

A vision for Parks College:
A community of scholars for the 21st century



Report of a series of Workshop Discussions

24th & 25th April, 1st May, 2019

Held at the Oxford Martin School, Oxford, UK



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2. Executive summary

Parks College is a newly approved Graduate Society of the University of Oxford, with a vision for research, student support and teaching based round a set of research clusters representing challenging interdisciplinary areas of enquiry. A particularly exciting part of the development of this College is the chance to build a new community and develop a set of shared values.

This series of workshops sought to gain insights and feedback from a wide cross-section of the University community – including academic and non-academic staff, graduate and undergraduate students, to feed into the development of the vision for Parks College.

The overwhelming consensus was a desire to establish a college which **strikes a balance between academic excellence, camaraderie and open-mindedness, and practical problem-solving skills**, whilst having **people and their well-being at its core**. The college should be diverse and innovative in its disciplines, ideas, culture and people, and have the necessary systems and resources in place to deliver this vision and organisational culture.

Parks College provides an opportunity to **create a college with a purpose**. The college can **leverage the Oxford brand** and the **college's assets of location** to establish a new and different **vision, system** and **organisational culture** within an established institution.

There is an opportunity to **create an example**, using available resources to **build on and learn from what already exists**, whilst bringing in new, imaginative and innovative people to **create real-world impact**.

Based on these findings, a vision for a Community of Scholars for the 21st century (such as Parks College) might be something like: *"A college with a purpose: Creating real-world impact through combining inter-disciplinary intellectual excellence with diversity, community and practical problem-solving."*

3. Background and aims

Parks College is a newly approved Graduate Society at the University of Oxford, which aims to recruit its first cohorts of fellows from Michaelmas term 2019 and graduate students from October 2021. During late April and May 2019 three workshops were conducted at the Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford, to develop an ambitious shared vision for Parks College. The workshops were open to all members of the university, and aimed to facilitate open discussion regarding a vision for Parks College. They were part of a wider consultation exercise, which included open Question and Answer sessions, presentations to a range of university committees and informal discussions with members of Departments and Colleges, students and staff both in groups and individually.

The workshops were a chance for debate and discussion between different interest groups, in a forward-looking atmosphere, of the overall vision that the College might aspire to, rather than the short-term specifics of the process of setting up the College.

The workshops aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key positive characteristics of a community of scholars for the 21st century?
2. What are the necessary resources and pre-requisites for this vision to be achieved?
3. What are the potential barriers to achieving the vision, and getting these pre-requisites in place?
4. How can these barriers be overcome?

4. Methods

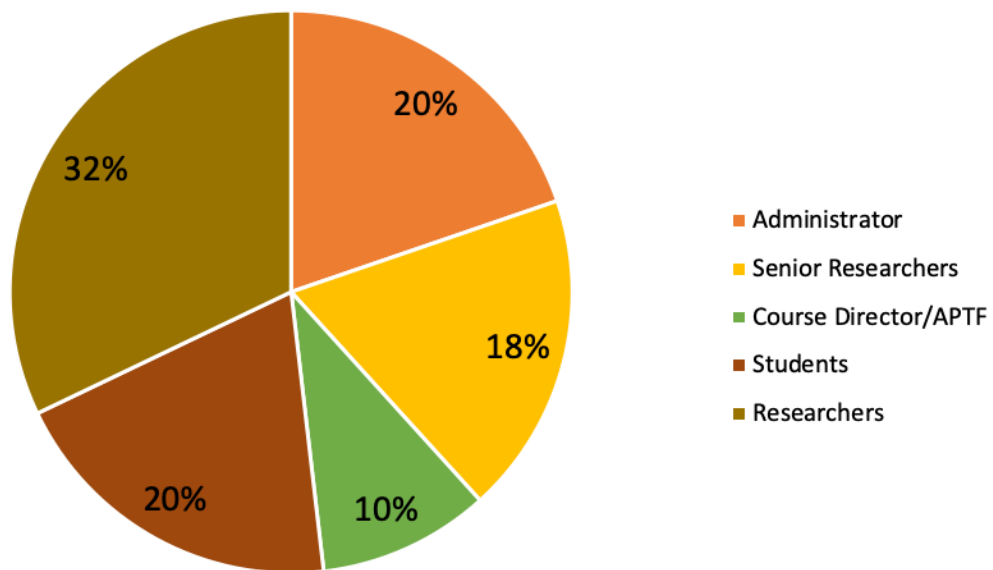
Recruitment for the workshops was done via sign-up through an online form, circulated in February with a two-week deadline. Announcements about the workshops were put in the University Gazette and were circulated widely by the organisers, the Student's Union and through Departmental email lists. The aim was to be as open as possible and to enable anyone who wanted to contribute to do so. When expressing an interest, individuals were asked for a few details about their positions as a way to allocate places to achieve balanced representation across interest groups. They were also asked to respond (optionally) to the questions above. This was in order to enable all those with an interest to express their views, in case there was not enough space to accommodate all those who wished to attend.

There were 30 places available at each of the three workshops. The response was such that all three workshops were fully subscribed, but no one who expressed an interest in attending was turned away. The few late requests to attend were all granted, because of last-minute drop-outs.

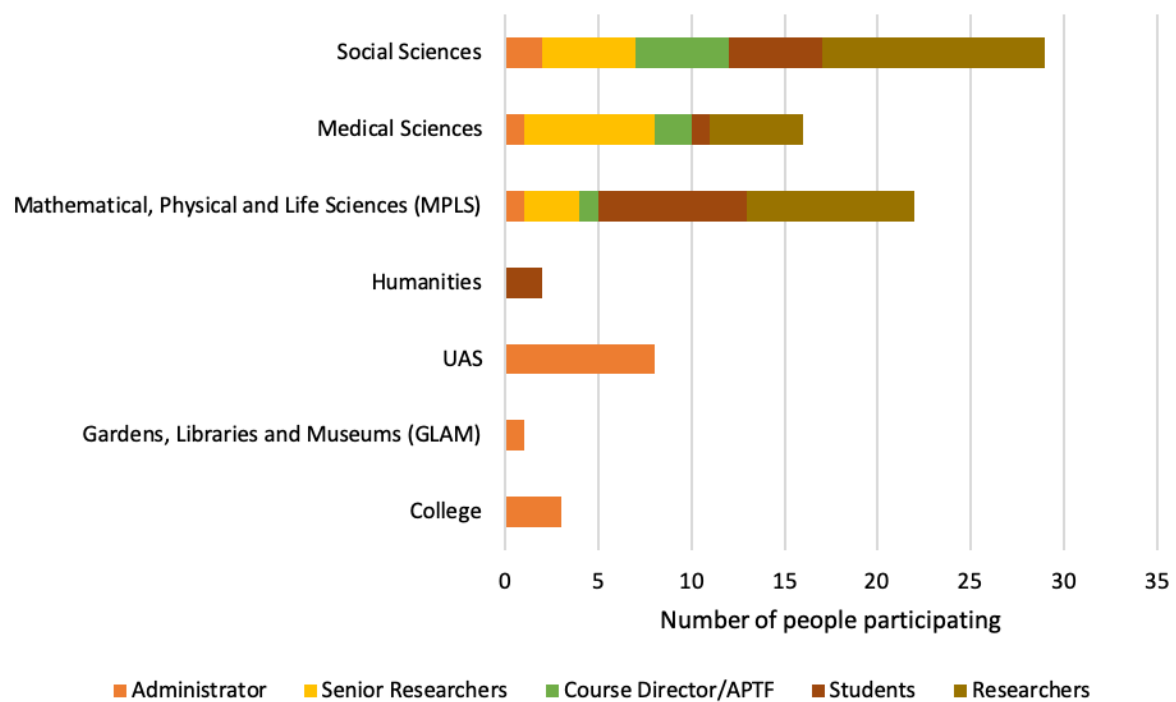
A total of 81 people participated in the workshops and filled in the survey, including students (both undergraduate and post graduate); early career researchers and post docs; senior researchers and fellows; and administrative staff. These people came from all academic and administrative Divisions of the university (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Representation of different groups and divisions during the Focus Group Discussions

1a. Representation of different groups



1b. Distribution across university divisions



The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were designed with a semi-structured format, to allow free-flowing conversation, open opinions and new ideas, whilst maintaining structure to facilitate constructive and practical outputs which explicitly recognise conflicts, uncertainties and variable priorities. Each FGD included an introduction, three rounds of group work (30 minutes each), and feedback to plenary with final reflections. The three rounds of group work each centred around the three key questions:

1. What are the key positive characteristics of a community of scholars for the 21st century?
2. What are the necessary resources and pre-requisites for this vision to be achieved?
3. What are the potential barriers to achieving the vision, and getting these pre-requisites in place? What are the opportunities? What are leverage points that would allow us to turn the barriers into opportunities?

Each group consisted of ten people, plus a facilitator. The compositions of the groups were changed during each round of the FGD. The aim of this was to ensure that all voices were heard; the first mixed groups (Question 1) were pre-assigned to maximise their diversity across career stages, divisions and roles. The second group (Question 2) was divided by role in order to ensure that the perspectives of people with different roles in the university came through (participants self-identified as: students and Early Career Researchers, administrators/course directors, more senior researchers/academics). For Question 3, a few people were moved between groups to ensure new combinations of people were obtained.

Facilitators displayed participants' inputs using flip charts, clustered and summarised key themes, and guided discussion. Scribes also took notes during discussions and feedback. The FGDs operated under the Chatham House Rule, whereby attendees are free to use the information discussed in the workshop, but the source of any information or views should not be identified.

The workshop findings were summarised through conducting a simple thematic analysis based on the notes taken during the discussions, supplemented by the responses to the pre-workshop survey questions, to identify frequent terms and overarching themes. Particularly interesting ideas were also summarised, and direct quotes were pulled out from the pre-survey to illustrate specific points.

5. Key Findings

Overall, there was remarkable consistency between the three workshops in the themes which emerged. All three workshops were characterised by a positive spirit and an openness to discussion and exchange of ideas.

5.1 What are the positive characteristics of a community of scholars for the 21st century?

The FGD and pre-survey responses for question 1 indicate that there is a desire to establish a college which **strikes a balance between academic excellence, camaraderie and open-mindedness, and practical problem-solving skills**, whilst having **people and well-being at its core**.

There was a strong emphasis on diversity, and that this should be reflected in the college's academic disciplines, ideas and research outputs, and people. Similarly, there was an emphasis on inter-disciplinarity, which should be reflected in the College's research, and its members, with a community of driven and imaginative scholars, who also have excellent people and practical problem-solving skills, and are able to act as facilitators of interdisciplinary exchange. It was emphasised that the college should create a space for this, by being inclusive and accessible, supportive (both for members within the college, and to the broader community outside of the college), and ensuring equality across race, gender, sexuality and socio-economic background.

The desire for a strong sense of community, with mentoring, peer support and pastoral care within the college was also noted. Other key values included environmental sustainability, and having people and well-being at its core. It was also emphasised that the college's research should be solutions-oriented and impact driven, with a focus on solving key problems for the 21st century (such as climate change), and thus creating value for society. Both the college and its members should provide local and global leadership in these values, and create a global example of good practice.

It was also noted that the college facilities should also reflect these values, with informal shared spaces for open conversation and bookable private work space for meetings or individual deep work. The college should also have facilities to support its diverse community, such as multi-faith prayer rooms for students from different cultures and religions. Finally, the college should also facilitate sustainability, through supporting bus and bicycle access, for example.

The key overlapping themes and characteristics are summarised and described in Table 1 and Figure 2. Note these themes were echoed in both the answers to the pre-survey, and the workshop group discussions.

Table 1. Key themes from FGDs and pre-survey responses to question 1

Key theme	Details and illustrative quotes
1. Diverse	<p>In disciplines, ideas, culture and people. Dimensions of diversity that were specified include gender, race, age, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, geographical and socioeconomic background and academic discipline.</p> <p><i>"Diversity in all aspects of the word"</i></p> <p><i>"Plurality in schools of thought, inclusiveness for a varied set of disciplines"</i></p>
2. Supportive community	<p>Sharing spaces and ideas. A sense of community within the college, and outside. A non-hierarchical system for mentoring, peer support and pastoral care. A 'failing safely' culture.</p> <p><i>"Collaborative environment to facilitate interactions and free flow of ideas"</i></p>
3. Equality, inclusivity and accessibility	<p>Mutual respect and understanding, equality of opportunity and access.</p> <p><i>"Equal opportunities for all, resulting in a diverse community... equality of access to funding, resources, facilities, and social functions"</i></p>
4. Collaborative and open	<p>Broad outreach and engagement across the city, Oxfordshire and internationally, and working with other sectors, to involve and create value for others.</p> <p><i>"To address 21st challenges, we need to engage people with expertise in a wide range of disciplines, reach outside the academy, and really collaborate with people who have different backgrounds and cultures... The boundaries between the [college] community and those who are outside the community should be as minimal as possible."</i></p>
5. Inter-disciplinary/ multi-disciplinary	<p>Promoting dialogue and cross-pollination across research disciplines, and with other sectors outside of academia. Imaginative, inquisitive and facilitatory people.</p> <p><i>"The scholar community should be composed of intellectually curious and cross-disciplinary people, who are able to hold deep intellectual conversations in different fields."</i></p> <p><i>"Willingness to explore different ways of thinking, respect for different types of knowledge, bridging between different communities of thought"</i></p>
6. Solutions-oriented and impact-driven	<p>Concern for global issues. Generating innovative cross-cutting solutions to key societal problems. Challenging research that creates value for society.</p> <p><i>"A community of specialists scientists with the ability and interest to work across disciplines to practically apply methods to important societal issues"</i></p> <p><i>"Ambition. Irreverence. Impatience to do things... Engaging with society"</i></p>
7. Sustainability and social responsibility	<p>Both in research and practice - setting an example for a sustainable, environmentally-responsible college.</p> <p><i>"Desire and concrete steps to be zero carbon in [college] operations"</i></p> <p><i>"Emphasis on quality over quantity of work... Highest value placed on collaboration and contribution to society rather than individual gain."</i></p>
8. Innovation and leadership	<p>Thinking outside the box. A learning organisation, prepared to change and adapt. Progressive - working towards a better future, and leading by example.</p> <p><i>"The college could embed a philosophy of 'restless experimentation'. Trying to do things better, publicising what it does, and learning from its mistakes."</i></p>
9. People and well-being	<p>Systems and facilities within the college, to support, and ensure the welfare of members. As well as a focus on tackling real-world societal problems.</p> <p><i>"Best practice in environmental and labour standards, investing in people, compatibility with the demands of family life"</i></p> <p><i>"Curiosity and kindness"</i></p>

Figure 2. Word cloud generated from flip chart and scribe notes from Group 1 discussions, illustrating the frequency of words noted during the group exercises



5.2 What are the necessary resources and pre-requisites for this vision to be achieved?

Discussions on resources and pre-requests during the FGDs can be summarised into three over-lapping types of pre-requisites:

1. Physical facilities and resources
2. Policies, governance and organisational culture
3. Relationships and buy-in

The key resources and prerequisites are summarised in Table 2. Those that were identified as 'top' prerequisites during the discussions are highlighted in **green bold font**. The themes identified in the resources and prerequisites discussions also reflected the characteristics and values identified in question 1 (Figure 3).

Table 2. Key resources and prerequisites identified in FDGs

Physical facilities and resources	Policies, governance and organisational culture	Multi-stakeholder engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sufficient funding to develop facilities and resources - Strong 'branding' to generate interest and sponsorship – a new vision in an established institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared values, principles and purpose to create the desired college culture - People and leadership - diverse management and leadership structure, which includes student and non-academic voices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suggestion to have a member of Oxford City's governance (e.g. ex-Councillor) within the college's governance structure - Public and community engagement as everyone's

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complementary mixture of shared social space, and private, bookable space - Design that reflects tradition, informality and diversity. A source of pride, inspiration and creativity - Shared common room (not a hierarchy of rooms) - Sufficient appropriate accommodation – particularly for families - Nursery provision - Multi-faith prayer rooms - Sports facilities - Library facilities - Workshop facilities - Video conferencing facilities - "Space for loitering" - Bike parking and shuttle bus/public transport - Sustainable/low carbon-footprint, recycling - Scholarships and hardship funds to encourage diversity and access - Unrestricted funding for college priority activities - Bridging funding to maintain community of early career researchers - 'Community builders' – a coordinator role, to facilitate interactions and build a community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clearly articulated vision, mission and goals, with bold sustainability, social responsibility, diversity and impact strategies - Diversity of subject backgrounds to address themes of the college - Strong focus on developing people, and building practical skills to tackle real-world problems. - Representative, participatory governance, which gives a voice to people from outside of the college/university - Recruit broadly, with systems to avoid unconscious bias in hiring and admission processes. - Academic excellence and socially-conscious merit. - Mentoring across different levels of seniority - Transparency and accountability - Oxford Living Wage and employment security for all staff - New financial model - Open door policy - Inclusive and casual social activities to build a sense of community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - responsibility, members sign up to an 'obligation to participate' - Engagement with external non-academic bodies, such as industry, NGOs, policy makers, to ensure that the college can achieve its goal of being solutions-oriented - Buy-in from the University, with regard to the role, focus and added value of the college - International engagement – with best-practice institutions, and to facilitate exchange with academics from other countries - Local engagement and outreach – to create value for the broader Oxfordshire community, and allow public access to the college. - UK engagement and outreach - approach underrepresented groups - Strong social media and web presence
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Physical facilities and resources

The facilities and resources identified reflected the characteristics and values from question 1. In particular, it was emphasised that the college should “showcase diversity and sustainability in its physical infrastructure and resources”. In particular:

- Reflecting the **diversity and inclusivity** values, key facilities that were noted include nursery space and family accommodation, multi-faith prayer rooms. Key resources included financial means to enable excellence regardless of socio-economic background, with a means to respond to student needs (e.g. scholarships and hardship funds).
- Reflecting the desire to put **people and well-being** at its core, there was an emphasis on diverse academic and non-academic facilities, in order to enable a ‘good life’ for college members with diverse interests. This included an emphasis on comfortable, affordable accommodation, as well as excellent library facilities, sports facilities and space and resources for social activities.
- Reflecting the **community** values, the need for informal social space, and space to foster collaboration was noted. This included bar and dining facilities, as well as space for meetings and discussions – both formal and informal - with ‘space to loiter’ and foster collaboration between different college members, and collaborators from outside the college. It was also noted that a programme of events should be established, including

high profile speakers, workshops and social events, to create a quality student experience, as well as opportunities for building a sense of community, celebrate cultural diversity, and facilitate inter-disciplinary cross-pollination.

- Reflecting the **collaborative** values, facilities for workshops and conferences, and skype/video conference rooms were noted
- Reflecting the **sustainability** values, there was an emphasis on designing a sustainable, carbon-neutral facility, with logistics to support this, such as bicycle parking and renting.

Policies and governance

Forms of systems and institutions required to achieve the college vision were also discussed. In particular, it was emphasised that systems should be put in place that enable a diverse learning organisation, in which it is safe to share diverse ideas, challenge hierarchy and leadership, and learn from failures. The college should learn from other sectors, such as business enablers, for designing flexible and responsive organisational management systems. Key points included:

- The need to **clearly articulate the vision, mission, values and goals** of the college from the outset, and establish a culture of **shared valued and purpose**. This should include bold environmental, diversity and impact strategies, with clear definitions of terms and aims. There should also be a focus on development of people, and on building practical skills to tackle real-world problems, as opposed to academic output alone.
- Systems should be put in place to ensure that everyone is part of the college governance, with **representation** across the college community, and **participatory democracy** for decision-making. The leadership structure should include student and non-academic voices. **Transparency and accountability** by the leadership was also seen as important.
- In order to deliver excellent, high-impact research, college members and staff should be chosen based on both **academic excellence and socially-conscious merit**. There should be **mentoring across different levels of seniority**, to facilitate learning and development for all, with **rewards for cutting edge research that can solve societal problems**, such as those in our cluster themes, in order to incentivise this practical, problem-solving approach.
- College management should be **diverse**, with a focus on actively attracting members from under-represented groups. To facilitate this, systems should be established to **avoid unconscious bias** in hiring and admission processes.
- Systems should also be put in place to facilitate **interaction with the wider community**, both within and beyond Oxford, so that the college can create value for society. This includes relationships with external bodies - industry, NGOs, policy makers, supporting international collaboration, and supporting engagement with Oxford's non-academic community (e.g. local schools and NGOs). One practical way to create value for local society would be to pay the Oxford living wage for all staff. Genuine participatory research and engagement with the local community was seen as important.
- The college could explore **new financial models** - currently colleges are loss-making entities which rely on donations and endowments. The donor model raises ethical questions and influences research. The college could seek to develop a new model to generate resources.

Multi-stakeholder engagement

Finally, the importance of engaging multiple stakeholders to develop relationships and buy-in was emphasised. In particular:

- Engagement with external non-academic bodies, such as industry, NGOs, policy makers, to ensure that the college can achieve its goal of being truly **solutions-oriented and impact-driven**
- **Buy in from the University**, with regard to the role, focus and added value of the college
- **International engagement** – with other best-practice institutions
- **Local engagement** – to create value for the broader Oxford community

Figure 3. Word cloud generated from flip chart and scribe notes from Group 2 discussions, illustrating the frequency of words noted during the group exercises



5.3 What are the barriers, opportunities and leverage points for achieving this vision?

Barriers

The identified barriers can be grouped under four overarching categories: resources, systems, reputation and implementation.

1. **Resource barriers** include money (in the short- and long-term), time, space and people.
2. **Organisational barriers** are primarily related to the existing hierarchies, bureaucracy and culture of the University, in which the college will sit.
3. **Reputational barriers** relate to the newness of the college, and the need to establish a brand and attract interest (in terms of funding and people).
4. **Implementation barriers** pertain to the practicalities of establishing the college, and achieving the ambitious vision.

These are summarised in Table 3, and Figure 4 with Table 3 including some illustrative quotes from the pre-survey.

Table 3. Key barriers identified in the Focus Group Discussions

Resources	Organisational	Reputational	Implementation
<p><i>“Lack of resources and staff and students who are too busy to engage.”</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Financial</u> - no alumni, therefore need to be creative and establish alternative/sustainable income. No scholarships, therefore difficult to create desired thematic focus. - <u>Time</u> – busy people involved, need sufficient time to devote to the college needs - <u>Space</u> – dispersed nature of space and facilities, lack of accommodation and in-built architectural restrictions - <u>People</u> – establishing the right people for college leadership, as well as professional and support staff 	<p><i>“Overcoming the deep-rooted hierarchies established within the University, Divisions and Departments.”</i></p> <p>The college must develop and operate within the constraints of the existing university structure, which may create conflict. Potential challenges include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of diversity in the leadership - Hierarchy – limits to autonomy and self-governance (e.g. limited control over student selection) - Ingrained disciplinary disparities - Overarching vested interests of the university - Bureaucracy – things move slowly and change takes a long time 	<p><i>“Communicating how it fits in among the rest of the colleges, given its differing concept.”</i></p> <p>Lack of history, reputation and historical precedent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New image, and will need to compete with old colleges, which already have established brands - eternal competition for students - Narrowness of themes - no other Oxford college has so narrow an offering 	<p><i>“Building a cohesive unit”</i></p> <p><i>“Maintain[ing] focus”</i></p> <p>Expectations are high and ambitious, need to ensure delivery. Specific challenges include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficult to create common ground between disciplines in practice; if not done properly people will retreat to their own disciplines - Requires strong leadership to shape the culture - Lack of understanding on the project board; it lacks diversity, and there is little experience of running a college. Needs student representation. - Potential disagreements over implementation of principles e.g. how to be carbon neutral



"The chance to create an open and inclusive college from scratch, using the best practices from all other colleges so far... A blank page upon which Oxford can build its diversity credentials without the stigma of history; traditions can be challenged and changed if they are deemed unfit. Parks college can lead the rest of Oxford by example in diversity of background, thought, opinion, and collaboration, if the right foundations are laid in planning."

"The unique opportunity to celebrate diversity (of people, ideas, disciplines) and recognise its benefits in bringing people together... building a community where people can learn from each other and share skills."

"Developing a unique interdisciplinary environment, preparing students for the scientific challenges for 21st century science, and demonstrating that this can deliver excellent outcomes."

(A selection of illustrative quotes on "What is the most exciting opportunity for Parks College?" from the pre-survey)

Some specific opportunities relating to this include:

- Create **greater engagement outside of the university**, with the public and non-academic institutions, and involve them in determining research questions (specific suggestion to put someone from Oxford City Council on the Parks College Board)
- Attract **new people** who are not attracted to traditional Oxford. Give affiliation to people in the relevant research areas who are not academic researchers, and make it easy for people to become members of the College (specific suggestion of a "light-touch" membership for a wide circle of post-docs to have access to the cafe and events).
- Develop a **new funding model**, attract new sources of funding, and prioritise student finance
- Build a **learning organisation**, which is flexible and open to experimenting – things might not work the first time, but the college should be able to change and adapt. This will be supported through a **non-hierarchical structure**, which facilitates peer support and mentoring (vertical and horizontal)
- Ensure **inclusive governance and leadership**. The college can create a **governance structure** and **employment model** that reflects and leads to the desired values, culture and diversity (e.g. student and non-academic staff involvement in leadership, living wage, unconscious bias training and blind appointment process)
- Create **more focus on students**, and **improve the learning and non-academic experience** of students, through understanding what kind of college they want, and what skills they need to be equipped with to be impactful scholars in the 21st century (e.g. practical skills such as leadership and entrepreneurship, creativity, adapting to rapid technological change)
- The college could act as a **facilitator for impact** - Oxford has a lot of good ideas, facilitating those ideas and bringing them into practice is better than starting ideas from scratch.
- The **college assets** (e.g. location) provide a new and different offering, within an established institution and heritage. The Natural History Museum is an important opportunity for engagement

6. Acknowledgements

We thank everyone who took part in these workshops, and who contributed their ideas and enthusiasm. We thank participants who gave comments on the draft report. We also thank the Oxford Martin School for hosting the workshops. Many thanks to the workshop team:

Overall organiser: E.J. Milner-Gulland

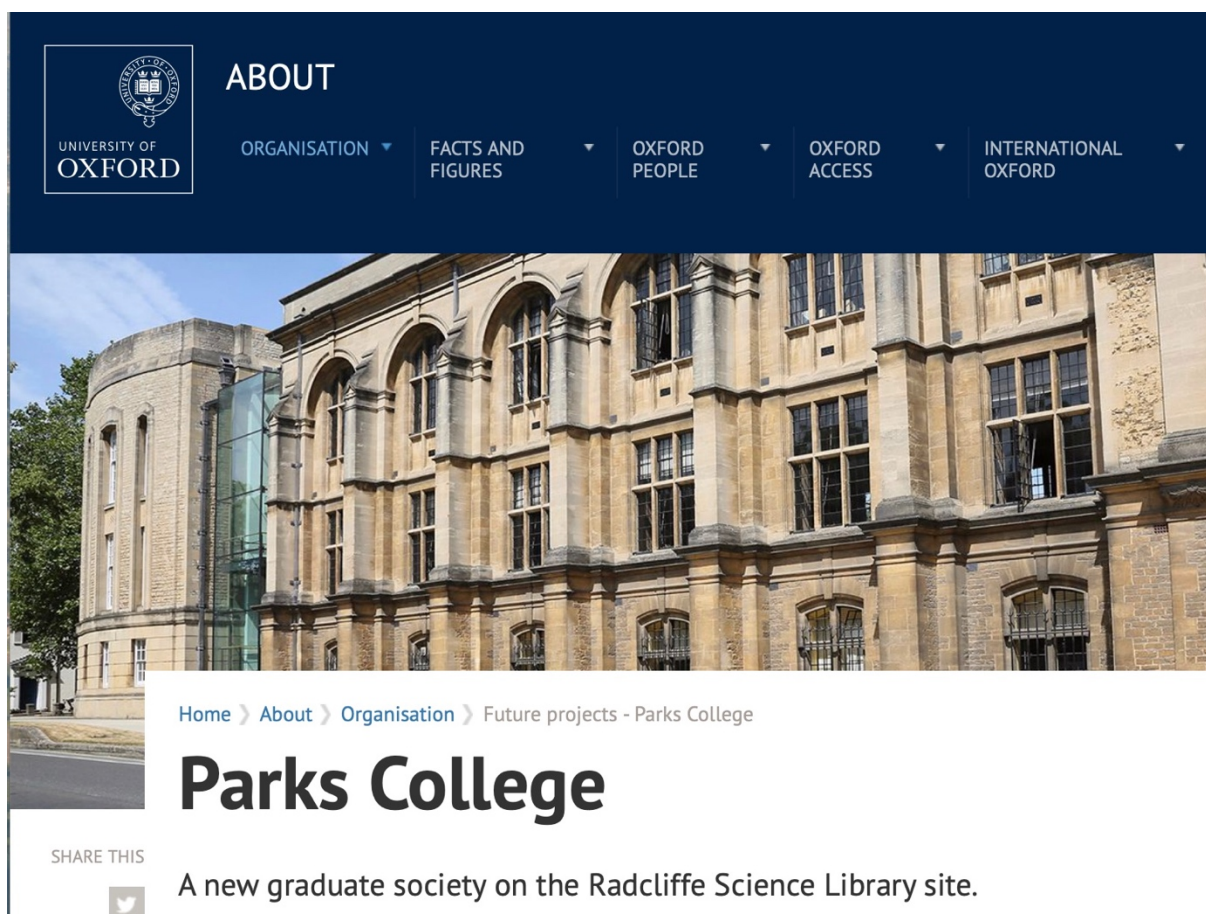
Workshop facilitator: Anne Gallagher

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The screenshot shows the top portion of the Parks College website. At the top is a dark blue navigation bar with the University of Oxford logo on the left and a menu of links: ABOUT, ORGANISATION, FACTS AND FIGURES, OXFORD PEOPLE, OXFORD ACCESS, and INTERNATIONAL OXFORD. Below the navigation bar is a large photograph of a historic stone building with many windows. Overlaid on the bottom left of the photo is a white box containing the text 'SHARE THIS' and a Twitter icon. To the right of the photo, the text 'Home > About > Organisation > Future projects - Parks College' is displayed in a small font, followed by the large heading 'Parks College'. Below the heading is the subtext 'A new graduate society on the Radcliffe Science Library site.'