

Oxford German Network Activities 2023-24

The Oxford German Network was established in 2012 by the Director (KK) with two complementary aims: Firstly, to connect the Sub-faculty of German with German teachers, especially locally, provide a local hub for policy engagement on Modern Languages and national advocacy on ML teaching, and networking opportunities also with other stakeholders who have an interest in German language, literature and culture. Secondly, to run a national competition for schools that generates enthusiasm for learning German across the age spectrum, provides curriculum enrichment, and offers an opportunity to invite learners and other stakeholders (e.g. German, Austrian and Swiss Embassies, Goethe Institut, German Academic Exchange Service) to Oxford to celebrate the learners' success. The latter institutions regularly contribute prizes, and value the opportunity to visibly support learners.

OGN has a Director, who engages with the policy engagement dimension and oversees the work of the following three Coordinators, who deal with the day-to-day running of activities:

- OGN Coordinator (2023-24: Santhia Velasco Kittlaus, ML graduate), employed part-time by Magdalen College School as a Waynflete Academic and based there with a teaching and curriculum enrichment role and OGN role, manages the OGN website and communications, manages the annual Christmas Biscuits event in conjunction with KK, contributes to the organisation of the annual Prizegiving event.
- Olympiad Coordinator (2023-24: Eva Wechselberger, chef at All Souls), partly remunerated for OGN work by Jesus College (8-9 hours/month) and for hours beyond that stint via the OGN account. Runs the Oxford German Olympiad including coordination of judging (by volunteer judges from within and beyond the Faculty) and contributes to organising the Prizegiving event.
- Classic Prize Coordinator (2023-24: Santhia Velasco Kittlaus, ML graduate), runs the Classic Prize competition including provision of academic resources and contributing to, and coordinating the judging of the essays (Head Judge: Schwarz-Taylor Chair of German).

Oxford German Olympiad

The competition is advertised each year with a different theme on the European Day of Languages (26 September). The 2023-24 competition was designed to connect with the Kafka exhibition in the Bodleian, with the topic "Kafkaesque Kreatures". It attracted some 830 entries from entrants age 9–18 from across the UK and across school sectors; all received a printed participation certificate. Approx. 60 winners each with a parent/guest attended the Prizegiving. Other attendees included representatives from the German Embassy, Goethe Institut, Austrian Cultural Forum and German Academic Exchange Service, and teachers.

The Prize-giving also provided a forum for other prizes to be awarded, including the German Classic Essay Prize for sixth-formers and a new Kafka Essay Prize established with a Wadham donor. This is the first year in which the Olympiad has been supported by a gift from Lidl UK (3k per annum). We also annually receive £1k from the Independent Schools Modern Languages Association (ISMLA).

Christmas Biscuit Bake-Off (*Weihnachtsplätzchenbackwettbewerb*)

This is an annual event held in the Taylorian Hall and attended by around 6 local schools with some 35-40 pre-GCSE participants overall. Participants bring biscuits baked according to German recipes provided on our OGN website and these are judged by the Olympiad Coordinator, who is a professional chef. The participants make Christmas decorations and take part in a quiz. Tea and modest prizes are awarded and each participant receives a participation certificate.

German Classic Prize

This competition is open to Lower Sixth Form students from across the UK. It was established following the initiative of the donor Jonathan Gaisman, KC, who wished to enable young people to

enjoy the study of German literature; the contact with OGN was facilitated by the German Embassy in 2017 on the basis of the OGN's established success in reaching schools and engaging young learners across the UK. The text changes each year and is designed to be a 'classic' that stretches participants beyond what they learn at school and introduces them to independent university-style study. We provide signed-up participants with a copy of the text (this year Kafka's *The Stoker*) and a translation into English, as well as mini lectures and print resources on the text to encourage scholarly study. Each participant receives individual feedback and a participation certificate. There are three prizes (£500, £300, £100) as well as Highly Commended and Commended (all these winners are invited to the Olympiad Prize-giving and a special 'Classic' tea). Numbers fluctuate depending on the text – since the texts are challenging and have to be studied independently over the summer, we tend to get between 15 and 30 entries following some attrition over the summer. We are currently seeking to implement ideas for raising that number.

Schools Liaison and Facilitating Collaboration between Local Schools

Meetings with local schoolteachers are held in the autumn term and spring terms in order to provide an opportunity for exchanging information, ideas and experiences. Attendance (for tea provided by Jesus College with a subsequent meeting) has dropped significantly since Covid and an online or hybrid format has worked less well. We are however proposing to trial a different format later this year.

An important role of OGN is to facilitate collaboration between German departments in local schools from the state and independent sectors. E.g. Radley College hosts an annual "Oktoberfest" and a "Kneipenquiz" for sixth formers to which they invite all local German teachers and pupils. This has the advantage of creating critical mass in a subject that can seem very small in a single school.

We provide newsletters, act as a successful forum for enabling schools to join forces for initiatives, and provide information about developments concerning matters such as assessment. An urgent desideratum is a more up-to-date website and we will be exploring this in the course of the year.

The Director conducted two tours of the Kafka exhibition in the Bodleian Libraries for local schools and was invited to judge a drama competition involving six London schools.

The OGN team has greatly valued the advice of the Faculty's Schools Liaison Officer Nicola Brown, and further collaboration will be pursued in the coming year.

Policy Engagement and Advocacy

OGN provides a useful forum for engaging with initiatives concerning promotion of interest in German language and culture, and Modern Languages more broadly. E.g. the Director was asked to conduct a tour of the Kafka exhibition and host a reception for members of the British-German Association.

The Director is a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages and regularly attends events at the German Embassy as well as relevant conferences. She feeds back information gleaned there to teachers. She has also been a proactive member of a small cross-sector group (now including a head teacher, a representative of the British Academy, two teachers, and another HE representative) since 2012, which has been seeking to convince Ofqual that 'severe grading' in Modern Foreign Languages – now accepted by Ofqual as persuasively evidenced – needs to be addressed with urgency in order to avoid perpetuating a detrimental effect on uptake in Modern Languages. Modest gains have been made at various points, including this year, but more work needs to be done. The Director contributed to the development of a new curriculum for GCSE as a member of a DfE advisory group. She is also a participant in the current cross-sector initiative "Making the Case for German" spearheaded by the German Ambassador and led by the Goethe Institut.

Benefits for Grant Applications and Career Development

Benefits of OGN extend to providing the OGN team with broadly based experience of schools liaison, outreach and policy engagement work. Experience of setting up and leading OGN put the Director in a

strong position for leading the major AHRC-funded project “Creative Multilingualism”, and also proved useful in obtaining funding for the current AHRC-funded project “Kafka’s Transformative Communities” (2024-26), in which she is a Co-Investigator.

OGN also provides graduates and ECRs with schools liaison, teaching and PER opportunities that complement their graduate work and extend their skill set for employment within and beyond academia. E.g. the first OGN Coordinator, Dr Charlotte Ryland, is now Director of the Stephen Spender Trust and Director of the Queen’s Translation Exchange. Dr Emily Oliver and Dr Susanne Herrmann-Sinai are German teachers at Magdalen College School, at a time when there is a serious shortage of German teachers. Erstwhile Olympiad Coordinator Dr Madeleine Brook is now Deputy Head of the Department of Research at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach and continues to act as a volunteer judge for the Olympiad. Erstwhile OGN Coordinator Dr Jamie Green has obtained a permanent position as a journalist for ITV Meridian.

The Director was Humanities representative in the founding phase of the University’s Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN) and was recently invited to contribute to a policy engagement initiative led by the Director of the Queen’s Translation Exchange and involving an Oxford-based ECR and a German graduate, the former of which has now been appointed by Cambridge University as Outreach Coordinator for German. Policy engagement alongside advocacy is gaining increasing importance for the subject and the Faculty.

Fundraising

OGN continues to be an asset for the Faculty in terms of fundraising. The contact with Lidl, which also led to support by the Dieter Schwarz Foundation, was originally established as a result of a series of visits by the then Head of the Humanities Development Office and the OGN Director to head offices of German companies operating in the UK. It is therefore particularly gratifying that the latest Lidl donation is as from this year contributing to the running of the Oxford German Olympiad. The Independent Schools Modern Languages Association continues to contribute annually to the running of the Olympiad. The generous funding of the German Classic Prize was continued this year by Jonathan Gaisman KC, funding the prize, the role of the Classic Prize Coordinator, and the creation of resources that enable participants from all types of school background to compete on the basis of an academically robust edition of the main text as well as criticism and bespoke resources created especially for the competition. The Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages is most grateful for the support provided for the activities of the Oxford German Network.

Katrin Kohl
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Director of OGN
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