



# Student Experience at Permanent Private Halls

Oxford SU 2024/25 Report

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# Purpose of Report

At a collegiate university such as Oxford, your college plays a significant role in shaping your overall experience. Being placed in a Permanent Private Hall (PPH) offers a distinctive and unique Oxford experience, and it is essential to ensure that students in PPHs receive an experience that is as academically and personally enriching as those in traditional colleges.

We understand that a review of one of the PPHs was conducted earlier this year, which included input from students. The aim of this report is to expand upon these student perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the support and wellbeing, inclusion, and the religious atmosphere within all PPHs. Additionally, whereas the PPHSC review gathered feedback through group settings, our consultations were conducted individually, allowing for more personal and detailed insights.

As the elected representatives for students, we believe we are well-positioned to carry out this research and act as a bridge between students and the University. Students may feel more comfortable and open in expressing their experiences to fellow students, rather than to University officials, especially on sensitive matters related to personal wellbeing and inclusion.

The purpose of this report is not to replicate or critique the earlier review, but to provide the committee with additional student feedback and deeper insights that can inform their decision-making process and help ensure that students at PPHs receive an experience that is equal in quality and support to that of the broader Oxford community.



# Research Methods

To investigate the student experience at PPHs, we conducted a consultation process by reaching out to students at PPHs via email and social media platforms. Some participants were recruited via snowball sampling.

We interviewed every PPH student who expressed interest, resulting in the following participation:

- 6 current students (including some in leadership roles) at Regent's Park College
- 1 former\* Regent's Park student
- 3 current students at Champion Hall
- 1 former\* Champion Hall student
- 1 former\* Wycliffe student
- 1 current student at Blackfriars Hall

We also consulted with one Junior Dean from a PPH, as well as a member of PPHSC who took part in the PPHSC review.

These consultations were primarily conducted online, with each session lasting between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The interviews followed a qualitative, semi-structured format. While we had a list of predetermined themes and questions, we allowed the conversations to flow organically, allowing students to fully expressive themselves. The list of themes and questions can be found in Appendix A.

The data collected from the consultations was analysed using thematic analysis, allowing us to identify common patterns and key issues raised by students across the different PPHs.

Anonymity and confidentiality were promised to all participants, and as such, no names or identifying characteristics will be included in the report.

\*All former students had completed their course in 2023-24

# Limitations

While our research provides valuable insights into the student experience at Permanent Private Halls (PPHs), several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the sampling method relied on voluntary responses from students who engaged with our consultation call. This self-selection bias means that the students who participated were likely those already passionate or concerned about the issues at hand, which may not reflect the views of the broader student body. As a result, the findings may skew towards the perspectives of more engaged or motivated students.

Second, the consultations were primarily conducted with students from Regent's Park College and Champion Hall, with fewer responses from Blackfriars Hall and Wycliffe Hall. Despite efforts to reach students from all four PPHs, the low response rate from Blackfriars and Wycliffe limits the study's ability to draw comprehensive conclusions about the experiences across all PPHs. This could affect the generalisability of the findings.

Additionally, the sample size of 15 consultations (13 of which were students), while providing depth in individual responses, is relatively small. This means that the study's findings may not capture the full diversity of experiences within each PPH. For context, Champion Hall has around 15 students, whereas Wycliffe Hall and Regent's Park have around 150 and 290 respectively.

Despite these limitations, we believe the research retains significant merit. The qualitative, in-depth nature of the consultations allowed for rich, nuanced insights into the student experience, revealing key areas of concern and common themes across the halls. Quality of consultations was prioritised over quantity. By dedicating up to an hour for each individual consultation and creating a space where students felt comfortable to open up and share their experiences in depth, we were able to learn a lot about the student experience at PPHs. This approach fostered more meaningful discussions and allowed for a deeper understanding of the issues affecting students at PPHs.

Furthermore, the findings highlight important trends and issues that can be explored in future research or used as a starting point for further dialogue with students across all PPHs.

# Findings

## Theme 1: Religious and Cultural Atmosphere

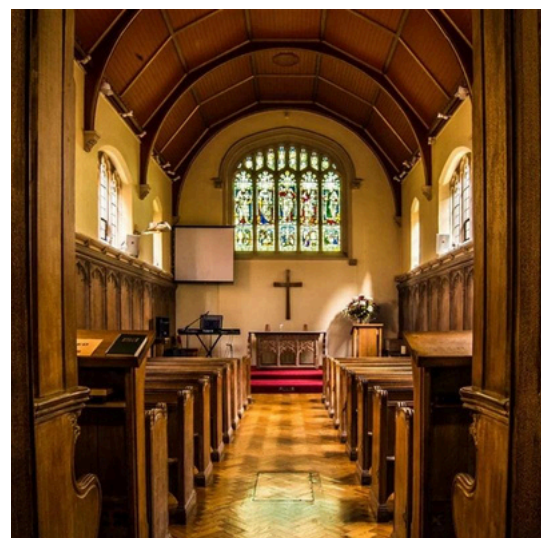
Whilst the religious ethos in PPHs varies in visibility and influence, it remains fairly significant in all.

At PPHs, practices such as grace before meals, religious services, and spiritual reflections are common. It is important to acknowledge that these practices exist in some traditional colleges too.

Some students, particularly those aligned with the institution's religious tradition and those who selected their PPH as a preference in their application, felt positively about these religious practices, enjoying the sense of shared values.

Students consistently reported that there was no obligation or pressure to participate in religious practices or events at the PPHs. Engaging with the religious elements of PPH life—such as attending services, joining in grace before meals, or participating in religious discussions—was always a voluntary choice. Students noted that the community was generally tolerant of individual beliefs, meaning students can opt out of religious activities. To some extent, this approach fostered an environment where students could appreciate the PPH's Christian ethos without feeling compelled to adopt specific religious practices, allowing them to engage in ways that felt comfortable and appropriate for their personal beliefs.

However, while students generally reported that religious practices were not enforced, many non-Christian students shared concerns about feeling marginalised. Students noted that there is a significant difference between merely tolerating religious and other minority groups and actively including them - a distinction that PPHs often seem to overlook. While PPHs generally strive to create a respectful environment where students are free to practice different beliefs or abstain from religious activities, some students felt that the approach stops at tolerance rather than full inclusion.



For instance, while Christian practices are regularly celebrated and supported, events for other religions often lack comparable institutional support or funding, leaving minority groups to feel sidelined rather than truly valued. This approach can create a sense of being "allowed" rather than genuinely welcomed, underscoring the need for PPHs to move beyond tolerance and actively foster an environment where all religious and cultural identities feel equally celebrated and included.

It is important to note that students from minority backgrounds, especially LGBTQ+ groups, often reported feeling that their identities were misunderstood or unacknowledged. Instances of microaggressions, insensitive comments, and a lack of PPH support for non-Christian religious events contributed to a feeling of exclusion. This is amplified by the lack of Halal or Kosher provisions at many PPHs. For LGBTQ+ students, there were accounts of homophobia and transphobia, which added to a sense of alienation rather than acceptance. Whilst we acknowledge these instances also unfortunately occur at other colleges, they have been identified as more prevalent by students at PPHs than their peers at other colleges.

# Findings

## Theme 2: Support and Wellbeing

Some PPHs have expanded their mental health resources, but their small size and limited budgets mean formal mental health services are somewhat scarce.



Several students raised the issue that Chaplains often serve dual roles as chaplain and welfare leads – which is of a particular concern when this is the only welfare contact or the head of welfare. Other roles associated with student wellbeing—such as junior deans—are also often filled by ministerial students, which means that students may lack a secular point of contact for support. This can create barriers for students seeking secular or non-religious support, especially in sensitive cases for LGBTQ+ students or students who might need access to family planning/sexual health support. These dual roles can create challenges for those who would prefer to discuss personal issues in a non-religious setting, leaving some students feeling as though there is no neutral space to turn to for wellbeing assistance.

As a result of limited budgets and dual Chaplain and welfare roles, students highlighted that peer support is a crucial aspect of well-being in PPHs, with students often relying on each other or informal staff-student relationships. While students valued this close-knit support network, several noted concerns about the burden placed on peers to fulfill what might traditionally be handled by professional welfare staff.

Some students, particularly postgraduates, felt isolated within the small student body and expressed difficulties integrating into the broader university community due to the PPH's insular nature. Additionally, students at smaller PPHs, like Champion Hall, reported that the limited number of students sometimes hindered their social experience, as organising events and activities required extra effort and planning, often leading them to seek social outlets at larger colleges.



While loneliness is a growing concern across the university, the smaller student population at PPHs, combined with fewer organised activities and social events, can intensify these feelings. Unlike larger colleges, where numerous clubs, sports teams, and social gatherings provide opportunities to connect, PPHs often have limited extracurricular options, which can leave students feeling isolated. The close-knit nature of PPH communities, while supportive for some, may not suit everyone's social needs, especially if they struggle to find peers with shared interests. For students without a built-in support network, the limited social offerings and smaller peer group at a PPH can make it harder to combat loneliness, emphasising the need for expanded efforts to foster community and connection within these unique environments. Additionally, these feelings of loneliness can be amplified when PPHs lack the resources and space for suitable and welcoming common room spaces.

# Findings

## Theme 3: Academic Experience

Students who selected a PPH as their preference, particularly those studying theology, found that being part of a PPH significantly enriched their academic experience. The close-knit environment fostered frequent, informal discussions around dinner tables, where students could engage in deep, relevant conversations with peers and faculty members who shared their academic interests.



Additionally, PPHs regularly hosted seminars and events centered on theology and philosophy, providing further opportunities to explore topics directly aligned with their studies. These students also reported generally having access to all necessary books and resources within the PPH, making it an ideal setting for those seeking a community focused on religious and philosophical scholarship.

For students who did not select a PPH as a preference and/or did not study theology, the experience was slightly different. These students noted that much of the academic focus, including seminars and discussions, was centered on theology and philosophy, which limited exposure to other fields. While they appreciated the community's openness, some felt that the academic offerings were not as diverse as those found at larger colleges. Additionally, students in non-theology subjects sometimes struggled to find the resources they needed within the PPH's smaller library collections, requiring them to rely on other libraries across Oxford to access essential materials (which often only have one or two books in stock of their necessary readings).

One of the strongest arguments in favor of Oxford's collegiate system is that it fosters interdisciplinary exchange, allowing students from diverse fields to interact, collaborate, and broaden their perspectives. However, this benefit is often lacking in PPHs, where the majority of students are ministerial candidates or studying theology and related subjects. This concentration of disciplines creates a more specialised environment that limits exposure to a variety of academic fields. Consequently, students in PPHs miss out on the interdisciplinary enrichment that is typically a hallmark of the Oxford experience, as their peers and the majority of academic discussions around them are rooted in similar theological or philosophical perspectives.

That being said, students generally felt that being at a PPH had little impact on their overall academic experience. A lack of library resources was mitigated by the array of other libraries across the university. They appreciated Oxford's many academic events, lectures and seminars and felt that this provided ample opportunity to engage in a broader range of subjects and discussions.

# Findings

## Theme 4: Comparison with other Colleges

The smaller, close-knit environment of PPHs fosters a strong sense of community but can also feel insular, particularly to students who were pooled into a PPH without understanding its unique context.



For some, this led to a sense of missing out on the “traditional” Oxford experience, as larger colleges typically have more diverse social groups, interdisciplinary academic subjects, broader extracurricular offerings, and a more integrated position within the university. Some students felt socially isolated and wished for more formalised connections with other colleges to facilitate broader social integration and access to additional resources.

In terms of facilities, PPHs generally offer fewer amenities. For example, students noted the absence of gyms, bars, and sports facilities on-site, as well as a lack of variety in dining options. Social events tend to be fewer and less elaborate, primarily due to budget constraints. Many students reported feeling that their social experience was limited and that they had to go outside the PPH to fully participate in Oxford’s social life.

It is important to note that many of the challenges highlighted—such as limited funding, fewer extracurricular options, and reduced access to resources—are issues that also affect other smaller and less wealthy colleges. However, these problems can feel more pronounced within PPHs due to their particularly small student populations and unique religious ethos, which further shapes the student experience.

One of the most significant comparison points was the lack of financial support, for the less wealthy PPHs. This meant that students did not have any of the book grants, travel grants, accommodation bursaries or other kinds of financial support offered at other colleges. To some extent, students felt this impacted their academic experience as well.



# Recommendations

## 1. An effective opt-out provision

Students who actively choose to attend a PPH tend to thrive, as they are more likely to embrace the unique culture and values of these halls. Having specifically chosen the intimate, religiously-oriented environment of a PPH, these students make the most of the opportunities, engaging deeply in academic discussions, community activities, and the close-knit social atmosphere. In contrast, students who are pooled into a PPH without prior knowledge or preference often find it more challenging to adjust, as the smaller size and strong religious ethos may not align with their expectations or personal interests. For this reason, a consistent opt-out provision is essential: it allows only those students who genuinely wish to be part of a PPH to accept an offer, ensuring that these communities are filled with individuals who are excited to contribute to and benefit from the experience. Providing students with an option to decline ensures that those who do choose to attend are well-suited to and enthusiastic about PPH life, ultimately fostering a more cohesive and engaged community.

Currently all PPHs, with the exception of Regent's Park, offer a choice for students to decline their offer from a PPH through an opt-out provision. The application of the opt-out option varies across PPHs: Blackfriars and Wycliffe both offer a formal opt-out provision, while Champion Hall takes a less formalised approach, arranging a conversation between the President and prospective students to help them understand life at the PPH before the students decide whether to accept the offer. Regent's Park does not provide an opt-out option, leaving students pooled there with no formal mechanism to decline. This lack of consistency has led to confusion, with many students misunderstanding the opt-out process or worrying that turning down a PPH placement could mean losing their Oxford place entirely.

### Case study:

One of the students we consulted had originally been pooled to Blackfriars. They invoked the opt-out provision and declined their offer from Blackfriars. They were then pooled to another PPH, Champion Hall. They accepted the offer from Champion Hall, explaining that at that point it was so late in the year they felt pressurised and anxious to decline another offer and be left without a college.

This example underscores how the current opt-out process can inadvertently leave students feeling uncertain and constrained, rather than reassured and empowered. The lack of clarity and consistency in the process, particularly concerning what options remain after declining a PPH, contributes to student anxiety and the perception that turning down an offer might jeopardise their place at Oxford altogether.

We argue for a standardised opt-out policy across all PPHs, including clear applicant-facing documentation and guidance, to alleviate concerns and prevent situations such as the one described above. This guidance should: a) outline information about the PPH and ensure that students understand the religious affiliations and unique aspects of a PPH so that they may make an informed decision and b) explain the opt-out process clearly, clarifying that declining a PPH offer does not mean forfeiting admission to Oxford.

Regent's Park poses a unique challenge, as its larger size and structure very much resemble a traditional college. The students we consulted at undergraduate level expressed concern at an opt-out provision being implemented at Regent's Park, as it might result in a lack of student numbers or lack of diversity. Undergraduate students also felt that an opt-out provision was not completely necessary, as it is very similar to a traditional Oxford college. Rather than an opt-out provision, undergraduate students conveyed that they would like Regent's to adopt a more inclusive atmosphere to other religions and beliefs, rather than an atmosphere of simply tolerance. Postgraduate Regent's students still remained concerned of the somewhat exclusionary religious ethos around ministerial students. Therefore, this report suggests that an opt-out provision at postgraduate level is introduced.

## 2. Separation of welfare and religious roles <sup>14</sup>

To enhance the accessibility of welfare services for students at PPHs, it is recommended that the roles of chaplain and welfare officer be separated. This structural change would create a more approachable environment for students who may feel hesitant to discuss personal issues within a religious context.

It is worth noting that we received positive feedback from students regarding current chaplains serving as head of welfare. However, concern was expressed that while the current chaplains may effectively manage the dual responsibilities of providing both spiritual guidance and welfare support, the success of this arrangement is ultimately dependent on the individual capabilities and may not be consistently upheld when a new or different chaplain enters the role.

By institutionalising this separation, PPHs can ensure that students feel more comfortable bringing a diverse range of concerns to welfare services, creating an inclusive support system that respects both secular and religious needs. Doing so will ensure welfare services are more approachable for students who may feel hesitant to discuss personal issues with someone in a religious leadership role, especially those relating to LGBTQ+ experiences or family planning/sexual health support.

In order to strengthen welfare support within PPHs, an option is to work in collaboration with Student Welfare and Support Services (SWSS) to create a streamlined process for those specifically from PPHs who may need support. Having SWSS staff more easily accessible to PPH students would provide a valuable, secular support option, especially for those who may feel isolated or underrepresented within the smaller, religiously-affiliated PPH communities.

### **3. Collaboration with colleges to alleviate student burden**

It is often the case that students residing in PPHs bear the burden of seeking out opportunities for inclusion and engagement within the broader Oxford community. For instance, they may have to join sports teams at other colleges or seek out resources, such as books not available in their own library. This responsibility can be particularly challenging for students who did not choose a PPH, as they must actively tap into other communities to curate the Oxford experience they envisioned. Such efforts create an additional layer of tasks and responsibilities that students must undertake to ensure meaningful engagement, a burden that students in traditional colleges typically do not face.

To alleviate this pressure, PPHs should explore strategies that minimise the onus on students. For example, establishing official partnerships with other colleges could facilitate access to shared resources, such as sports teams and library services. Additionally, organising formal dinner swaps or collaborative events would promote inter-college interaction and foster a sense of belonging within the larger university community. By implementing these initiatives, PPHs can enhance the student experience, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities for engagement and support, regardless of their college appointment.



# Conclusion

This report highlights the unique and varied experiences of students within Oxford's Permanent Private Halls. While students who actively choose to attend a PPH often benefit from its close-knit, supportive community, those assigned without preference can encounter challenges aligning with the hall's religious and cultural ethos. The report indicates that while PPHs generally strive for inclusivity, there is room to enhance support systems and academic resources to match those available in larger colleges. Our recommendations aim to foster an environment where all students, regardless of their PPH assignment, can fully engage with and benefit from the Oxford experience.

## A summary of our recommendations:

1. **Effective Opt-Out Provision:** Standardise an opt-out provision for students assigned to PPHs (including at PG level for Regent's Park), ensuring students understand they can decline a PPH placement without risking their place at Oxford. This would allow only those who are genuinely interested in a PPH experience to join, fostering more cohesive communities.
2. **Separation of Chaplain and Welfare Roles:** Separate the roles of chaplain and welfare officer within PPHs. This would create a more approachable support environment, especially for students who prefer non-religious guidance on personal issues.
3. **College Collaboration:** Facilitate partnerships between PPHs and other colleges to help students access shared resources, like sports teams and libraries, and enhance social and academic integration within the broader university community.



## List of predetermined questions and themes

Did you know what a PPH was when applying to Oxford?

Did you specifically apply to a PPH?

### Religious and Cultural Atmosphere

- How does the Christian ethos of your PPH influence the culture and day-to-day life?
- How inclusive do you feel the PPH is towards students of different backgrounds, identities, and beliefs?
- Are there any particular challenges or benefits you've experienced regarding inclusivity in such a close-knit community?
- How does the PPH engage with issues of diversity, equality, and inclusion?

### Support and Wellbeing

- How would you describe the support available for student wellbeing at your PPH?
- Does the smaller size of the PPH make it easier or more difficult to access support services when needed?
- How does your PPH address issues related to mental health, stress, or academic pressure?

### Academic Experience

- How would you describe the academic resources and support (like tutoring, libraries, etc.) available at your PPH?
- Do you feel that the size of the PPH impacts your academic experience in any way?
- How does the religious affiliation of your PPH influence your academic experience, if at all?

### Comparison with Other Colleges

- What do you think are the biggest differences between your experience at a PPH and what you hear from friends at other colleges?
- Are there any aspects of life at larger colleges that you feel you are missing out on, or that you appreciate not having at a PPH?
- How would you compare the overall experience of being at a PPH with being at a non-PPH college?

### Challenges and Recommendations

- Are there any specific areas where you think the PPH could improve the student experience? / What suggestions would you offer to enhance life at your PPH for future students?
- Would you recommend your PPH to prospective students, and why or why not?
- If you could change one thing about your experience at your PPH, what would it be?
- How would you feel about an opt out option, for PPHs only, when being allocated a college?



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