in 1983 called for evidence to assist its work in devising a new method for undergraduate admissions, most institutions and individuals sent a single

⁹¹ These impressions are drawn from the 2015 survey of Tanner Scheme alumni conducted by the Hertford College Development Office, Oxford.

⁹² E. A. Baskerville to Oliver Taplin, 16 June 1982, AD 1/53, OUA.

submission; a few communicated twice; only Neil Tanner sent in four submissions.⁹³ One of these, to Sir Kenneth Dover, displaying a full measure of self-knowledge, ended thus: ‘PS It is unlikely that I shall be able to attend either of the meetings arranged for the discussion of the committee’s report, which may comfort you a little’.⁹⁴

In a speech Tanner gave, probably in the early 1980s, he explained the scheme as a response to the unfairness of a 7th term entrance examination which pitted grammar schools against ‘independent schools generously staffed with dedicated teachers’. The college was looking for ‘a system of entry which would be less critically dependent on preparation...the only way that colleges can create some approximation to equality of opportunity is to partially decouple from examinations and to rely more heavily on school reports and interviews’. Conditional offers based on A-level grades, which were introduced in Oxford in 1974 for entry the following year,⁹⁵ were rejected a decade earlier when the Tanner scheme was set up, because A-levels ‘are necessarily a mass production job lacking in discrimination’ and ‘schoolmasters know much more about their pupils than the A-level examiners can determine’. Tanner also thought that the uncertainty of outcome each summer in a system dependent on conditional offers would be ‘an administrative misery’ as students missed their offers and colleges faced the problem of unfilled places. It was a prediction which has not come true largely because A-levels are not so rigorous and challenging as then, and grades are now much more predictable.

He went on to consider and dismiss the criticisms that Hertford faced when it went public with its scheme in 1968: ‘the sacred cow of “uniformity-of-practice” was threatened, meaning that other colleges thought Hertford might gain an advantage’. He extolled the simplicity of the scheme: ‘Generally the policy is that a candidate can either talk or write his or her way into a place, in both cases the reckoning being on promise rather than achievement.’ He contrasted it with some of the smaller college schemes of the 1960s and 1970s from which it emerged, which were ‘restricted to particular areas’ and functioned like outmoded closed awards: the Hertford scheme was now open to all. He also defended its

⁹³ See below, section 8, ‘The Dover Committee, 1983’

⁹⁴ Neil Tanner to Sir Kenneth Dover, 28 April 1983, OCAO Papers, ‘Reactions to Interim Communication from Dover Committee’, AD 1/25/3, OUA.

⁹⁵ See GB minutes, 30 May 1973, 23 Jan. 1974, 6 Feb. 1975, HCA 4/1/3.

academic integrity and outcome: ‘There should be no delusion that the Hertford unconditional offers represent an easy way into Oxford. About a third of those who have entered thus have obtained Firsts’, which compared very favourably with a university average then of about 12% first class degrees.⁹⁶

The Tanner Scheme was, as we have seen, the outcome of a number of different contexts and factors in college, university and society more generally. But as these remarks suggest, it was also characterised by some of Neil Tanner’s attributes and views. Against formality, drawn to those with genuine ability, many of whom were rough diamonds or apparently unlikely scholars, keen to redress social inequality, and frustrated by Oxford’s protocol and procedure, the Tanner scheme was inspired by the spirit and outlook of Neil Tanner himself. As one student recollected later, ‘My impression of the admission process was that it was actually quite flexible and he could make it work as he saw fit until he was satisfied with his decision’.

Tanner cared about the academic life of his college and about the waste of talent in the British educational system, but he was no ‘social engineer’, and insofar as he was responsible for the Tanner scheme, it was not a social crusade. Late in the scheme’s history, in 1983, he published a long and detailed article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, backed by copious statistics (in which he was assisted by his son and co-author, Julian, then at Durham University) which sought to refute political criticism of Oxford admissions. It was prompted by an attack on Oxbridge by a Labour Party committee on post-18 education, chaired by the late Phillip Whitehead MP, which complained ‘about the unreasonable proportion of undergraduates from private schools, and [threatened] Oxford with quotas imposed by legislation.’⁹⁷

Tanner took aim at some of the lazy inferences and simplistic assumptions of Oxford’s critics. For example, he pointed out that post A-level candidates from independent schools had a higher success rate than pre A-level applicants from the maintained sector because weaker candidates from fee-paying schools, with lower A-level grades attained, did

⁹⁶ Neil Tanner, ‘The Hertford Scheme’, n.d., speech probably delivered in the early 1980s, HCA.

⁹⁷ N. W. Tanner and J. S. G. Tanner, ‘Is there a touch of class bias?’, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 26 April 1983.

not apply, making ‘the success rate look good’. Against the current, he found it ‘very difficult to believe that there is any significant bias among Oxford tutors in favour of independent schools’. Indeed, Tanner defended the college system: ‘There is no evidence at all that any college exercises a bias in favour of undergraduates of a particular origin, but it is quite clear that undergraduates of a particular origin exercise a bias in favour of certain colleges.’ A man who had spent a lot of his time over the past two decades criticising the conservatism and caution of his university colleagues and the collegiate system – or so it might have seemed – here came to their defence. Through analysis of the class lists in the Oxford final honour schools, he pointed out ‘that the men from maintained schools do well, the women from maintained schools do badly, and the men and women from independent schools break even’. Was the Labour committee suggesting that the number of state-school women should be culled, therefore? That was ‘likely to offend against the Sex Discrimination Act and would certainly not satisfy Mr. Whitehead’s committee’. Tanner was honest about some of the weaknesses in the admissions system, notably the ‘substantial criticism...that selection at Oxford is by achievement, rather than potential, thus conferring an advantage on those schools which are particularly skilful at preparing their pupils for examinations.’ But as he explained in mitigation, ‘it is not easy to spot untrained talent’. The essay ended by making a familiar, but nevertheless important argument in Oxford’s defence: ‘The Labour Party committee might like to give a thought to the way in which they might persuade pupils at maintained schools that the places at Oxbridge are there for the taking, rather than threatening quotas.’ Of course, Neil Tanner knew those places were available because he had done as much as anyone to create them. It is noteworthy that in the same week that this combative essay was published Tanner was himself complaining behind the scenes about the interim conclusions of the Dover Committee which, within Oxford, had been established to reform undergraduate admissions. Tanner was that not uncommon type among Oxford dons - a loyal defender of his university from external criticism even while he pursued reform within it. He was no ideologue.

5. Criticism of the Tanner Scheme:

The Tanner Scheme was never popular with the authorities. When Tanner himself wrote to the Admissions Office at its inception in October 1965 offering to ‘come and discuss this with you’ the reply was curt: ‘Dear Mr Tanner, I have already heard something of your

scheme from Mr Styler and I do not think I need waste your time coming here at the moment.⁹⁸ Critics of the Tanner Scheme made two essential points: that accepting a single method of entry to Oxford was the only fair way of organising procedures as between the colleges, and that significant deviations from the agreed norm would only confuse applicants, thus compounding the very problem that Hertford complained about: the complexity and mystery of an application to Oxford. The admissions tutor at University College complained about the scale of Hertford's scheme, feared a new type of competition and race between colleges to interview the best candidates early, in September, before the examinations, and was unhappy with the implication in Hertford's communications with schools 'that the other Colleges are not concerned about pre-A level candidates'.⁹⁹ From St. Edmund Hall came the view that the answer to Tanner's objections to a 7th term examination was a better examination for those in their 4th term: 'The overriding consideration is that there be some obvious way in which pre-A level candidates be seen to receive examination treatment different from that of their seniors.'¹⁰⁰ As a whole, the other colleges were concerned that very good candidates awarded places early at Hertford on the basis of a September interview who then chose not to take the examinations later, were lost to the system and unavailable to other colleges who might have given them scholarships. Talent was not circulating, as was the intention of scholarship awards. Even Oliver Franks himself intervened as Provost of Worcester College to protest against the literature Hertford circulated to schools:

While we appreciate that within a broad pattern of uniformity there are and should be variations in the admissions practice of different colleges, we are inclined to feel that these letters give the impression that Hertford College operates an admissions scheme effectively independent of that of the other colleges.¹⁰¹

Under this pressure the Management Committee in the Admissions Office drafted a new code of conduct to deal with Hertford's independent action. Communications sent to schools by colleges were to be overseen by the Admissions Office; whatever the form and content of

⁹⁸ Neil Tanner to G.J.R. Potter, OCAO, 12, 19 Oct. 1965. Correspondence with Hertford College, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

⁹⁹ 'Hertford Scheme – Letter from University College', John Albery, 22 Nov. 1969, OUA AD 1/52

¹⁰⁰ E. R (Ron) Oxburgh to the chairman, OCAO, 3 Nov. 1969, AD 1/52, OUA.

¹⁰¹ Lord Franks to the chairman, OCAO, 8 Oct. 1969, AD 1/52, OUA.

early interviews, there were to be no *written tests* in September set by colleges acting alone before the official scholarship/entrance examinations later in November; and there was to be a limit on the proportion of successful candidates that any college might take under its independent scheme.¹⁰² But what that proportion should be was controversial and became the subject of collegiate debate in the Michaelmas term of 1970. Eventually, by a vote of 17 to 4 among those colleges represented and voting, it was agreed that no more than 25% of a college's annual intake of undergraduates could come via matriculation offers.¹⁰³ In the process of agreeing this, there was a broad discussion across the collegiate university on matters constitutional - on whether and how a majority of colleges could bind a minority, or even a single college, on matters concerning admissions. Some colleges 'expressed a fear that any strengthening of the present procedure would make it easier for the majority of the colleges to suppress the views of minority colleges', and Neil Tanner characteristically pushed back yet harder:

He felt that the expression of a formal decision by a majority of colleges against the intentions of his own college had tended to make his colleagues more determined in their views. In view of this experience he felt that a less formal expression of the majority opinion on any topic was more likely to be taken into account by colleges holding a minority view.¹⁰⁴

But though Hertford's fellows might have felt aggrieved by these debates, and certainly felt that, given the quality of applicants for 'early places', the 25% cap was too low, the Tanner Scheme emerged from these arguments intact. As Tanner's annual letter to schools in 1971 made clear, unconditional places would continue to be awarded, up to a quarter of the total planned annual intake, on the basis of school reports and interviews conducted in September. Unsuccessful candidates at that stage would be encouraged to take

¹⁰² See Minutes of the 22nd meeting of the Management Committee of the OCAO with College Representatives, 29 Jan. 1970, item 12, pp. 3-4, AD 1/52, OUA.

¹⁰³ Neil Tanner to the Chairman of the Management Committee, OCAO, 19 Feb. 1970; Minutes of the 23rd meeting of the Management Committee of the OCAO with College Representatives, 7 May. 1970, pp. 1-2, AD 1/52, OUA.

¹⁰⁴ Minutes of the 25th meeting of the Management Committee of the OCAO with College Representatives, 28 Jan. 1971, item 3, pp. 1-2, AD 1/52, OUA

the entrance examinations later that term ‘when, as our past experience shows, they are likely to win another third of College places’. In the process of defending the scheme moreover, Hertford had defended also the right of colleges to develop their own policies and make their own decisions. It was a position that won Hertford some support in the late 1960s, notably from other colleges including University College, Balliol and Magdalen.¹⁰⁵ Today, because of the general centralisation of the University, its administration of the Admissions Office since 2007, and the sheer scale of the undergraduate admissions operation which must now deal with more than three times the number of applicants of fifty years ago, college autonomy in undergraduate admissions is limited to the choice of students itself: the procedures are designed and overseen from the centre.

6. The Success of the Tanner Scheme:

Up to this point, the early 1970s, it could be said that the Tanner Scheme was a successful experiment that was demonstrating the extent of talent deterred from applying to Oxford by the increasingly outdated and unrealistic assumptions governing the process of admission to the university. Thereafter, in the following decade, its impact was transformative, first on Hertford itself and then on the other colleges in Oxford.

The Principal wrote in 1982 ‘that the College in recent years has been floating upwards on a warm wave of success.’¹⁰⁶ One measure of that was the increasing number of applicants for places in Hertford each year. In 1967 Hertford was the first choice of 155; by 1971 the number had risen to 213; and it stood at 229 in 1975. It then started to rise dramatically: 414 in 1977, 432 in 1978, and 419 in 1981, in which year Hertford was successful in petitioning to have the cap raised for the proportion of ‘Tanner students’ admitted annually to 33%.¹⁰⁷ The college was one of the most popular in Oxford. This popularity led to remarkable academic success, one of the most talked-about transformations in the standing of a college in the modern history of the university. In the ten years 1964-73

¹⁰⁵ Minutes of the 23rd meeting of the Management Committee of the OCAO with College Representatives, 7 May. 1970, pp. 1-2, AD 1/52, OUA.

¹⁰⁶ *Hertford College Magazine*, 68, Spring 1982, 1.

¹⁰⁷ 13 Jan. 1981, annual totals of applicants to Hertford College, compiled by E. A. Baskerville, secretary of the OCAO, ‘Correspondence with Hertford College’, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

measured from the initial decision of the college's Governing Body to try to raise the academic level, Hertford was placed 26th out of 28 colleges overall in the Norrington Table, the annual order of success of the colleges in the university, judged by the performance of their undergraduates in the Final Honour School in each subject. But in the subsequent decade 1974-1983, Hertford was placed 8th overall in the university, and managed some notable annual achievements within that period: the college was 6th in the table in both 1975 and 1976; 5th in 1978; 2nd in 1979 and 1980; and 5th again in 1981. The performance of Engineering, the best subject in Hertford during this period, was the second-best across the university as a whole in the decade 1976-85.¹⁰⁸ Geography was also very strong with commensurately impressive results. As Tanner reported to his colleagues in November 1980,

Of the undergraduates given places under the September scheme between 1973 and 1980, of those who had so far graduated, more than 30% had achieved Firsts and [only] 9% Thirds. A-Level results of candidates admitted in September are not significantly different from those of candidates admitted in December.¹⁰⁹

While a college's position in the Norrington Table tells us only something about the academic life of the institution, and may be of interest only to insiders in Oxford (and perhaps only some of these), the transition from the bottom third to the top third of colleges, measured by success in Schools, inside a handful of years is unmatched in the modern university and has made its mark in local memory and lore. For those of a certain age and generation, Hertford is the college that has most dramatically improved itself, and it sets the example of what a society can do to better its results if it really dedicates itself to academic improvement – even if that college is not especially wealthy and lacks a strong academic tradition further back in its past. But it would not have been possible without the Tanner Scheme drawing so many exceptional applicants to the college.

Hertford's popularity was enhanced and its academic success maintained by the decision to admit women undergraduates from 1974 when it became one of the first five Oxford colleges to 'go mixed'. For the first two years, under the terms of an agreement with

¹⁰⁸ These placings are calculated from 'Table 6: Results 1964-86' in Christopher Hibbert, *Encyclopaedia of Oxford* (London, 1988), 280-1

¹⁰⁹ GB Minutes, 12 Nov. 1980, HCA 4/1/5.

the existing women's colleges, 'early offers' to women, of the type made by Hertford, weren't allowed, but 'from 1976 unconditional offers will be made to men and women candidates on equal terms.'¹¹⁰ How many of the women admitted after that were Tanner students, however, is unclear because there are no surviving lists of entrants coming to the college in this manner, whether female or indeed male, for any year between 1966, when the first male cohort matriculated, and 1985, when the last mixed group arrived at the college. In the initial years we can estimate that about 20 undergraduates a year were 'Tanner students'. By the mid-1970s when Hertford was admitting approximately 100 undergraduates each year, the figure was in the mid-twenties in line with the 25% cap set after the controversies of 1969-70. In the last four years of the scheme, 1982-86, the cap was raised to 33%. So a reasonable estimate would put the total number of Tanner students over the twenty years at about 450. In addition, the very existence of the scheme encouraged more applications to the college from highly able students from the maintained sector in the conventional manner, with additional impact on the intellectual level and social composition of the undergraduate body. One of these students, who applied through the conventional route and only found out about the scheme on his arrival put it this way: 'I was always very glad that 'The Tanner Scheme' became so successful, and that Hertford escaped from the murky depths of the Norrington Table.'¹¹¹

When Norman McCrum, Tutor in Engineering, reflected on these results in the college magazine for 1981, he wrote of 'the amazing change in the college's academic position' and produced a chart to demonstrate it, in which all lines really did move skyward [fig. 1 below: 'The position of different subjects in Hertford College'].¹¹² Each subject in the college was compared to the university standard in that subject (because examiners in different subjects, then and now, award different proportions of first, second and third class degrees). Smoothing was applied by counting 50% of the points achieved in each year alongside 25% in the year before and 25% in the year after. In 1963 only a single subject, PPE, out of 13 major Honour Schools in Hertford, was above the university average in

¹¹⁰ Geoffrey Warnock, 'Pre-A-Level Candidates for Hertford College', letter to Head Teachers and School Principals, April 1976, in AD 1/35/7, Correspondence with Hertford College, OUA.

¹¹¹ E-mail to author, 1 Feb. 2019.

¹¹² N. G. McCrum, 'Another Look at the Hertford Schools Results', *Hertford College Magazine*, 1981, pp 10-11. Figure 1 is reproduced from page 41.

standard. By 1981, only four subjects in the college were not higher than the average, and each of these was very close to it.¹¹³ As McCrum pointed out, though it was expected that the Tanner scheme would confer particular benefits on the science subjects in the college, ‘it will be seen that the improvement took place in all subjects’. Noting that now ‘the Hertford admissions scheme, evolved in the mid-1960s, is being adopted by other colleges’, which was indeed the case by the early 1980s, McCrum reflected on the benefits of college autonomy and independence: ‘This is an excellent example of one of Oxford’s great strengths, continuing change by evolution. The colleges, within a loose framework, pursue independent policies, the best succeeds and is then imitated.’

¹¹³ The four subjects were Lit Hum, English, Modern Languages and History, but in each case there had been demonstrable improvement over the 18 years surveyed.

6: The Tanner Students

To measure the success of the Tanner Scheme only in terms of Norrington Table outcomes and performance in Schools, important as that must be in Oxford, is to miss the success embodied and experienced by the Tanner students themselves – and, indeed, the experience of everyone in Hertford over these two decades. Whether tutor or student, whether entering the college by conventional or unconventional routes, it is the experience of Hertford at this time which is most enlightening and which also provides the best evidence for the success of the Tanner procedures.

Reflecting on the scheme and on their time in Hertford some two generations later in 2015, several students made the same point: ‘But for the Tanner scheme, I would never have gone to Oxford’; ‘I wouldn’t have got into Oxford otherwise’; ‘without the Hertford Scheme, I would never have considered applying to Oxford’; ‘that if not for that scheme I would not have had a place at Oxford as I did not have the benefit of public school coaching for the entrance exam’; that ‘it did not occur to me that Oxbridge was within my reach’; ‘coming from a working-class family I would never have thought of doing so’; ‘it was unthinkable in my family to go to Oxford’; ‘it was unknown for someone from my school to be offered a place at Oxford’; ‘my original aim was to apply to Imperial College, London’; ‘Reading University was my first choice’.¹¹⁴

Over time, Hertford’s reputation grew and drew more applicants to it: ‘I had no idea there was a Tanner Scheme. I just knew Hertford and a handful of other colleges made it easier for state school students like me to apply’. They drew attention to admission in their 4th term of A-levels as a key attribute of the scheme and inducement to apply. ‘I’d never have stayed on at school to do the 7th term entry’. Several confirmed that applying after A-levels would have been a financial impossibility: ‘My mother, who had been a widow for ten years, was [also] very clear – no hanging about, straight to university or join the bank.’ Another was

¹¹⁴ The personal testimony used in this section is drawn from submissions made by ‘Tanner students’, who sent in their written recollections in advance of the college’s ‘Tanner Day’ (‘Celebrating the Tanner Revolution in Hertford and Oxford Admissions’), 5 September, 2015, and from the 38 questionnaires which alumni returned to me in 2018. I am grateful for permission to use this material which is quoted anonymously.

‘not sure that my family would have managed financially with a seventh term entry’.

According to one Hertford alumna,

I only came to Oxford/Hertford because of the fourth term entry scheme. My parents were not able to fund an extra year at school to enable me to do the Oxford exam so I would never have been able to come to Oxford otherwise. My mother also worried that I would be too old to get married if I had to spend another year at school (remember this was the seventies!) If it had not been for finding out about the fourth term entry, they would have wanted me to leave school and find a job or, preferably, get married.... I would like to say that the fourth term entry was a brilliant scheme which enabled me as the first person (and the first woman) in my family to come to university and to come to Oxford. The fourth term entry was the reason I chose Hertford and I was delighted that I did so... I have the most wonderful and happy memories of my time at Oxford and Hertford and it would never have happened without the fourth term entry scheme.

The simplicity of the scheme was equally attractive: ‘Then I came across Hertford, and the option of being able to apply for an interview-only entrance. The barrier to entry was so much lower that it encouraged me to ‘have a go’, figuring I had nothing to lose.’ There was also that release of pressure for those offered an early place at Hertford, now with the chance to expand their academic interests in the months before coming up, which was one of the ancillary aims and effects of the scheme:

I suspect the intention was to free pupils from the constraints of the A-level syllabus permitting them to read widely before arriving at Oxford. Indeed, this may have been the interpretation taken by many pupils. I have to admit to being one of the many who simply had a wonderful last 6 months at school with all the pressure of A level results removed.’

Tanner students, like everyone interviewed at an Oxbridge college, can recall some of the details of first encounters with the tutors who would go on to teach them. In the case of the Tanner Scheme, the admission interviews were usually a little longer than interviews endured after the examinations – there was more to find out - and also a little less formulaic

and standardised. As Keith McLauchlan explains, tutors took it on trust that the schools had sent them their best candidates who were judged capable of coping with an Oxford syllabus. So in the interviews they were free to explore issues and aspects far removed from classroom learning. He recalled one aspiring chemist he interviewed who had little to say about chemistry but exploded with enthusiasm when allowed to talk about his passion for jazz and for the songs of Besse Smith in particular. He won his place.¹¹⁵ This chimes with the recollection of another student interviewed by Neil Tanner: ‘it was only when I got off the topic of physics and onto some philosophical ideas about Bertrand Russell that things came to life...I often think that it may have been that a science geek from a Northern comprehensive was spending his spare time reading Russell [that] might have swung the offer.’¹¹⁶ Of course, good tutors knew how to bring out the best in interviewees: as one now recalls, ‘First time round I was absolutely terrified and Keith McLauchlan was brilliant in handling me’.

One student was asked whether Plato’s account of the death of Socrates was a work of philosophy and commented that ‘nothing had prepared me for an extended discussion like this.’ Another ‘spent the whole time looking out of the window into the Old Quad unable to believe where I was’ but still won a place. One was asked what happened when a stack of sugar cubes was lowered into a cup of tea; another ‘what is the length of the track of a 45rpm single record’; another ‘how much power would be needed to drive a fan to ventilate the college kitchens’, and yet another ‘how I would estimate the weight of an Austin Mini’ and ‘when that seemed to be going nowhere, I was asked to calculate the distance flown by a fly which flew to and fro, in a straight line always at 20 mph, between two cyclists who started a mile apart and who cycled towards each other at various speeds.’ It is remarkable that nearly four decades later the problem can be recalled with such precision. In other cases, a single question is all that can be remembered: ‘I was asked how I felt about being subservient to the conductor when playing in orchestras. I could not see the relevance to the study of engineering!’ Another candidate received ‘a real grilling on my ability to construct, or demolish, very logical arguments’ but, surprisingly, ‘enjoyed it very much, although I would certainly not have admitted it to anyone.’ Another found it ‘Good fun. Dr Ganz was

¹¹⁵ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, 28 March 2019.

¹¹⁶ This testimony has been constructed by splicing together the same story told by the narrator in 2015 and in reply to the questionnaire in 2018.

engagingly eccentric.’ Enjoyment comes in different forms, however: one student who ‘certainly enjoyed my visit’ but had ‘no expectation of being offered a place’ recalls being ‘extremely relaxed throughout...not a little flippant and even “cocky” in some of the interviews.’

Some Tanner candidates weren’t really interviewed, just ‘asked questions about what I was reading.’ In one Geography interview the candidate mentioned that he ‘had read some Malthus’ and he suspects ‘that is what won me my place’. In a Chemistry interview Keith McClauchlan ‘greeted me, sat me down and handed me a ball and stick model of methane. He asked me to talk about it.’ Others misjudged their performance by the length of the interview: one especially impressive mathematician left ‘with the feeling that the interview had been very short and that I had not had much opportunity to show them that I really could do maths.’ This may be compared with the experience of another student whose interlocutor ‘appeared to be genuinely enjoying the discussion, so much so that when the allotted time expired but the discussion had not yet come to a conclusion, he asked me to come back to finish it after he had dealt with his next appointment.’ Of course, he had won a place. Some got lucky: one student entered her interview determined to talk about the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and met there the English tutors Julia Briggs and Tony Cockshut who was an expert on Hopkins. Remarkably, when the interview was over, she was asked to wait outside and when called back into the room her tutors offered her an unconditional place there and then. ‘I remember calling my father from a nearby pub to tell him I’d got in – allowing for those two Es!’ Another student who met this pair of tutors had a wilder ride:

Then it started. I was out of my depth. Me, a callow kid, trying to argue on Shakespeare with these two. Ridiculous. But I had nothing to lose. So I answered the questions I wanted to answer, irrespective of whether they had actually been asked or not...I’m still not sure how they didn’t work out I was bluffing them.

Not all of the unexpected experiences occurred inside the interview room, either:

When I arrived in Oxford, having never been before, the whole place looked like some sort of film set. This was literally the case as I turned up in front of Hertford [and] there was a film crew making what we later learned to be the TV serial of

Brideshead Revisited. They were filming Jeremy Irons walking under the Bridge of Sighs and we interviewees were only allowed into Cattedon Street during breaks in filming.

When this student eventually managed to work his way into college he 'felt the interview had gone badly so, instead of staying the night and travelling back on the third day, I checked out and took the first train home...the letter came to the school rather than me and it said I would be made an EE offer.' It was common enough for interviewees to feel that they'd failed. Take this student of Law, for example:

It was a traumatic experience. I met no other candidate remotely like me. I left for the long bus ride home certain of failure. I told my school it was a washout. I remember the headmistress telling me afterwards that Roy [Stuart's] account to her of the interview (they spoke on the phone, I think) was unrecognisable as the same event as the one I had described to her. Huge credit to Roy for spotting the potential (and toughness) among all that disorientation and lack of confidence – and for getting me in the room in the first place.

Many of those interviewed by Neil Tanner himself thought, wrongly, that they'd made a hash of the whole thing. One recalled being interrogated by the Physics tutor, who, by the end 'seemed to have reassured himself that I knew nothing at all but it was not my fault...The whole thing was done with a barely suppressed sense of unthreatening amusement that a Physics syllabus could have imparted so little knowledge to its victim; and that was that.' Another of Tanner's victims 'thought I had flunked the interview, claiming to know something about relativity then falling down at the first question'. Even at this distance we can sense how much Neil Tanner would have enjoyed meeting one applicant who 'had recently attended a lecture where a psychologist had claimed that it was not possible to judge someone on the basis of an interview', an almost direct challenge to the Tanner scheme itself. They spent most of the time 'discussing whether he could judge me or not' which was much more enjoyable than being asked awkward questions about science. As the candidate left, Tanner said 'that in his view he could judge me' and the judgement was evidently positive: he won his place. The purpose of such meetings was understood by a member of the first Tanner intake in 1965: 'The whole point, I later realised, was that Neil wanted to know

whether he could teach me, not what I already knew'. Tanner wanted to know whether a student could think: 'Neil outlined on a blackboard a scientific problem that he was currently engaged with and asked me for my ideas.' It could be a sophisticated concept or something quite primitive like 'how high would a rocket made out of a plastic bottle and containing pressurised water go?' As another student recalled of an interview conducted on a visit to his school,

Neil would throw out ideas and ask simple but subtle questions and see how I responded...I remember one question he asked me because a beam of sunlight was playing on the table. He threw a coin onto the table top and asked me why it did not start to rotate...Neil offered me a place at Hertford on the spot.

Most 'Tanners' 'adapted extraordinarily well' recalls Andrew Goudie, perhaps especially once the cap on numbers was lifted to 25% of the intake in the early 1970s.¹¹⁷ As one student recalled

Arriving in 1973, there had been a significant expansion of the scheme & we almost felt in a majority of that year's intake. There were so many of us who were 'first from our school' or 'first from our family' to go to Oxford that there was a great feeling of comradeship.

Others were challenged by Oxford's habits and norms. For one student, early in the scheme, who had just arrived, eating in a restaurant was not only entirely unfamiliar but believed to be a luxury and morally wrong. Another commented that 'coming from a working-class background there were aspects of other students' lives that were a world apart from my own...The public school-educated were used to an all-male environment but it did not appeal to me...My parents did not have a telephone so there was no option to "phone home"'. According to a third, 'I found myself automatically and unconsciously gravitating towards other Tanner scholars. I mixed little with boys who seemed to know much more about Oxford...we never felt fully part of Oxford.' The majority of the friends made by another 'Tanner' 'shared my state school background...I felt somewhat intimidated by the

¹¹⁷ Telephone conversation with Professor Andrew Goudie, 9 March 2019.

level of self-confidence and, in a few cases, sense of entitlement among ‘traditional’ undergraduates’. It was possible both to belong and to feel alienated in a single experience. One Tanner student still

cannot fully express the relief and joy of being in the company of like minds. I found [Hertford] a place where I could have conversations that I couldn’t have with my peers at school. It was a place where I wasn’t going to get beaten up (no, really) for being brighter than everyone else. In fact, it was the place where I wasn’t brighter than everyone else.

Nevertheless, he never felt that he belonged:

There were times when I felt that I had sneaked in the door somehow and I was bound to be found out at some time. And that sense was in no way linked to my academic ability...I was “at Oxford” rather than being a part of Oxford. There was much that was inaccessible due to social understanding; money; background and connections. There was a whole set of languages that I didn’t understand.

Of course, these contrasting experiences were not limited to Tanner students.

It was an important feature of the Scheme in operation, which was to the credit of Hertford and its staff, that once students ‘came up’ and walked into the college a year later, they were invisible as applicants who had reached Oxford by a particular route. According to one, ‘none of us considered ourselves to be “Tanner Students”. I do not recall hearing the phrase during my four years in Hertford’. This is confirmed by others: ‘I don’t recall the term ‘Tanner Scholar’ ever being used.’ Another could not ‘remember precisely which other students from my year were Hertford Scheme Students’. One commented that he was ‘not exactly sure who was recruited under Neil’s scheme and who was not’; another, noting that his friends were from similar backgrounds, ‘never actually asked if they took an entrance exam.’ ‘Whether we were Tanner scholars or not did not matter’. One commented that he ‘was not even aware that the Tanner Scheme existed until long after I left Oxford.’ Another, that he didn’t learn about the scheme until ‘many years after I graduated from Oxford, probably on reading [Neil Tanner’s] obituary.’ According to another ‘I don’t, to this day,

know for certain who the Tanner scholars were.’ The different modes of admission were treated equivalently, ceasing to be of any significance once undergraduates in Hertford began their courses. Thus some students, even to this day, don’t know if they were, or were not, part of the Tanner group: ‘I wasn’t aware of being part of a specific scheme, but I may have been, as I came from a state school. I know that Hertford was making special efforts in that direction at the time.’ As another put it, ‘At the time, of course, to most of us undergraduates, the Tanner Scheme was more or less invisible, it was certainly not much discussed amongst us. We were all too busy meeting new people and making the most of the myriad opportunities in front of us.’ According to one student. ‘Socially, the fit was fine at Hertford. It was genuinely diverse – all sorts of people to choose from...Oxford more generally remained a strange, romantic world – which I was happy to float in without really owning or being owned by.’ The successful blending together of all Hertford’s students over the twenty years of the scheme has relevance to any future use of methods like this to admit students from minority backgrounds: there is no reason to believe that altering the mode of entry for some underprivileged or underrepresented groups will have any bearing at all on their experience of Oxford.

Many students have reflected on the social mobility they experienced as a consequence of being picked by Tanner methods. ‘Coming from an ordinary family and attending state schools throughout my education, studying at an Oxford college would have been an impossibility without the scheme.’ According to another ‘my place at Hertford was a great step up onto the ladder of life.’ One Tanner student explained that his brother ‘had left school and gone out to work aged sixteen’. But in his case, his parents were called to the school and told that ‘it would be a waste if I were not able to stay on into the sixth form and go to university’. As he had a friend who was determined to go to Cambridge, he followed his example and applied to Hertford. One brilliant young Tanner student came up to Hertford in 1975 and within five years was elected a fellow of another Oxford college. One of the first students to enter Hertford in this manner could not

help but reflect on the sad contrast between the opportunities I was given and those available to young people nowadays. Neil Tanner played a huge part in my education and subsequent life but another, perhaps even larger part was played by the

educational authorities of fifty years ago who enabled bright working class lads to go to Oxford, and who were not afraid of being called elitist.

Again and again, alumni of the scheme attest to the personal advantages they gained from it. One 'shy comprehensive schoolgirl' was given 'the opportunity to succeed in such diverse ways both at Oxford and thereafter throughout my life'. Another female undergraduate was grateful for 'the mind-opening and artistic opportunities offered by Oxford life...Hertford taught me how to think for myself, and to have courage in my own convictions and the strength to pursue a minority path through life.' In another case a Hertford student recalled her headmistress 'saying what an incredible opportunity it was for girls such as me and how wonderful it was that Oxford was opening up in this manner.' The 'transformative effect that the Hertford Scheme had on my life' was recalled by one 'prototypical example of a boy from a comprehensive school...that had never sent anyone to Oxford.' Another such came from a comprehensive school 'that had never sent anyone to Oxford...and the Tanner scheme made it possible.' In testimony repeated by many Tanner scholars, 'I was the first person from my extended family to attend university, let alone Oxford, so it is not hard to imagine what a significant event it was for me and my parents.' Nor did the personal benefits and advantages of the scheme end there with the enhancement of a single individual. According to one Tanner alumnus

I think the way Oxford opened my mind to such a rich and diverse set of experiences contributed hugely to my own approach and philosophy in education (and in life) and I hope I passed some of these attitudes on to the teachers and hundreds of young people I worked with.

It is reminiscent of the motto for the cultured life used by Hector, the charismatic French teacher, in Alan Bennett's play about Oxbridge admissions, *The History Boys*, set in Leeds in 1983: 'Pass it on boys, pass it on.'

7: Success Breeds Emulation

If in the late 1960s the Tanner scheme was the focus of college opposition throughout Oxford, by the late 1970s is attracted not condemnation but emulation. This is not difficult to

fathom; the scheme's success, whether measured by the number of Hertford's applicants, their evident quality, the college's position in the Norrington Table, and the general sense that this was a college 'on the up', was indisputable and led other colleges to review their procedures. Hertford had shown that there was so much academic talent in British schools that was not otherwise attracted to Oxford that other colleges were naturally drawn to copy the Hertford model. As an article in the college magazine explained

Its radical admissions policy is the major cause of its rise to academic stardom. And in doing this it has shown the way to the University which has followed Hertford's lead in making boys and girls of all schools, and most particularly those in comprehensives, feel that Oxford is the university for them, if they have potential.¹¹⁸

The Tanner Scheme had shown itself adaptable to both the 'comprehensivization' of the British secondary school system, a process that began in the early 1960s and was largely complete by 1980, which merged grammar and secondary modern schools into comprehensive schools for all abilities, and to the admission of women to men's colleges in Oxford. Neither of these developments affected the Tanner scheme so greatly as to change it. The fellows of Hertford, as in all colleges, certainly worried over the impact of mixed-ability teaching in secondary schools, though the most notable effect was the loss of contact with specific teachers who had supported the Tanner initiative in the process of school reorganisation.¹¹⁹

Hertford's success led it to ask, quite naturally, that the cap at 25% of entrants made matriculation offers which was set in 1970 should be raised. As Tanner explained in a letter to the Chairman of the Management Committee of the OCAO, 'this limitation has become inconvenient and embarrassing...we now find ourselves interviewing in September rather more than 85% of our applicants and it is unsatisfactory to have so few places to offer so many candidates...the 25% limit serves no purpose and is unnecessarily restrictive.'¹²⁰ Geoffrey Warnock, the then Principal, followed up with a formal request to raise the cap to a

¹¹⁸ 'The Changing Face of Oxford', *Hertford College Magazine*, 68, Spring 1982, 12.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, 28 March 2019.

¹²⁰ Neil Tanner to Oliver Taplin (Magdalen), chairman of the OCAO, 17 Oct. 1980, AD 1/35/7, OUA. See GB Minutes, 29 Oct. 1980, HCA 4/1/5.

third of annual places offered. As he explained, ‘restricted as we now are, we can make early offers to only about one in ten, or even fewer, of the pre A-level candidates we get’.¹²¹ When the motion embodying this proportion was put to the colleges, 11 colleges were in favour, 7 were against and 10 abstained, including some that had been totally opposed to the Hertford scheme. In the following year, 1982, in typically tenacious style, Neil Tanner came back and asked for 50%, only to be rebuffed by the Management Committee.¹²²

By this time fully 10 colleges were making matriculation offers: there had been a rush to diversify modes of admission at the start of the 1980s and Oriel, St. Hugh’s, Balliol, Brasenose, Pembroke, Mansfield, Somerville, Wadham and University College had now joined Hertford in advertising matriculation offers based on an interview.¹²³ While some of these colleges were setting aside only 10% of places in this way (Wadham, University, Brasenose) and Balliol, Mansfield and Somerville would go to 20%, the remaining four colleges, including Hertford, offered up to a third of their places as matriculation offers. There could be no more obvious sign of the Tanner scheme’s success than this. When Oriel, the first of these colleges to adopt matriculation offers, wrote to the OCAO to explain its decision, the Provost made the proposal in these terms: ‘In other words, we want to do what Hertford College has been doing.’¹²⁴ The paper circulated by the Admissions Office to college representatives for its meeting in Trinity Term 1981 was entitled ‘The adoption of the “Hertford Scheme” by other colleges’.¹²⁵ Keith McLauchlan recalls the occasion when the President of St. John’s came to lunch in Hertford to find out how the scheme worked.¹²⁶ Indeed, so large was the group of colleges that the OCAO Management Committee held a special meeting in June 1982 to try to agree common procedures among them at which Neil

¹²¹ Geoffrey Warnock to Oliver Taplin, 7 Jan. 1981, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

¹²² E. A. Baskerville to Neil Tanner, 12 March 1982, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

¹²³ Minutes of the Meeting of the Management Committee of the Admissions Office with College representatives, 11 Feb 1982, Matters Arising, Minute 13: ‘Matriculation Offers: The Chairman reported that ten colleges had asked to be shown in the booklet with the estimated proportion of offers which they might make in this way.’ AD 1/53, ‘Matriculation Offers’, OUA.

¹²⁴ Provost of Oriel to the Chairman of the Management Committee, 27 March 1981, AD 1/53, OUA.

¹²⁵ Management committee, OCAO, 21 May 1981, item 8: ‘The adoption of the “Hertford Scheme” by other colleges’, AD 1/53, OUA.

¹²⁶ Interview with Keith McLauchlan, 28 March 2019.

Tanner suggested that the ten colleges should form themselves into a co-ordinating group for the purposes of annual admissions.¹²⁷

The stampede was barely controllable, though most of these colleges were giving only a few matriculation offers in each year, and a slightly higher number of conditional offers.¹²⁸ In October 1982 there were 796 applicants for matriculation offers across the university and 829 for conditional offers. Of these, 121 were made matriculation offers for admission in October 1983 and 227 were made conditional offers.¹²⁹ The rush to diversify modes of entry became a genuine problem for the university as a whole when a few months later, in Michaelmas 1982, Keble College announced that it, too, would be making conditional offers as from 1983 for first entry in 1984, but like Hertford, at 33% of the intake, which equated to 40 students a year in Keble's case.¹³⁰ The Keble Scheme was to be an entirely independent initiative with its own listing in the UCCA handbook; applicants would apply to Keble separately from the University of Oxford. They would not take the entrance examination and would be offered places conditional on A-level results the following summer after an interview in December. Those who applied and were rejected would never be part of the Oxford system and unavailable for consideration by other colleges.¹³¹

The announcement of the Keble Scheme had caused consternation, not least because it attracted local and national publicity, and was a turning point in the recent history of

¹²⁷ 'Record of a Meeting between the Management Committee and representatives of the colleges which make Matriculation Offers, held in the University Offices...28 June 1982', AD 1/53, OUA.

¹²⁸ The number of conditional offers made across the university in 1978, 1979 and 1980 were 150, 188 and 130 respectively. E. A. Baskerville, Paper for the Management committee of the OCAO, 11 June 1981, item 5, AD 1/53, OUA. Over the three years 1980-82 the average number of matriculation offers in the five highest colleges were: Hertford 29; St. Hugh's 22; Pembroke 20; Balliol 12; University 7.

¹²⁹ 'Statistics Based on Places Given Through the Admissions Exercise October and December 1982', (14 Jan. 1983), AD 1/53, OUA.

¹³⁰ 'The Keble Scheme', 7 Oct. 1983, paper for the OCAO Management Committee (MC/1643) in AD 1/54, 'Keble Scheme', OUA.

¹³¹ Transcript of a meeting between the Joint Committee of the OCAO and the Warden of Keble (Sir Christopher Ball), 4 Nov. 1982, AD 1/54, OUA.

Oxford admissions.¹³² As the Tutor for Admissions at St. Catherine's put it in a letter to all other Tutors for Admission in the colleges,

The proliferation of new modes of admission, and the further elaboration of modes already in operation, usually at the initiative of single colleges, seriously threaten the whole common admissions procedure which the Colleges agreed on in 1963 and which was largely responsible for the setting up of the OCAO...As for schools, we believe that the ever increasing complexity of the Oxford admissions procedure is becoming not simply a nuisance, but even a deterrent to sixth-form masters and potential candidates.¹³³

As Robin Devenish recalls, 'Schools pushed back in the late 1970s and early 1980s: there were too many schemes, it was all too complex and diverse.'¹³⁴ Keble was asked by the OCAO to delay the introduction of its proposed scheme and agreed to do so for a year only. At its meeting on 4 November 1982, the Joint Committee for admissions took the view by 26 votes in favour to 2 against 'that a committee should be set up to carry out a thorough review of all Oxford admissions procedures and to report back by Trinity Term next year [1983]'.¹³⁵ In the following term, with the higher councils of the university in agreement, a Committee on Undergraduate Admissions, chaired by the President of Corpus Christi, the classicist Sir Kenneth Dover, was established. Its terms of reference were 'to review all the procedures by which undergraduates are admitted to Oxford, and to aim to arrive at a simplified procedure which will command the unanimous agreement of colleges (or the agreement of the great majority)'. The Dover Committee was in some ways the ultimate triumph of the Tanner Scheme; it also marked its end. The Dover review had been set up because so many colleges, following Hertford's example, were now 'doing their own thing'. But the new uniformity it established spelled the end of Hertford's two decades of creative and successful independence.

¹³² See the *Oxford Times*, 5 Nov. 1982; *Isis*, 11 Nov. 1982; *The Guardian*, 6 Nov. 1982.

¹³³ M. H. Shotton to 'Tutors for Admission', 25 Oct. 1982, AD 1/54, OUA.

¹³⁴ Interview with Robin Devenish, 27 March 2019.

¹³⁵ Minutes of the Joint Committee of the Management Committee of the OCAO and College representatives, 4 Nov. 1982, 2, AD 1/54, OUA.

8: The Dover Report, 1983

The Dover Report which was published in June 1983 was the work of a committee of college tutorial fellows with close and direct experience of the admissions system. Their deliberations were of interest to a national as well as a purely local audience.¹³⁶ Though they aimed to create ‘a simplified admissions procedure’ they admitted to finding their task ‘one of extraordinary complexity’.¹³⁷ They recognised that ‘many schools regard the Oxford admissions system as complicated, arbitrary and discouraging’. They noted the differential success rates for post A-level candidates in the autumn of 1982, 44.2%, as compared with pre-A-level candidates at 29.2%. The success rate for seventh term applicants from independent schools in that year was 48%, in fact. To maximise accessibility, but also to satisfy different opinions across the university they recommended two modes of entry, Modes E and N. Mode E, requiring written entrance examinations, would only be available to pre-A level candidates. But they could also choose to apply via Mode N which involved, in their case, interviews in December and a conditional offer based on A-level grades the following summer. For post A-level candidates, entrance would only be via mode N: having attained their grades in the previous summer they would be interviewed and admitted unconditionally if successful. According to the committee ‘the essence of Mode N is that interviewers should trust their own judgment’, which had been true of Hertford’s *modus operandi* for the previous two decades. Applicants could nominate up to three colleges in order of preference, or no preference at all and be allocated to a college. Entrance awards were abolished: no college made a strong case for their retention and the committee noted that they had both distorted the internal mechanisms of admission and deterred applicants from ordinary schools. The last entrance round under the old dispensation was to be held in the autumn of 1984 for entry in 1985; from autumn 1985 the new system would apply for entrance in October 1986.

Crucially, from Hertford’s point of view, the Dover Committee’s first recommendation was that ‘all colleges should agree to adopt the same procedures’ and its

¹³⁶ Articles and essay in the press at this time included David Johnston Jones, ‘Oxbridge Selection’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 23 July 1982; John Rae, ‘The exam that has run its course’, *The Times*, 3 Feb. 1983; Mary Warnock, ‘Is the Oxbridge Entrance System Fair?’, *The Observer*, 6 Feb. 1983.

¹³⁷ *Report of the Committee on Undergraduate Admissions (Dover Report)*, June 1983.

seventh that ‘no statements by any College about preference for one Mode or the other should appear in the Prospectus’, marked the end of the Tanner Scheme, along with the ILEA schemes for science and PPE, and the Scottish scheme as well. It also marked the end of ‘the seventh term’ in independent schools; if post-A level candidates would only be required to attend an interview rather than sit a batch of demanding written examinations, intensive teaching after A-levels was no longer required for Oxford entry. Nor was it required for admission to Cambridge. There, too, the early 1980s had seen university-wide consultations and debates about undergraduate admissions and a recognition that seventh-term entry as the norm was untenable when the vast majority of secondary school students were now in comprehensive schools. But Cambridge’s answer was rather different from Oxford’s. If Oxford retained an examination in the 4th term, the Cambridge solution was to establish new examinations to be taken alongside A-levels in the sixth and final term of the VI form. These were known as STEP^s (Sixth Term Examination Papers) and at first Cambridge applicants were made offers conditional not only on their A-level grades but also on results in these new STEP tests. However, over time, they proved unpopular and unnecessary (with the exception of entry to read Mathematics) and Cambridge, like Oxford, has reverted to a procedure focused on interviews in the 4th term and conditional offers based on A-levels in the following summer.

Thus both universities responded to pressures for reform at the same time and have worked towards essentially similar procedures focused on 4th term admission for the vast majority of candidates. In the mid-1990s Oxford decided to abolish all entrance examinations and rely on interviews only for both pre and post A-level applicants – to go over to Mode N wholly, therefore. However, within a decade, by the mid-2000s, many subjects had found that a written test was required as a means of determining the best candidates in larger and larger pools of applicants, and as providing evidence of fundamental skills required for the course to come. These tests are less onerous than the scholarship/entrance examinations of the 1960s and 1970s, usually amounting to a single examination, and are designed to be taken without requiring, in theory, any formal academic preparation.

Insofar as the Dover Committee focused admissions in Oxford on the 4th term and tried to equalise conditions as between different sorts of applicant from different sorts of schools, it could be seen as an endorsement of the Tanner scheme. True, the committee had

favoured conditional offers rather than matriculation offers, but the fact that the inquiry was established in the first place and that it set out to end the disadvantages experienced by applicants from state schools, owed much to Hertford's advocacy of reform and its experience using innovative procedures. Hertford led the way, other colleges followed, and eventually the weight of experience and opinion within and without the university was irresistible: the old system was failing to attract many excellent students capable of meeting and surpassing Oxford's standards and had to be changed.

But for Hertford and Neil Tanner in particular it was difficult to be one of the crowd again, to give up a scheme which had been so successful for students and for the college. Tanner sent three long submissions to the Dover Committee, two on behalf of the college in his formal role as Tutor for Admissions and a further letter setting out more personal views. In the latter, Tanner asked for more research to support the committee's conclusions: 'what is the correlation between A-level grades, entrance and examination marks, and Final's classes?'; 'what happens to candidates who are marginally rejected by Oxford?'; how do men and women differ in examination outcomes?; who got third class degrees and why?¹³⁸ Sir Kenneth replied personally as best he could with a dose of humour and some evident fatigue.¹³⁹

In the two official letters from Hertford, concern was expressed about the capacity of the suggested new procedures to interview, assess and process so many candidates now applying through different modes in the relatively short space of two weeks in early-mid December each year.¹⁴⁰ The committee's commitment to uniformity of practice across the colleges was another issue. Hertford responded to the recommendation that there should be no exceptions to the methods Dover was proposing with the following comment: 'As we are faced with a non-uniform set of schools, even within groups labelled 'maintained' and 'independent', and a non-uniform set of home backgrounds, we might want a diversity of practice among colleges to cover the various circumstances.'¹⁴¹ And in an ironic twist,

¹³⁸ Neil Tanner to Sir Kenneth Dover, 28 April 1983, Dover Committee Papers relating to the 'Interim Communication' of the Committee, AD 1/25/3, OUA.

¹³⁹ Sir Kenneth Dover to Neil Tanner, 30 April 1983, AD 1/25/3, OUA

¹⁴⁰ Tanner to Baskerville, 20 June 1983, AD 1/25/4, OUA.

¹⁴¹ Tanner to Dover, 28 April 1983, AD 1/25/3, OUA.

Hertford argued that rather than force pre A-level candidates to make a binary choice between Modes E and N, the whole university should come over to its way of doing things: interviews in September, allowing candidates who failed to gain an offer of a place at that stage to take the entrance examination two months later, thus combining modes E and N and keeping both routes open in a single process. 'We would much prefer to be able to interview pre A-level candidates in September, offer places to some and encourage others with respect to the examination'.¹⁴² But this proposed coup in which Hertford would have converted the rest of the colleges to its way of doing things was unsuccessful: fourth term applicants were given a choice between a place won by examination (E) or a conditional offer (N).

In an obituary for the Tanner Scheme, the then Vice-Principal, John Torrance, described the Dover Report as a 'misfortune for the college' and also 'a misfortune for many potential Oxford candidates'. Given that one of the key aims of the Dover committee was to make admissions fairer, 'there is irony in the result that, for the sake of uniform practice, Hertford must surrender a scheme widely hailed as Oxford's most progressive response to the difficulties faced by candidates from maintained schools'. He feared that the new system would not, in practice, greatly change the proportion of undergraduates drawn from the independent sector, a prediction that proved correct. The Hertford scheme had offered both 'positive encouragement' and 'positive discrimination' to ensure that candidates competed on equal terms. The early interview and two-stage admissions process 'helped candidates who lacked social assurance and interview skills to perform better at their second, crucial interview in December. Most of this will now be swept away.'¹⁴³

Perhaps this was a touch too pessimistic: Hertford had certainly lost the battle, but it had persevered and ultimately won the war to open Oxford up to 4th term applicants from local schools: not without evidence and good cause did Neil Tanner refer some months later in a letter to the chairman of the OCAO management committee to 'the Hertford scheme, which initiated much of what we are now trying to do.'¹⁴⁴ It is a measure of the Tanner Scheme's success and influence across Oxford that in December 1984 for entry in October 1985 fully 'fourteen colleges gave some places to candidates who had not taken more than

¹⁴² Tanner to Baskerville, 20 June 1983, AD 1/25/3, OUA.

¹⁴³ John Torrance, 'The Vice-Principal Writes', *Hertford College Magazine*, 70, Spring 1984, 1-2.

¹⁴⁴ Neil Tanner to Oliver Taplin, 14 Nov. 1983, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

one A-level, subject only to their satisfying the University's matriculation requirements which includes two passes at any grade of A-level.¹⁴⁵ In effect, half the colleges in Oxford had been converted to the merits of the Tanner Scheme. But the Dover recommendations ended this process completely, and unsurprisingly, the college reported itself to be 'opposed *nem con* to the report's general recommendation'.¹⁴⁶ As Tanner wrote to the chairman of the OCAO management committee at the end of 1983, 'We are not now contemplating UDI [unilateral declaration of independence] but remain very unhappy about the complexity and consequence of the Dover scheme.'¹⁴⁷

9: Old Habits Died Hard: Hertford's response to the Dover reforms in 1984-5

Hertford's independent spirit and Tanner's quest for the fairest and most advantageous procedure led to two final spats with the collegiate university in 1984-5 as the new procedures were being publicised and explained to schools and applicants. They were entirely characteristic.

In the first case, the college tried to organise a separate gathering alongside a much bigger Oxford Schools Conference in March 1984 at which the Dover recommendations were to be unveiled and explained. In Neil Tanner's letter of invitation to selected schools and teachers he called it a 'fringe meeting' at which participants would 'explore other long term solutions to the chronic problem of Oxbridge admissions'. The key word was 'other': as the rest of the university was getting to grips with the new system, Tanner was moving on to consider other and more radical ways to restructure admissions, in this case a new 6th term admissions procedure to coincide with the taking of A-levels, somewhat like the proposed Cambridge system.¹⁴⁸ The response from the Admissions Office may be imagined: Tanner

¹⁴⁵ 'Statistics based on places given through the Admissions Exercise, October and December 1984', AD 1/53, OUA.

¹⁴⁶ GB minutes 12 Oct. 1983, HCA 4/1/5.

¹⁴⁷ Neil Tanner to Oliver Taplin, 21 Dec. 1983, AD 1/35/7, OUA

¹⁴⁸ Neil Tanner, Letter of invitation to guests at the Oxford Schools Conference, March 16-17 1984, AD 1/35/7, OUA. Tanner's 'summary of proposals' attached to the letter suggested holding interviews in the Easter vacation of the second 6th form year and a common entrance examination for both Oxford and Cambridge to be taken at the time of A-levels examinations, with decisions to coincide with A-level results in August.

was distracting attention from the main aim of the conference, had misused the university's address list, and Hertford was undermining a new system agreed by the collegiate university even before it had been tried. The result would be the perpetuation of the confusion and diversity that had led to the Dover reforms in the first place.¹⁴⁹ The college protested in reply that it was simply encouraging debate.¹⁵⁰ A letter was subsequently sent to all those attending the main conference making clear that the new procedures would definitely come into effect in the following year, 1985, and had the backing of the whole university. *The Times* caught wind of the fracas in a piece entitled 'Oxford Entrance Challenge'.¹⁵¹

Later in 1984 the fellows agreed 'that the College should advertise and arrange advisory interviews in the last week of September' and requested that its entry in the 1985 admissions prospectus should include an invitation to applicants to visit the college 'at the end of September...for guidance about modes of entry...and, in many cases, to judge prospects for admission'.¹⁵² Old habits died hard and the fellows evidently wanted to carry on building relationships with potential applicants in advance of formal procedures through a type of 'early interview'. The college sent a letter to every secondary school in the country offering 'at the request of schools, the early interviews and, in some cases confidential reports to heads which, we believe, have in the past been of value to candidates and schools irrespective of whether they led to a place at Hertford'.¹⁵³ As may be imagined, the other colleges took the view that this was not in the spirit of the new arrangements and objected by a vote of 25 to 1 (with two abstentions).¹⁵⁴ It was reaffirmed that no element of selection should begin until the examinations and university-wide interviews were held in November-December each year. A subsequent special meeting of the Management Committee called on the college to cancel September interviews forthwith and threatened first, to send a letter to all schools to isolate Hertford, and second, 'to consider asking Hertford to withdraw

¹⁴⁹ Oliver Taplin, OCAO, to John Torrance, Vice-Principal, 7 March 1984, AD/1/35/7, OUA.

¹⁵⁰ John Torrance to Oliver Taplin, 10 March 1984, AD/1/35/7, OUA.

¹⁵¹ *The Times*, 14 March 1984.

¹⁵² GB minutes, 31 Oct. 1984, HCA 4/1/5; OCAO, Joint Meeting with College Representatives, 14 Feb. 1985, item 7.

¹⁵³ 'Entry to Hertford College in October 1986' (dated March 1985), AD 1/35/7, OUA.

¹⁵⁴ Lord Crowther-Hunt, Rector of Exeter College, chairman of the Management Committee of the OCAO, to John Torrance, Vice-Principal of Hertford, 2 April 1985, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

completely from the new admissions system.’¹⁵⁵ Faced with these threats and with increasing anger across the university – the matter was referred up to the university’s Hebdomadal Council - the fellowship backed down, if somewhat reluctantly.¹⁵⁶ They ‘acknowledged that our way of publicising our plans has proved highly contentious’ and agreed ‘as a gesture of reconciliation’ to give up September open days, early interviews, confidential reports and all the methods and processes that had together formed the Tanner Scheme.¹⁵⁷ As Lord Crowther-Hunt, Rector of Exeter College and the then chairman of the Management Committee, wrote to John Torrance, Vice-Principal, at the end of copious exchanges in the Trinity Term 1985, ‘I am sure you appreciate the importance of uniformity in any admissions procedure.’¹⁵⁸

This was the rather ignoble end to the Tanner Scheme, therefore, a slightly misconceived coda to an otherwise influential educational experiment that had succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations. There can be little doubt that Tanner exceeded the patience and tolerance of other colleges and that he misjudged the mood of the university as a whole which was now committed to making the Dover procedures work for all students as fairly and openly as possible. The two miscalculations illustrate, however, the level of pride felt by Tanner and his colleagues in the Hertford scheme and the transformation of the college it had led to, and there is no reason to doubt the sincerity with which they held to the belief that their former practices were better, not only for the college but for the university as a whole and above all, for the applicants. But complaining about the new systems in public and stealing a march on other colleges by continuing to jump the starting gun in September turned admiration for Tanner’s achievements into frustration with his maverick approach. It was inevitable and better that the college conceded at this point. The Tanner scheme could still be admired for its achievements over two decades and the best of its features taken forward.

¹⁵⁵ Special Meeting of the Management Committee of the OCAO, 10 May 1985; Crowther-Hunt to John Torrance, 15 May 1985, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

¹⁵⁶ For evidence of the opposition of colleges, see the Minutes of the 67th Meeting of the Management Committee with College Representatives, 23 May 1985, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

¹⁵⁷ John Torrance to Crowther-Hunt, 7 June 1985, AD 1/35/7, OUA. For the decision to back down, see GB minutes, 29 May and 5 June 1985, HCA 4/1/5.

¹⁵⁸ Crowther-Hunt to Torrance, 3 July 1985, AD 1/35/7, OUA.

Hertford College continues to enjoy academic success with a secure position in the Norrington Table, albeit in the middle. Over the period 2006-18 the college's average Norrington score has been 70.16, placing it 15th in the list of 30 colleges over these years. It continues to attract applicants from a notably wide range of backgrounds. Over the three years 2015-17, 69% of its undergraduate intake was from state schools, the second highest proportion in the university, against a university average of 57.2% for the same period. Over these three years, 13.9% of Hertford's undergraduates were drawn from geographical areas with 'low progression to higher education' (so-called POLAR quintiles 1 and 2), against a university average of 11.7%. On this measure of the university's social reach and mix, Hertford is the 5th most socially diverse college in the list. Interestingly, in this period Hertford also had the second highest proportion of female students at 54.8% of its undergraduate intake, compared with a university average of 48.8%.¹⁵⁹

10: Conclusions: The Tanner Scheme and Oxford Admissions Today

What conclusions can we draw from the Tanner scheme that have relevance for Oxford undergraduate admissions today? What follows is a set of personal reflections on the history uncovered here. Readers may and will draw other and equally valid lessons.

First, we should take inspiration from the approach and spirit of the Tanner Scheme. In the 1960s Hertford saw that by changing its methods, opening the college to talent, varying procedures, doing things differently and flexibly, the college could achieve a remarkable trio of good outcomes: good for students who would not otherwise have studied at Oxford; good for the college, which remade itself socially and academically; and good for the university which, had it seen the potential in the Tanner scheme from the start, might have adapted its admissions procedures to attract more and better applicants much earlier. American President Franklin Roosevelt once characterised his 'New Deal' in the 1930s as 'bold, persistent experimentation'. This characterises the Tanner Scheme as well, and the collegiate university might adopt such an approach today.

¹⁵⁹ University of Oxford, Annual Admissions Statistical Report, May 2018.

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Annual%20Admissions%20Statistical%20Report%202018.pdf#page=16>

Second, we should note an interesting transition in the scheme which has been overlooked: that it began as a partnership with grammar schools in the 1960s, but by the 1980s the college was largely working with comprehensive schools and with no diminution in the quality of the students brought to Hertford in this way. Selective grammar schools were largely turned into non-selective comprehensive schools in the decade 1965-1975 and it is often said that this has made the university's search for talented applicants from the maintained sector all the more difficult. The objection could be made that Hertford's experiment worked so well because it was initially a partnership with excellent selective schools whose best pupils achieved very high grades in academically rigorous courses. How could it have failed in such circumstances? But it continued to be successful even after the large majority of secondary schools became comprehensives. If so, this makes it more applicable to the current situation of secondary education than it would have been otherwise: it cannot be easily dismissed as a response to a particular set of conditions in the 1960s and 1970s which have now passed.

Third, the Tanner scheme depended on the independence of an individual college and its creativity in an era when colleges were more autonomous than they are now. It would be more difficult – probably impossible – for a college to break free of university-wide procedures in this way today. In 2007, and controversially, the administrative control of the Admissions Office passed from the colleges to the university under the newly appointed Director of Undergraduate Admissions. It was felt that this would make it easier to reform procedures and attract more actively a wider range of applicants. Centralisation and uniformity have followed though progress towards a diverse student body has been slower than expected. But in this story, Hertford acted as a pioneer. By being an outlier, the college could test new ideas and procedures and eventually, over time, other colleges came to agree with it. The university followed, adopting much of the Tanner Scheme, above all its focus on selection in the 4th term of the VIth form. Encouraging experiments, schemes, good ideas, and new approaches even in supposedly 'maverick' institutions and departments must be one of the lessons of the Tanner story.

Fourth, a diverse and socially-inclusive student body may be best created by eschewing deliberate acts of social engineering, which is always controversial and which

risks undermining the status and confidence of those brought to the university by such means. According to one Tanner student

In the current era of regular media attention upon the number of state school pupils gaining places at Oxbridge, I think it important to note that the 'Hertford Scheme' was not some vague concept or idealistic approach, but an intensely practical step to create a fairer and more inclusive admissions process.

The fellows of Hertford were not given to loud advocacy of social engineering during these two decades. Their more modest aim was always to improve the academic calibre of the college, and they did that by giving clever boys and girls their chance. There were no manifestoes or public declarations of faith, though many of the fellows derived great satisfaction from the social results of their experiment. In the process of making the college more accessible, the Tanner scheme had the effect of broadening the social backgrounds represented in the college. By concentrating on individuals, the scheme 'widened access' in general. There may be a lesson here: that Oxford can become more accessible not by deliberate acts of high-level policy and protestations of its openness to talent but by ensuring that applying to the university and being assessed for entry is as simple, humane, direct and straightforward as possible. The Tanner scheme shows that getting the procedures right can encourage a different view of the university, and a glut of applications then follows.

Fifth, and following on from this point, as a way of targeting talent and bringing it to Oxford, the informality of the scheme contrasts with some procedures used across the university in subjects today. The essence of Tanner's approach was to seek out clever boys and girls who would have gone elsewhere, and having located them, to make it relatively easy for them to enter the university by dispensing with formal tests and hurdles. It was a scheme for discovering potential and it trusted teachers, head-teachers, and tutors to exercise their judgment and perhaps take a chance. This contrasts with the undergraduate admissions regime across subjects that has developed over the past 15 years or so. A successful applicant today has to reach a required level in an admissions test and then specified grades at A-level (never lower than 3 grade As, and usually higher). Most tutors also look for at least 6 A* grades or the equivalent at GCSE. This makes it difficult for a tutor to take a chance and militates against admitting a talented student from a non-standard educational or social

background. Neil Tanner worried about this and warned against inflexible and static procedures in one of his submissions to the Dover Committee in 1983:

I must hasten to add that I see the personal and individual characteristics of the present admissions system as its outstanding virtue and would not, without quite compelling evidence, abandon these characteristics in favour of a mechanical system. The proposed departmental grading of candidates would, in the case of large numbers, necessarily degrade into a mechanical system.¹⁶⁰

There are two different approaches here. The present Oxford admissions system, designed to deal with more applicants than ever, has had to become more centralised and uniform. It encourages many more applications (though not necessarily from the groups Oxford wants to target) and it puts everyone through the same procedures irrespective of their educational background and circumstances (though flagging relevant contextual detail for those candidates from weaker educational and poorer social backgrounds). This contrasts with the Tanner model which was used to target specific schools – though applications through the scheme were open to anyone – and to subject a small cohort of pre-chosen and talented students to a flexible, individualised and non-bureaucratic method of selection reliant on professional judgment rather than test scores. The university can rightly defend its present methods as open, fair, equal, objective, impartial. Given the longstanding criticism of the system for favouring applicants from private schools and middle-class backgrounds, this is to the good. But if now and in the future Oxford needs to address the under-representation of specific groups – Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), white working class, applicants from outside London and the south east, mature students, the disabled – the Tanner scheme in its essence has much to recommend it. The procedures today will be different, but the spirit of the scheme should surely inform the spirit in which the university works with specific groups, just as Hertford began to work with specific under-represented schools and the whole class of ‘grammar school boys’ in 1965.

My own suggestion would be to build on the links each college has made in recent years with schools in its designated region of the country, which has been divided up so that

¹⁶⁰ Neil Tanner to Sir Kenneth Dover, 28 April 1983, AD 1/25/3, OUA.

colleges can build close relationships in a manageable area and not compete over the same ground. Encourage ten schools in each district without a history of sending pupils to Oxford to send their 4 best students in each case for an early, in-depth interview in Oxford in September and then set the best of them a realistic A-level offer, or even just a modern equivalent of a matriculation offer (the university abolished matriculation requirements of any sort in the 1990s so perhaps it would simply be an unconditional offer). Presently we are hoping these students will apply and be chosen from amidst an expanding ocean of candidates; instead, target them and if they possess potential, take them in addition to a full complement of undergraduates recruited by conventional methods. It is difficult, admittedly, to ignore A-level predictions and results, and to take students with lower grades than those routinely rejected would open the university to criticism. But if Oxford is serious about meeting all the objections to its enduring exclusivity, it needs to do something radical (though in this case, very simple). It is defensible – after all, a long interview before two or more tutors is no easy matter when you're seventeen, as so much of the testimony in this report demonstrates - and it builds on a proven model from the past. Indeed, if we stretch back to the West Yorkshire scheme of the 1960s as our example, the university might time-limit the project at its outset, making it into a five or ten-year experiment to engrain the idea of Oxford applications in schools and amidst groups who are currently cut off from the university. At the end of the period it would be expected that applicants would apply in the usual manner to a university which is no longer seen as remote or 'difficult'. A relevant feature of the Tanner Scheme is that Hertford alumni are confused to this day about who was, and who was not, a Tanner student. The college skilfully ensured that admissions' decisions were made with discretion; there was no focus at all on the route into Oxford once they walked past the Hertford Lodge for the first time. That could easily be replicated as a feature of any scheme today.

Neil Tanner saw talent and potential that was not being unlocked by Oxford and devised a successful method of drawing it to his college, with notable results. We can at least suggest that if Oxford today can locate other pools of untapped talent it could learn from Tanner's methods and the Tanner scheme as whole. Even if, in a different age, it is considered impossible to take students without excellent A-levels, there are enduring features of the Tanner Scheme which can be applied to the widening of access. These include working closely with schools, their heads and teachers; bringing potential students to Oxford and

sending existing students to the schools to inform and encourage; searching for academic potential by whatever means and looking for evidence of its existence in unfamiliar places (like the songs of Besse Smith); and being unafraid to employ the skills and judgment honed in the tutorial system, which brings tutors and students into such creative proximity, to choose young people of genuine ability. Fifty years on, the precise methods of the Tanner scheme matter less than its spirit.

The last word should go to the Tanner students themselves, many of whom praise the scheme for its wider social benefits and for the educational example it still provides. Neil Tanner is remembered for having ‘set out to widen access to the best, the highest status, education available, and to make the competition more fair.’ In a challenge to Oxford today and in the future, one alumnus has noted that ‘the Tanner scheme started a sequence of innovations on entry which decisively changed the college and Oxford for the better’, and comments that ‘the spirit of innovation on access should be constantly renewed in the decades to come.’ Others agree, using the same word, ‘innovation’. According to one ‘innovation in admissions’ systems matters as it is important to reach out to potential students in groups under-represented among applicants; and to keep the approach fresh.’ According to another ‘One needs to identify and implement rigorous, innovative mechanisms that identify talent and potential in non-standard places.’ According to a third, ‘You need to look for innovative ways to seek out talent’. And to a fourth, ‘it is still imperative – now more so – to find new ways to assist entry for bright kids who are inhibited from applying for social or financial reasons.’ Put another way, ‘Oxford must be an open house. It must push at the barriers. Must give opportunities to those who would not expect that chance – because if you only fish in the same ponds, you only catch the same creatures, time and again’. In short, as one Tanner student has put it, Oxford must ‘take risks’.

In his elegy for the Tanner scheme written in 1984, John Torrance hoped that ‘the merits of Hertford’s response to comprehensive education should not sink unsung into oblivion’.¹⁶¹ They have not, remaining as relevant today as half a century ago.

¹⁶¹ ‘The Vice-Principal Writes’, *Hertford College Magazine*, 70, Spring 1984, 2.

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