

## **An Offer from Oxford Changed my Life... Now, I am Determined to Extend That Opportunity**

**By Lennon Airey**

At the end of the day, what's the point? These universities are too expensive, too pompous and I wouldn't fit in there, especially being from the North East. That's without talking about how I'm just not actually that clever in comparison to other applicants. I may as well not bother...

That sounds defeatist and negative. That dialogue, however, was all too real for me. It is the exact text message that I sent to my best friend Grace only months before applying to the University of Oxford. I'm glad I didn't listen to myself, because I got in. I don't know exactly what got my application over the line in the end, but I do know one thing for sure. I only got in because I applied so there was an application to assess. But my decision to apply isn't common, and those questions I started with loom too large for some state-school students in the North East of England and they follow my initial advice, they don't bother.

That Oxford offer has changed my life completely, as Grace's LSE offer has equally changed hers, and we are motivated to extend the ladder back down to ensure that more students from state-schools in the North East of England have the opportunity to attend top universities.

There is a confidence barrier in the North East of England in applying for top universities. Time and time again last year, Grace and I spoke to talented students from the region who didn't feel like they would fit into a top university, and didn't feel like they had the academic credentials to boot. It is because of my experiences that I want to change that through StateElevate.

I remember sitting opposite my mam at the kitchen table in the summer before I applied to Oxford. We got talking about the application process that was fast approaching and we were sat reading a provisional draft of my personal statement. For me, an application to Oxford was a shot in the dark; I was the first in my family to apply to university, and it was only after a conversation with my History teacher that I had even considered Oxford as an option. As we were reading through the personal statement, my mam stopped and said, 'You're going to do this, aren't you? You're going to get in.' I looked up and saw my mam starting to tear up. It was at that moment, I realised that this application wasn't just my application; I was carrying the hopes of my family with me too. Me getting into Oxford was to be their success too, and, from that moment, I was more motivated than ever to get in.

It was a simple conversation with my mam that motivated me to put my all into the application. It was having someone throw their belief behind me that made me believe in myself. I know how strong the pride is in working-class families in the North East, built around the simple desire for children to do better than their parents. It is not for the lack of belief from families, nor is it the lack of ambition and hunger among the students that prevents them from applying to top universities from state-schools. That problem runs far deeper, and it is one word: confidence.

I won't accept that there isn't a desire to attend top universities in the North East. I also won't accept that there isn't talent and academic drive in the region either. StateElevate matches that desire and drive and has a concrete plan to turn the aspirations of students into a reality, because I know the difference that attending a top university can make.

Attending Oxford has changed my life. Surrounding myself with some of the brightest minds in the country, being taught by the best tutors and being surrounded by incredible buildings are just some of the examples of what brilliant universities can offer. For me, however, it's in the doors that have opened since I started my journey with the university. Since starting, I have received awards, achieved academically and made a name for myself as a 'gobby northerner', but it has developed so much more in me. Oxford has transformed me from a state-school student who felt out of his depth heading to university into a confident public speaker, someone who puts themselves into uncomfortable situations and someone who has formed views about the world with the ability to put them into action. I want more students from the North East to have that same opportunity.

I was mortified to see the lack of representation from the North East of England at Oxford, an experience that Grace also experienced at the LSE. There wasn't an absence because students from the South are cleverer than students from the North East. Far from it! It's because state-school students from the North East don't apply. As per the University of Oxford's own statistics, only 2.5 percent of all students admitted to the university between 2022 and 2024 were from the North East. This statistic may appear shocking, given that the region is only a four-hour train journey away. The statistic is less shocking if we look at the application rates from the North East, which stands at just 2.2 percent. The university admission process is not the problem here; the problem lies in the North East itself. But it doesn't have to be that way.

StateElevate harnesses the skills and aspirations of state-school students in the North East of England and transforms that ambition into opportunity. By the end of the month, around 150 state-school students from across 11 North East schools will be partnered with one of our 100 undergraduate mentors in a range of subjects. This support, however, isn't just about academics.

It's about investing time into students, with no financial cost. It's about building connections between students in the North East of England and high-achieving professionals and undergraduate students. It's about instilling confidence into students and making sure that the structural confidence barrier is broken for good. In short, Grace and I turned our own challenges in applying for top universities into StateElevate to ensure that success is determined by aspiration and ambition, not background.

A 2.5 percent acceptance rate simply isn't good enough for a region with the heritage, pride and passion of the North East, nor is a 2.2 percent application rate. This needs to change, and I hope that StateElevate can play a small part in transforming the mindset of students in the North East, so that they believe in their capabilities and aspire to fulfil the full potential of their talents.

I want you to think about the questions that swirled around my head before my application. I am confident that the support of StateElevate will change this. With countless hours of academic support by an undergraduate in their subject, with access to career-based events and speakers, and having the

weight and belief of an organisation employing the brightest and best undergraduates fighting their corner, I believe that those questions will be a far weaker burden.