



**How can universities cultivate leaders of character?  
Reflections from a character-based leadership initiative amongst Oxford  
University postgraduates**

**Edward Brooks and Jonathan Brant**

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**How can universities cultivate leaders of character?**

**Reflections from a character-based leadership initiative amongst Oxford University  
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Jubilee Centre Conference, 2018, 'Virtues in the Public Square'

Edward Brooks and Jonathan Brant

This paper will offer reflection on practice, assessing the impact of the Global Leadership Initiative, a year-long programme drawing together a small but diverse cohort of postgraduate students and supporting them in developing the qualities of character needed by leaders serving the public good. Using qualitative data collected over the three years of activity, we reflect on what we have learned, considering three questions: (1) Can virtues of character be cultivated amongst a culturally diverse group of students? (2) What are the particularities of 'emerging adults'? (3) How might the programme's impact translate into civic society, politics and culture?

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For many centuries universities have played an important part in preparing leaders and thinkers who go on to have significant influence and impact around the world. Whilst this continues to be the case it is also true that today's students will take up positions of responsibility at a time of significant global uncertainty, when there is a marked lack of confidence in leadership worldwide. How can students be prepared to contribute positively in this global context, learning to think in a way that is not only clever but wise, learning to lead in a way that not only furthers personal ambition but actively seeks the wider good of society?

It was in response to this challenge, and with the encouragement of a group of senior Oxford academics, that the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative (GLI) was established in 2014, applying the research of the Oxford Character Project in a practical leadership-development programme for postgraduate students.<sup>1</sup> Our distinctive focus is on the relationship between leadership and personal formation, highlighting the centrality of personal character for the exercise of leadership that serves the common good. This stands the GLI apart from the majority of leadership programmes that focus exclusively on management strategy or practical skills. Whilst strategies and skills are undoubtedly important, it is increasingly evident that these cannot guarantee good leadership and societal benefit. Our approach seeks to understand leadership as a personal category before it is a professional one, placing values and virtues at the heart of good leadership.

Over the last four years, we have conducted research into moral formation during the life stage of 'emerging adulthood', exploring virtues and themes that are essential for personal formation and moral leadership, including gratitude, humility, service, honesty, wisdom, and vocation (from now on referred to as our 'focal virtues').<sup>2</sup> We have investigated and formulated a student-specific account of character development for leadership; measured and iteratively improved our programming using qualitative and quantitative approaches; and produced a diverse and academically informed curriculum focussing on character formation for leadership. Our events and student programmes seek to foster open engagement with students and academics from various moral, cultural and religious traditions, in keeping with the diversity represented in the university community. We believe that intentional, research-led interventions in the lives of 'emerging adults' can contribute significantly to the formation of gifted young people into the good leaders and wise thinkers that are essential for the flourishing of human communities and society.

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<sup>1</sup> The GLI is part of a wider research initiative at the University of Oxford, the Oxford Character Project (OCP), which was founded by an Anglican charity with the support of senior academics from across the University of Oxford. Our academic research seeks to draw on perspectives from history, literature, education, philosophy, theology, and the social sciences. It is conducted by a group of researchers, working in affiliation with the MacDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the concept of 'emerging adulthood', see, for example, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, 'Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties', *American Psychology*, Vol. 55, No. 5 (May 2000): 469-480.

The heart of our work has been with small cohorts of University of Oxford postgraduate students, who have been selected through a competitive process of written application to participate in a seven-month GLI 'learning community'. This group of fourteen students joins a tailored programme that runs from December to June and incorporates the discussion of chosen readings, day-retreats, intimate meals with guest speakers, creative input from the arts and humanities, and personal mentoring from our own team members and senior leaders in each student's vocational field.

The programme, which draws heavily from the humanities as well as leadership discourses in education, business, and politics, includes sessions on: the nature of good leadership, the ethics of institutions, practices of leadership, following and leading, leading and failing, vocation, service, gratitude, and humility. Creative contributions from guest academics have included a workshop on 'Leadership and the Wisdom of Jazz', a post-performance discussion of leadership in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and a tour of the National Portrait Gallery considering 'Portraits of Leadership' over the last five hundred years.

We have sought to trouble simplistic conceptions of leadership, moving beyond analysis of different leadership 'models' to consider the qualities of character that leaders need to possess. The GLI's six focal virtues have been particularly selected as important qualities for university students that are not actively engaged by other aspects of their university education. Our methodology of character formation follows a broadly Aristotelian approach to the relation between virtue formation and human flourishing and incorporates seven methods of character cultivation: habituation through practice, reflection on personal experience, emulating virtuous exemplars, dialogue and discussion, conversations about implicit biases and institutional incentives, making norms salient, and friendship and community.<sup>3</sup>

We have attempted to assess the impact of our programmes, and develop an evidence base for our work, through a mixed-method, quantitative and qualitative, longitudinal, controlled measurement process. Year-on-year, we have administered questionnaires to each GLI cohort at the beginning and the end of their involvement in the programme, using previously validated instruments to measure any change in the levels of our focal virtues in each participant across the time period of their participation.<sup>4</sup> These changes have been compared with control groups,

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<sup>3</sup> Our model of character development and more detailed rationale for the selection of our focal virtues is laid out in Jonathan Brant and Michael Lamb, 'Cultivating Virtues in Postgraduates', forthcoming (2018).

<sup>4</sup> For the four, pre-validated measures we have utilised see: VOCATION: Bryan J. Dik, Brandy M. Eldridge, Michael F. Steger and Ryan D. Duffy, 'Development and Validation of the Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ) and Brief Calling Scale (BCS),' *Journal of Career Assessment*, Vol. 20 (2012): 242. SERVICE: J. Philippe Rushton, Roland D. Chrisjohn, G. Cynthia Fekken, 'The altruistic personality and the self-report altruism scale' in *Personality and individual differences*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1981): 293-302. (Revised by Rushton, Witt and Boleman in 1991). HUMILITY: Jeffrey Charles Elliott, *Humility: Development and analysis of a scale*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Tennessee, 2010. GRATITUDE: M. E. McCullough, R. A.

sampled from among the wider postgraduate student community, and the data has been supplemented, and our understanding of what is taking place deepened, by long-answer questionnaires administered at the end of the programme which provide qualitative data. All participants are afforded complete anonymity and pseudonyms selected by participants are used to allow us to match quantitative and qualitative data and pre- and post-programme tests for each student. The measurement has been conducted under the auspices of the Combined University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford, and in line with established best-practice.

This is not an academic paper, rather it offers reflection on practice, presenting our reasons for believing the Global Leadership Initiative has the potential for a positive impact on the public sphere. Using indicative and illustrative qualitative data collected over the three years of activity, we consider three questions: (1) Can virtues of character necessary for good leadership be cultivated in a university setting amongst a culturally diverse group of students? (2) What are the particularities of 'emerging adults' with regards to the cultivation of virtue and its importance for leadership? (3) How might the programme's impact translate into civic society, politics and culture?

### **1. Can virtues of character necessary for good leadership be cultivated in a university setting amongst a culturally diverse group of students?**

Even before 'leadership' entered the English language (its first recorded use is in 1821), universities were important sites of leadership formation, their graduates taking up positions of authority and influence in society. Today the language of leadership is ubiquitous, and an emphasis on developing leaders is an active part of the self-conception of many universities and university departments. Shirley Tilghman, President of Princeton, might have been representing any number of worldwide universities when she spoke in 2009 of the mission of Princeton as 'preparing young men and women to become leaders and to change the world for the better'<sup>5</sup>

However, if many universities share this purpose, our engagement with postgraduate students at the University of Oxford (many of whom have already studied at leading universities elsewhere in the world) suggests that it is an emphasis that may be yet to connect with student

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Emmons, and J. Tsang, 'The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 82 (2002): 112-127.

<sup>5</sup> Shirley Tilghman, Princeton Commencement 2009, online: <<https://paw.princeton.edu/article/presidents-page-7>>. Similar examples can be drawn from around the world: The Harvard University website announces that 'Harvard University is devoted to excellence in teaching, learning, and research, and to developing leaders in many disciplines who make a difference globally.' Online: <<https://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard>>. Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government states its mission as contributing to 'A world better led, a world better served, a world better governed.' Online: <<https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk>>. In 2014, Peking University established the Yenching Academy, 'an innovative research center that aims to cultivate world leaders who will make a difference in the world.' Online: <[http://english.pku.edu.cn/News\\_Events/News/Focus/11335.htm](http://english.pku.edu.cn/News_Events/News/Focus/11335.htm)>.

experience. Students report a lack of intentional leadership preparation and even those who have undertaken modules on leadership in professional schools report a deficit when it comes to how they might join up their own sense of purpose and personal development with what it means to develop as a leader prepared to serve the public good. Observations along these lines from previous participants include: [Ba2015] 'These are the kinds of conversations you hope will happen between thoughtful people [at university], but rarely do.'<sup>6</sup> [Go2016] 'It was a wonderful opportunity to have thoughtful conversations about topics of great relevance, which I had no other avenue for discussing.' [In2015] '[It was] a valuable personal development experience that helped me focus on the foundational values & meaning of leadership versus the practical skills of leadership as most programs do.'

This felt and reported deficit can be read in different ways: as a gap between ambition and actuality in the university's educational mission, as a mismatch in expectation between administrators and students when it comes to what constitutes leadership preparation, or, positively, as the desire of ambitious students to integrate their will to effect change in the world within a wider context of personal formation, moral purpose and public good than universities are currently finding a way to deliver. As one student commented: [Cl2016] 'It's a valuable and unique perspective apart from all the other academic and professional lenses at Oxford.'

Taking the most positive of these readings, there seems to be an opportunity to contribute formative teaching on character development for leadership to university students. Naturally, with this opportunity come challenges to overcome, one set of which relates to the incredibly diverse and ideologically plural nature of modern research universities and the highly specialized education they are designed to deliver. We will focus on three important issues: (1) Considering where students have come from raises the challenge of engaging diverse groups of students (with different national and academic backgrounds, life experiences, philosophical and religious commitments, and understandings of leadership) in a coherent and constructive programme of moral formation. (2) Considering where students are going on to raises the challenge of engaging students in a programme of moral formation for leadership in different parts of the world and across a whole range of vocational fields. (3) Considering the demands of specialized academic study, the fact that students arrive at university with a history of formation behind them, and the relatively short time available (certainly when it comes to one-year masters' students) raises the challenge of whether it is possible to make a substantive difference even if levels of student interest are high. We will take these three challenges in turn, describing our approach to them in the GLI.

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<sup>6</sup> NB the code attached to each quotation identifies the student's chosen pseudonym (surveys were anonymous) and GLI year group. The spelling, punctuation and grammar in each quotation is original.

The challenge of background-diversity is complex. In addition to the difficulty of gathering students from different backgrounds when the prevalent social norm is for like to stick with like, there is the challenge of drawing students from very different traditions of moral formation, each with its own (implicit or explicit) account of the good and attendant set of practices. Our approach here has been to engage and embrace diversity of all the kinds mentioned above. In a globalised world, graduates will hold positions that demand a willingness and ability to understand the divergent views and commitments of others. Students recognise this and many are eager to engage in substantive discussions where different visions of life and understandings of the good are part of the conversation. If administrators are understandably nervous to advance conversations that might cross the boundaries of safe secular space, our experience suggests that so long as the space is 'safe' (i.e. free from fear of reprisal although not necessarily from disagreement), the response to plurality with an attempted neutrality is not one many students find necessary. Their appreciation of this space is evidenced by the following quote:

[Ro2017] Immensely rewarding and different from any other extracurricular I have ever been involved with. Having a safe space in which to discuss abstract leadership traits grounded in personal experiences is a very rare opportunity indeed. The richness of the discussions made them extremely memorable, and the personal stories were particularly resonant. This experience was a privilege that more individuals from all walks of life should have access to! (Especially students and managers.)

Of course, convening a conversation that involves diverse perspectives is one thing, forming a learning community that is the site of and catalyst for moral formation is another. We have sought to engage this challenge by introducing virtues that are both important for good leadership and to some degree intuitive, their importance often supported by empirical evidence in moral psychology (e.g. gratitude) or leadership discourse and experience (e.g. humility). Raising objections that have been levelled against certain accounts of these virtues has allowed deep discussion on their meaning and importance for good leadership. Specific practices of reflection, solitude, and friendship are discussed corporately and also followed up personally in contact meetings with GLI team members, who are able to discuss in more detail how a student's personal journey and life purpose relates to the discussion of good leadership taking place in the group. Students are encouraged to push into their own tradition, relating what they are learning in the GLI to their own cultural / philosophical / religious convictions, rather than to keep personal and professional development in separate life-compartments. It appears that this intentional interplay of the personal and the professional, the familiar and the unfamiliar is appreciated:

[Ps2016] '[GLI provided] my most poignant encounters this year, in which my presuppositions regarding professional success and vocation were adequately challenged, so as to

open my heart up to new pursuits.’ [Ia2016] ‘In the beginning of the term I had some doubts about my professional future and how to reconcile it with my vocation. During the two terms, the readings (especially the book on Practical Wisdom), the discussions and self-reflections allowed me to have a clearer understanding of my vocation.’ [Ma2016] ‘I am now more than ever reassured about my vocation, and I am aware of the importance of character to follow it successfully through my career.’ [An2015] ‘The atmosphere of the GLI meetings was one of sanctuary for thoughtful and searching discussions on where to find and nurture a sense of purpose and meaning in our careers and in our lives.’

Selecting for diversity when it comes to academic discipline means that student participants in GLI cohorts have had a wide range of interests, different types of work experience and various vocational ambitions. Students have reported this diversity as a positive feature of the GLI, enabling them to break out of subject-specific peer groups for the kind of interdisciplinary discussions many hoped to have when they applied to Oxford but often proved elusive. For example:

[Ja2017] ‘I participated in many programs during my time at Oxford and GLI was no doubt exceptional regarding the level of diverse and intellectually talented students the group brought together for stimulating dialogue. The various groups I participated in, whether academic or athletic, were quite homogeneous in regards to (nationally, race, and possibly other areas) [*sic*]. GLI brought together people from differing backgrounds on a regular basis for deep reflection.’

[Cl2016] ‘Our discussions have brought together different cultural, ethical, religious and academic perspectives that each one of us carry. This is very helpful to test out some of the universally held or culturally different principles and practices of ethics and characters around the world. I was also amazed by the various personal experiences that people had apart from my own area of expertise or study.’

Our emphasis on moral formation in the virtues tradition delivers an approach that is resilient to contextual diversity in terms of future leadership positions and settings that students will hold. Practical wisdom is introduced at the outset as a meta-virtue and woven through the programme, underscored creatively in a session on ‘Leadership and the Wisdom of Jazz’. This focus on the transferability of virtues being said, however, we do also seek to highlight the importance of contexts of leadership, considering the shaping power of institutions with examples from a range of different industry sectors. Personal conversations with team members are important in this regard also, as will be the ongoing work of engaging with students once they have left university. [An2017] ‘Previously as my understanding, leadership is a skill to manage people, but after attending this course, I think leadership is more like a will, or a personality, with the purpose of helping others and building a better world.’



If this comment reflects the aim of the GLI to help students develop personal qualities for good leadership, it is important to acknowledge that it reflects a promise yet to be fulfilled. Our ambition to continue to develop an ongoing programme of engagement amongst a meaningful network of student alumni speaks to our desire to see such intention applied in practice. It also highlights the difficulty of time limitations inherent in university contexts. Not only do students quickly move on to national and institutional contexts with their own set of pressures, expectations and incentives, but students who arrive at university in their twenties have already been formed through their prior upbringing and education. However, if this suggests the difficulty of moral formation for leadership that is focussed on students, there are also factors that point the other way. Students in their twenties in university settings are often willing to submit their convictions and life path to enquiry as part of their learning experience. Recent work on the life stage of 'emerging adulthood' highlights this possibility and suggests an openness that we have found to be corroborated in our work. Tropes regarding personal 'development', 'new thinking', 'new understanding', 'transformation', and 'becoming' recur throughout the qualitative data. The following two quotes from the most recent cohort are indicative of the kind of change experienced by participants:

[Ro2017] Instead of admiring leaders for their achievements or being awed by their rhetorical power, I now attempt to assess them on the basis of more invisible character traits (humility, generosity, gratitude). I used to pride myself on my extensive CV / LinkedIn profile, but now I realise that a person is far more than the sum of his or her accomplishments. Actions and gestures speak louder than words.

[Ad2017] The discussions were quite eye opening because they would show me how other people read the same passages in very different ways, or approached the same topic from a very different angle--that helped me become more reflective, and more humble, about my own thoughts on what it means to be a leader.

## **2. What are the particularities of 'emerging adults' with regards to the cultivation of virtue and its importance for leadership?**

'Emerging adulthood' is a discrete life stage (first identified by Jeffrey Arnett) between adolescence and adulthood, stretching between the ages of approximately 18-29. According to Arnett, this is a new phenomenon, resulting from four 'revolutions' that took place (particularly in developed countries) in the latter part of the twentieth century:<sup>7</sup> i) the transition from a

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 2-7.

manufacturing economy to a service economy centring on information technology; ii) changing patterns of sexual activity and delayed marriage as a result of the Sexual Revolution; iii) broader educational and occupational opportunities for women; iv) the idealisation of youth and resistance to foreclosing the opportunities and possibilities that diminish with the commitments of adult life. Emerging adulthood is neither a straightforward extension of adolescence ('late adolescence') nor the beginning stages of adulthood ('young adulthood') but a life-stage in its own right. It is characterised by five main features:<sup>8</sup> i) identity explorations where emerging adults 'clarify their sense of who they are and what they want out of life';<sup>9</sup> ii) instability on account of fluctuations in love, work, domestic arrangements; iii) self-focus as a result of the relative lack of ties requiring obligations and commitments to others; iv) feeling in-between, no longer feeling like an adolescent but not yet satisfying the criteria of responsibility and financial independence considered to be the marks of adulthood; v) high hopes and great expectations, resulting from dreams that are yet to be tested out. Following Arnett's characterisation, it is possible to identify particular opportunities and challenges for moral formation for leadership amongst emerging adults.

Recognising emerging adulthood as a period of **identity formation** highlights the possibility of moving beyond management- or skills-focused leadership training in order to re-imagine understandings and practices of leadership centring on personal qualities that need to be cultivated in conjunction with wider questions of personal value, meaning and purpose. The question 'What kind of leader do I want to be?' is naturally integrated with the wider question: 'What kind of person do I want to be?' As students reflected:

[An2017] Deep understanding of leadership helps me learn better about myself, people around me, and the world.

[Li2015] The programme has helped me realise that leadership is more about knowing and understanding yourself and people around you than just achieving a certain objective or goal. The practice of leadership I believe would evolve by making a conscious effort to consider the various virtues I learned and by working on them over the next few years.

If the openness that comes with a period of identity formation thus represents an opportunity for the cultivation of virtue as a central focus of leadership development, it is important that it is engaged with appropriate teaching methods. One student commented:

[An2015] I valued the fact that the programme fostered exploration rather than being didactic. For me, I have felt that it has been the beginning of an enquiry of deeper reflection on how to better identify my personal morals and apply them in my life and career to have the greatest impact.

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<sup>8</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 8-16.

<sup>9</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 9.

The **instability** experienced in emerging adulthood (and increasingly in society more widely) highlights the benefit of moral formation in the virtues tradition over deontological or situationist approaches. As Shannon Vallor highlights in her discussion of moral formation at a time of technological change:

Few are moved by an ethical norm or ideal until we have been able to envision its concrete expression in a future form of life that is possible for us, one that we recognize as relevantly similar to... our current one. When our future is opaque it is harder to envision the specific conditions of life we will face tomorrow that can be improved by following an ethical principle or rule today, and such ideals may then fail to motivate us.<sup>10</sup>

This is pertinent, beyond technological change, in relation to the wider instabilities regarding relationships, place of residence and career path that are experienced in emerging adulthood. Whilst we seek to draw on students' previous work experience as well as inviting speakers, developing case studies and drawing on examples from the kinds of fields that students are likely to enter, they often don't have a clear view of what might lie ahead for them in five, ten, or twenty years. Focusing on the formation of virtue and drawing on examples and case studies in support helps to set students on a path of leadership formation that will be applicable across a wide range of settings and scenarios. This is reflected in the retrospective comment of a GLI alumna:

[Alum2015] The GLI provide to be a unique learning experience for me: it gave me... the opportunity to reflect upon my own growth and journey as a leader... While at Oxford, I had the privilege of being a part of the GLI cohort in 2015. This was the same year that a massive earthquake struck my home country, Nepal. Deriving strength from this helpful group, I found it in me to launch a crowdfunding campaign to help lead recovery efforts for Nepal, from Oxford. As I reflect upon my journey with the GLI, I find that the initiative was already helping groom me into a leader who sought to make the best out of even the most challenging situations.

The **self-focus** that characterises emerging adulthood as a result of the relative lack of ties and obligations and the awareness of a window of opportunity for identity exploration has the potential to be an opportunity as well as a challenge for moral formation. Positively, self-focus can allow for the development of practices of reflection that are aimed towards personal formation and moral action. The cultivation of reflective practice is a feature of the GLI and one that a large number of students raised as they thought back over their involvement: [Ad2017] 'My GLI experience was transformative: it made me into a much more thoughtful and reflective person; it made me much more careful and deliberate about my actions.' The other side of self-focus, of course, is the potential for pathogenic narcissism, which has been identified, rightly or wrongly, as a particular trait

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<sup>10</sup> Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 6.

of millennials.<sup>11</sup> We do not need to adjudicate in this debate to recognise the challenge that self-focus can present to moral formation for altruistic leadership. The GLI's focal virtues include gratitude, honesty, humility, qualities that productively de-centre the self, situating self-focus within networks of relationship and wider structures of meaning and purpose.<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in the comment of [Ro2017]: 'I have become more self-conscious and aware of a) the consequences of my own actions and b) what other people do for me, no matter how small. I am more appreciative than I was before, and I have explicitly thanked people more often (regardless of the size of the gesture).'

The 'in between' nature of emerging adulthood can be conceived as a time of preparation for responsibilities that are on the horizon but not yet present. However, over-emphasizing the discontinuity between life in this liminal period and that which will follow can lend tacit support to an overly-rigid and hierarchical view of leadership that links leadership very tightly to formal positions of office. By distancing emerging adults from leadership, such a view runs the risk of overlooking the importance of 'everyday' forms of leadership, disengaging future leaders from the institutions in which they will work, and potentially breeding either cynicism or ungrounded idealism (or both). The approach of virtue cultivation addresses this challenge, setting leadership preparation within a life of moral formation. Leadership can be practiced in all kinds of situations, whether or not positional responsibility is conferred. Opportunities to grow as good followers are also important as part of an integrated life that is not oriented to the attainment of personal ambition in a particular role but to a wider understanding of the public good.

[Ad2017] My understanding of the nature and practice of leadership changed tremendously through the course of the program. I came in with few thoughts on what leadership means, and I left with a much deeper appreciation of the various dimensions of leadership, including the ways in which it links to failing and following and humility and gratitude. Beyond that, I feel that I now think of leadership in a much more multifaceted way, and I can appreciate elements of the practice of leadership in contexts where I would never have sought them before.

[He2016] The guest speakers have not felt like 'virtuous exemplars', though they have been immensely interesting people. What I've particularly valued with the guest speakers is the opportunity they provide to think in a very real way about a

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<sup>11</sup> See Jean Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014); 'The Evidence for Generation Me against Generation We', *Emerging Adulthood* 1:1 (2013), 11-16. For argument against Twenge's analysis see Jeffrey Arnett 'The Evidence for Generation We and Against Generation Me', *Emerging Adulthood* 1:1 (2013), 5-10. Samantha Stronge, Petar Milojevic, Chris G. Sibley, 'Are People Becoming More Entitled Over Time? Not in New Zealand', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2017), 1-14.

<sup>12</sup> Following Ashton and Lee, the virtues of humility and honesty (H in the HEXACO traits) can be taken as an approximation of reverse-coded narcissism. See Ashton, M. C., & Lee, K. (2007). Empirical, theoretical, and practical advantages of the HEXACO model of personality structure. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 150-166.

life and see how the person whose life that is also thinks about that life: to contemplate, with them, the kind of narrative they offer of the choices they have made and the way their life has gone or is going. I've found that deeply beneficial and often humbling. It's a brilliant contrast with the writing of 'celebrated leaders', which presents the narrative without the 'human presence', which often speaks quite differently. So the combination (mentors, guest speakers and writings of leaders) has worked well, I think.

The **positive outlook** of emerging adults, whose dreams for the future are often untested and intact, can make them an energising presence. However, insofar as their positive vision relies on avoidance of substantial failure and loss, it may be accompanied by high levels of anxiety and/or depression, the presence of which in emerging adults (and especially young women) is increasing.<sup>13</sup> In order for the hopes and expectations of emerging adults to endure, they need to be resilient to the kinds of failure that are likely to be encountered. An important distinction is between hope as a virtue and the mental disposition of optimism. As a virtue, hope is cultivated in practice over time, along with a network of other virtues—including patience, gratitude, forgiveness—and is orientated towards a future good that is difficult to attain. By paying attention to failure and cultivating the virtue of hope, the positive outlook of emerging adulthood can be harnessed and strengthened with the resilience needed to live well, and lead well, through the failures as well as successes of life.

### 3. **How might the programme's impact translate into civic society, politics and culture?**

Over the last three years we have engaged in facilitated discussions with over three hundred students on the nature of good leadership and the qualities of character such leadership requires. In hour-long sessions with groups of ten students we ask two questions that are then expanded into a longer discussion: 1) What, in one word, do you think is the most important quality of a leader? 2) Can you think of a personal or public example of a leader who embodies that quality? There tend to be two categories of response. Some students move quickly to name skills that in their view make for 'strong' leadership: communication, delegation and vision are three prominent examples. Others—no doubt guided in part by what they have read online about the GLI—opt for more substantive personal qualities: kindness, empathy, humility, integrity, courage, honesty. The examples they offer in support are often personal ones: a teacher, a relative, a coach, a former boss.

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. 'The NHS Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014'. Online: <<https://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748>>; Jeffrey Arnett and J. Schwab, *The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, 2012: Thriving, struggling, and hopeful* (Worcester, MA: Clark University). Arnett argues, against Twenge, that increased levels of depression and anxiety in emerging adults are due to a heightened sense of self. He argues that they are most likely due to the instability of emerging adulthood as a stage of life which often involves multiple changes in relationships, employment and habitation. He suggests that 'The high expectations and optimism of emerging adults, far from being a bane to themselves or society, are actually a psychological resource during what is often a stressful and difficult time of life... Their optimism, their self-belief, is what enables them to get up and try again'. Arnett, 'Generation We', 8.

There is little that can be achieved in a one-off discussion, but an important aim of the GLI programme through the year is to help small cohorts of students develop an understanding of leadership that centres on virtue: the qualities of life that leaders need to cultivate in order to lead in a way that furthers the public good. Those who enter the programme often experience a change of mind:

[Bo2016] My thinking around the concept of the "hero-leader" has changed a lot. Even though I was subconsciously aware of the dangers of this type of leadership, the GLI gave me the words and structure to think about it.

[An2017] Previously as my understanding, leadership is a skill to manage people, but after attending this course, I think leadership is more like a will, or a personality, with the purpose of helping others and building a better world.

The openness to reconsider strongly hierarchical models of leadership is coupled with a willingness to consider the personal qualities that make for good leadership. This openness is refreshing but it comes with the challenge of moving from a discussion of ideals to a more normative discussion that brings into view the need for character qualities to be personally cultivated. Over the course of the GLI, we seek to create space for concrete steps in character formation by cultivating honest discussion and personal reflection. An emphasis on leading and failing opens out from failures due to complexity and complacency to failures of character. A prominent former Cabinet Minister who had a dramatic fall from office to spend time in prison makes an important contribution as a guest speaker. The 'humility' evident in his willingness to share his painful story was frequently referenced and many participants found this encounter particularly important: [la2016] 'The guest speakers that were able to reflect on their life and had a rich life - of rise and fall - were the ones that contributed more to the course.' [Ad2017] 'I really, really enjoyed this talk [by Jonathan Aitken] and gained a lot from it. It was especially meaningful because this came from someone who was at the height of his career and then fell to the very bottom of society, and then rebuilt: it was inspiring to know that reconstruction was possible, and humbling to see how even a seemingly small mistake can ruin one's career.'

Our second aim moves from understanding to practice and the setting of the university to life and work in various contexts in different parts of the world. It is that students not only understand more about leadership and the importance of personal character but that they become leaders of character themselves. After only three years, our own work is still in its early stages so discussion of impact, extremely hard to measure in any case, is still in the realm of potential rather than actual. 40 students have passed through the programme over three years, of whom 28 have now finished their postgraduate degrees at Oxford. 25 of the 28 are working outside of academia in the fields of medicine, public health, politics, civil service, banking, consultancy, manufacturing,

entrepreneurialism, journalism, and law. They are located around the world in countries including China, Singapore, Australia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Zambia, South Africa, Columbia, the United States, Canada, Belgium and the United Kingdom. There is no doubt that alumni of the GLI are placed to contribute to civic society, politics and culture in different parts of the world. Whilst we have not yet conducted any formal research, there is some initial evidence of the impact of the programme. Three examples are illustrative of impact in different ways:

The first highlights the ongoing influence of a student programme beyond the university setting and elsewhere in the world:

[Alum2015] The readings, ideas and discussions from GLI have continued to pop up in conversations in Melbourne - sometimes over dinner, a glass of wine, or more formally in discussions at work about the norms that teams should have and how our managers and leaders can best support us to achieve our goals and objectives. I think it's hard to quantify the impact, but I think my experience will definitely stay with me for many years to come.

The second illustrates the potential to develop an integrated approach to leadership and virtue formation that is applied with fresh insights in new settings:

[Alum2016] Law and politics are binary professions. Your client is guilty or not guilty. Your candidate is elected or not elected. Your team wins or loses. In a binary world, it is easy to fall into lazy, tribal thinking around right and wrong. This is not helped by the fact that most people think that morality comes from outside us: a supernatural entity, a set of universal human rights, a party platform or a criminal code. The uncritical refrain of *'the law is the law'* or *'the Bible says'* or *'it's a human right'* are common and reflexively adopted moral crutches of my profession. The GLI helps people expand their moral thinking beyond a simplistic and tribal right and wrong. Instead, it encourages us to engage with moral problems by using a set of virtue ethics to find the best way to act. Instead of thinking *'does this break a rule?'* the the GLI teaches us to ask *'which virtues can I apply here?'*. Can I respond with compassion or courage, generosity or temperance, loyalty or truthfulness? This refreshing moral calculus provides a sound basis for moral decision making in a binary world.

The third example gives some evidence of impact in line with our ultimate aim: to help students develop as leaders equipped to serve the public good around the world:

[2Alum2015] Today I work as an independent consultant, providing consulting services to clients including the International Labour Organization (ILO), CARE, USAID among other development actors in Nepal. As I do so, I draw on the invaluable teachings as well as the nuanced discussions of the group. I try to reflect upon the kind of leader I have become, as well as the road that lies ahead to make me a better leader and pioneer in my field. I find that such reflections help mold me into a role model figure such that even those around me recognize me as a leader, especially for young adolescent girls around the country who in turn aspire to become leaders themselves.

In addition to these examples, several students have been eager to catalyse similar initiatives in their own contexts and many have expressed an active desire for ongoing GLI programming. As well as continuing to work with new groups of students in Oxford, we are therefore beginning to develop activities that can engage our alumni network and establish partner projects in different parts of the world. Whilst our work is only at a very early stage, interest amongst students in Oxford and elsewhere suggests that university contexts do indeed provide opportunities for character formation as a central part of leadership development.