

“Oxford taught me to make the most of everything.”

Lord Christopher Patten on the challenges that university education faces in a globalised world

Marketplace or ivory tower? For many years a university of Oxford's stature could afford to ignore the question. After all, its name is carved into the very roots of education. But the globalised world is no great respecter of such traditions. Every day it lays new challenges at Oxford's door – to the university itself, to its curriculum and to its ability to hold its own against the competition. Lord Patten knows Oxford well, and not only as a graduate of Balliol College. It was above all the pragmatic and realistic approach of a politician of great international experience that led to him being appointed Chancellor of the University of Oxford.

The Focus: Lord Patten, what did it mean to you to study at Oxford?

Christopher Patten: I was the first member of my family to go to university, at a time when only six percent of my age group went to university at all. One of the things that impressed me was the Oxford learning experience, which is the most important aspect of the university. I think the learning experience at Oxford – when it is good – is better than anything else on offer. But on the whole, Oxford shaped my subsequent life more by the fortuitous than the intended. I had wanted to join the BBC or even go into advertising, but while studying at Balliol College I went to America on a scholarship, and to cut a long story short, I became involved in working for a political campaign and decided that politics was for me.

The Focus: That Oxford learning experience – is it fundamentally different for today's students or fundamentally the same?

Patten: I think it is fundamentally the same. I suspect that the rewards are now much greater, and as a consequence probably narrower, and I'm not sure this is a good thing.

The Focus: Does “Oxbridge” open more doors today than it did then?

Patten: It has always opened doors, but some of the doors are now so gold-embossed that they attract more graduates into law, consultancy, banking and financial services than would once have been the case. The other day I was looking at what the blues boat crews have done on leaving university and it struck me that, a hundred years ago, the majority of them became missionaries. Now I bet the majority go and work for Goldman Sachs or J. P. Morgan or Citigroup. Are they learning more about the world out there than those missionaries were learning? I doubt it. They may work for a couple of years in Hong Kong or Tokyo and live in a very cosmopolitan environment but I doubt that they learn the language or really what is going on. I doubt that they really get under

