

Minerva Scholarship Fund Report

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Purpose: Research, Supervision, and Tuition.

If I had to pick a title for this report it would probably go something like: ‘My Semester in Oxford: Education in a Time of Pandemic’. So ensconced was my Oxford semester in the ‘new normal’ of the Covid-19 pandemic, that it would be difficult to frame my time at the university in any other way. Covid restrictions were, in other words, ubiquitous. If at times the only real difference appeared to be attendance at online- in place of in-person- lectures, at other times it felt like a Sword of Damocles hung over our heads as fresh lockdowns threatened library closures and stay-at-home orders. But this is how third-level education has functioned over the past year and, one might even say, we started to get used to it.

The Europaeum originally planned to send us to Oxford directly after our semester in Paris which began in January of the ill-fated year 2020. Due to the pandemic, our time in Paris was cut short and the prospects of attending Oxford seemed unlikely at best, impossible at worst. Once back home, I soon began to lose heart that we would have any tangible, in-person experience in Oxford at all. Thankfully, however, our course organisers managed to work out a solution which offered us a choice: either chose not to go to Oxford and submit your thesis as per the original deadline or opt for a later Oxford semester from September to December of the same year. Four of us chose the former, six of us went for the latter. For me personally, it was never a question of not going to Oxford as I had dreamed of studying at the university ever since I visited the city during my halcyon days as an undergraduate. Although I knew that the situation could change in light of the evolving pandemic, I did not want to put my academic ambitions on hold.

The weather in Oxford in late September was unexpectedly warm. Students and townspeople filled the parks and meadows (socially distanced, or mostly) enjoying the last of what was an extended summer. I spent the first few days after my arrival meeting up with course mates and doing some tourism around the city. I thought it best to see as much as possible as soon as possible- who knew how long the opportunity would last? I was also introduced to my college



community and met my new housemates. My college, Green Templeton, is one of the university's newer colleges. In true Oxford fashion, however, 'new' does not translate as metal-clad modernism; the centrepiece of the college, for example, is the 18th century Observatory Tower which currently houses the college dining hall and GCR (Graduate Common Room). While regulations meant that I could not meet other students at the regular college events such as parties and formal dinners, the college committee did organise a number of outdoor activities and virtual 'get-togethers'.

In terms of wider university life, many Oxford traditions were understandably curbed due to the restrictions. Apart from the move online for classes that surpassed the 'rule of six', events such as meals in the college dining halls, college 'bops' (acronym for 'big open parties'), and public lectures in the university's various halls and colleges, were largely nonentities. That said, we were lucky in that the central libraries remained open (even during November's lockdown) and many colleges came up with creative ways to keep services operating by taking such measures as erecting marquees for social events and organising take-away options for lunch and dinner. In spite of the rules and regulations, therefore, most of the social and academic needs of students were catered for.



The Europaeum cohort was luckier than other students when it came to tuition. As our Oxford semester was dedicated primarily to thesis research and write-up, we only had one compulsory course to attend over the course of the semester. If we wanted more 'Zoom time', it was up to us. I enjoyed having the freedom to attend the many fascinating seminars offered by the Department of History. Alongside my own research, I joined virtual seminars on topics in Irish history, modern Jewish history, and, to stretch a bit beyond my field, modern politics. Many of these were led by distinguished academics: one week we had a presentation followed by a Q&A with Tim Berners-Lee. Our own Europaeum seminar saw a number of eminent scholars present on subjects as diverse as artillery

warfare in the Kingdom of Burgundy and petitioning kings and princes in the Swedish royal court. Although these seminar talks lacked the spontaneity and flow particular to in-person meetings, I still found the format very conducive to discussion.

As part of my thesis research, I was assigned an academic supervisor working in an area closely related to my field. Our discussions- even in the pre-lockdown stages- took place on Zoom as he was then living in London. Nevertheless, we spoke at least every other week and he gave me much useful and dispassionate advice. This helped to nudge my thesis in the right direction and motivated me during my less inspired periods. He also put me in touch with some of his academic acquaintances- one of these I even had a chance to share a drink with early on in the semester. These formal and informal contacts were crucial in the early stages of my thesis, as they provided me with an insight

into how scholars approached similar issues to the ones I was grappling with in my research. It also allowed me to build a network of academic contacts which may prove useful if I decide to pursue further study later on.

My thesis project dealt with Pope John Paul II's nomination of the patron saints of Europe and what this gesture could tell us about the relationship between the Catholic Church and the European Union. I was fortunate in that most of the primary sources I needed for my research were freely available online. For other primary sources, along with many secondary sources, I was able to draw from Oxford's extensive library holdings. As I mentioned above, even during lockdown the libraries had remained open, and I was therefore able to carry out my research 'as normal'.

It is worth mentioning that I found the general intellectual climate of Oxford to have been highly propitious to my research. Academics displayed openness and genuine interest in my subject, which was something I had not always experienced in other places. This is no doubt connected to the number of scholars and centres devoted to all aspects of religious history throughout the university. The discussions, seminars, and relative abundance of source material on my topic, gave me a feeling of confidence in my research and an awareness of its value. Had I not experienced this in Oxford, my academic aspirations, and perhaps even my thesis project itself, could have turned out quite different.

By way of conclusion, I can say that I learned a number of lessons during my time in Oxford. As a researcher, I was reminded of just how important both formal and informal discussions are in the progression of one's research. Research is far from linear; rather, it follows a winding path, and is enriched by exposure to the new and often unrelated ideas that arise in spontaneous encounters and discussions. Moreover, the pandemic also taught me the importance of minding one's mental health and nurturing some kind of social life- even if all you are permitted to do is to take a walk with a friend- alongside one's research. Far from being accessory to scholarship, regular social engagement is central to academic success. If I had not been assisted by a grant from the MSF, I would neither have learned many of these lessons, nor have been able to grow as a scholar. I would therefore like to finish by thanking the Fund for having allowed me to have such an educative and enjoyable semester in spite of, and to a certain extent as a result of, the global pandemic.