Why I sent Oxford a rejection letter

A little over a month ago, I sent Oxford a rejection email that parodied the thousands that they send each year. Much to my surprise, it has become a bit of an Internet hit, and has provoked reactions of both horror and amusement.

In my letter I wrote: "I have now considered your establishment as a place to read Law (Jurisprudence). I very much regret to inform you that I will be withdrawing my application. I realize you may be disappointed by this decision, but you were in competition with many fantastic universities and following your interview, I am afraid you do not quite meet the standard of the universities I will be considering."

I sent the email after returning from my interview at Magdalen College, Oxford, to prove to a couple of my friends that Oxbridge did not need to be held in awe. One of them subsequently shared it on Facebook* because he found it funny.

I certainly did not expect the email to spread as far as it has. Varying between offers of TV interviews and hundreds of enthusiastic Facebook* messages, it has certainly been far-reaching. Many of my friends and undoubtedly many strangers were unable to comprehend that I'd sent such an email to this bastion of prestige and privilege. Why was I not afraid of damaging my future prospects as a lawyer? Didn't I think this might hurt my chances with other universities?

For me, such questions paint a picture of a very cynical society. I do not want to study law because I want to be rich, or wear an uncomfortable wig and cloak. Perhaps optimistically, I want to study law because I am interested in justice.

To me, withdrawing my application to an institution that is a symbol of unfairness in both our education and the legal system (which is so dominated by Oxbridge graduates) makes perfect sense, and I am reluctant to be part of a system so heavily dominated by such a narrow group of self-selecting elites.

So, why did I apply in the first place? If you're achieving high grades at A-level (or equivalent), you can feel quite a lot of pressure to "prove yourself' by getting an Oxbridge offer. Coupled with the fact that I grew up on benefits in council estates throughout Bristol — not a type of heritage often associated with an Oxbridge interview — I decided to give it a try.

It was only at the interview that I started to question what exactly I was trying to prove. I was well aware that fantastic candidates are often turned down, and I did not believe that this was a true reflection of their academic potential.

Although I share concern that not going to Oxbridge gives you a "chip on your shoulder", I did not write to Oxford to avoid the risk of being labeled as an "Oxbridge reject": I already am one. Last year I made an (admittedly weak) application to Cambridge and was inevitably rejected post-interview.

A year ago, I was in awe of the beautiful buildings of Oxbridge, but today I am in awe of the sheer number of people who, like me, have managed to not take it so seriously. Ultimately, I am not harming Oxford by laughing at it, and it is an amazing feeling to realize that so many people are enjoying my email. Actually, I was amazed to know how many people of different ages bothered to read it and even to leave their comments about it in Facebook*. I had fun reading some of them, too.

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* Деятельность запрещена в России.

The letter caused so much response because people...

1. ...fully agreed with the message.
2. ...were outraged with the letter.
3. ...wanted to defend Oxbridge.
4. ...found the topic exciting.