

Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the [Oxford Hope Project](#), which explores the higher education hopes and aspirations of British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani families and their children, and presents key insights from two participatory family workshops held at [Lady Margaret Hall](#) and Jesus College as part of the project's wider mixed-methods study.

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## Oxford as a listening space for collective hope: intergenerational stories of British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani family hope for university

### What is this research about and why is it important?

This research explores the higher education aspirations of British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani young people and their families. It is important because, despite consistently high aspirations and strong academic performance, progression to high-tier universities remains disproportionately low. This paradox reveals a significant gap in how transitions to elite higher education are understood and addressed. Often, these communities are framed as “hard to reach,” while far less scrutiny is directed toward whether universities themselves adopt culturally sensitive and relational approaches to engagement. By exploring how aspirations are formed within families, how structural barriers are experienced, and how institutions might build more reciprocal relationships with communities, the research generates critical insight into how more inclusive pathways to higher education can be designed.

To examine these dynamics in a context where questions of prestige and access are especially pronounced, the study is situated at the University of Oxford. Oxford occupies a distinctive position within the UK higher education landscape: it functions as a powerful symbol of academic excellence yet has historically remained structurally inaccessible to many minoritized communities. In recognizing British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani students as priority groups within its widening participation agenda, the University acknowledges persistent inequalities in access and representation. As such, Oxford provides a particularly revealing site through which to investigate how aspirations, institutional practice, and structural inequality intersect.

### What did we do?

We held two participatory family-centered workshops at the University of Oxford: one at Lady Margaret Hall, attended by over 90 participants, and a second at Jesus College, attended by 40 participants. Both events brought together parents and young people in shared relational spaces designed for storytelling, dialogue, and practical engagement with university life, positioning families as partners in the research. Facilitation incorporated scenario-building to reframe the setting as informal and communal rather than hierarchical. Families were invited to imagine the space as akin to a shared living room during a celebratory gathering such as Eid. The intention was to cultivate

mutual learning and relationship-building among families, alongside discussion of higher education pathways

The intergenerational workshops drew on two data collection methods:

### **1) Life maps:**

Families participated in a creative life map activity where they were invited to annotate and reflect on experiences shaping their hopes, aspirations, pathways, barriers, and enablers for their children's higher education. The life maps functioned initially as a structured visual elicitation strategy. At the same time, the maps were treated as narrative artefacts, providing visual constructions of aspiration, constraint, and imagined pathways. The format enabled participants to situate educational trajectories within broader life histories, including migration experiences, family responsibilities, and institutional encounters.

### **2) Intergenerational storytelling:**

The life map activity led to intergenerational storytelling. Families had the opportunity to elaborate on their maps and speak openly about migration, sacrifice, bereavement, and carrying hope forward across borders and generations. Parents drew on lived experience to contextualise their children's educational trajectories, while listening to and learning from the stories of other families. The plenary structure enabled hope towards higher education to emerge as something collectively held within families.

### **Data analysis**

To understand the stories shared, we analysed both the life maps and the conversations that took place during the day. Rather than looking at individuals in isolation, we focused on families as a whole, paying attention to how parents, children and other relatives spoke together about education and the future. This approach helped us see how hopes and aspirations are shaped collectively and across generations. Our analysis followed three stages:

**1. Within-family multimodal narrative analysis** explored each family as a single narrative case, integrating life maps and interviews to understand how their shared story of hope unfolded over time.

**2. Cross-case thematic synthesis** involved developing themes across families to identify shared patterns.

**3. Intergenerational narrative case analysis** developed two in-depth family cases to illuminate relational dynamics and variation in more detail.

### **Reciprocal nature of the workshops:**

The workshops were not only research events; they were intentionally designed as reciprocal spaces that both generated knowledge and strengthened community engagement. Alongside the storytelling activities, families engaged with sessions on Oxford's admissions process, fees and funding, and what studying at the University entails. Representatives from the Oxford Bangla Society and the Oxford Islamic Society shared reflections on belonging and community, offering insight into the lived experiences of British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani students at Oxford. Families gathered for lunch in historic college halls, took part in guided city tours, and had dedicated time for prayer, ensuring the day felt welcoming, respectful, and inclusive.

### **What did we find?**

The study identified three central findings:

- 1) Hope is collective, relational, and intergenerational, an ethical form of endurance that is ancestral rather than individual.
- 2) Families teach and know on their own terms, with mothers emerging as the guardians of educational aspiration and the architects of home-based learning.
- 3) Structural inequality and racialized geographies shape educational opportunities. Parents navigate a racially stratified schooling landscape in England, where access to “good schools” is often tied to white, affluent areas.

## What does it all mean anyway?

One of the most striking insights was how readily families engaged when invited into elite university spaces in ways that were welcoming and reciprocal. Communities often described as “hard to reach” participated in large numbers when the approach was relational rather than transactional. By combining research with practical support, the project created spaces in which families could both share their knowledge and gain insight into navigating higher education. In many cases, parents voiced educational hopes and migration histories in front of their children for the first time, revealing the depth of commitment that underpins their aspirations. These moments underscored a central finding with clear implications for outreach and access policy: when universities invest in relational, trust-based engagement, participation follows.

The workshops offered several lessons about how educational opportunity might be better supported:

### **1. Work with families, not just students**

The workshop showed that hope for education is shared across generations and sustained within families. Universities can strengthen participation by engaging families more directly in conversations about education pathways.

### **2. Recognise the role of mothers and family learning**

Many parents, especially mothers, play a central role in guiding their children’s educational journeys. They support homework, encourage aspirations, and shape how young people think about the future. Outreach programmes should recognise this home-based learning and involve families as partners in education.

### **3. Address the geography of opportunity**

Parents described how access to “good schools” is often linked to where families live. This means that educational opportunity is shaped by neighbourhood inequality. Policies that expand access to high-quality schooling, wherever families live, remain essential for widening participation.

**Links:**

[The Hope Project Page](#)

[A blog post about the event at Lady Margaret Hall](#)

[A short video about the project](#)

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