Balliol College AMES: Professor Jim Mallinson – video transcript

The tutor, Professor Jim Mallinson, is seated, facing the camera. The tutor's name and course subject are shown the first time they appear. The tutor answers the questions that are displayed on screen.

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON (BODEN PROFESSOR OF SANSKRIT AND PROFESSORIAL FELLOW): My name is Jim Mallinson. I'm the university professor Sanskrit. I'm also a Professorial Fellow here at Balliol. I teach at AMES, which is the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. I teach Indian history, religion and culture; and Sanskrit language of course; and research methods for Indology (the study of classical India).

My main research focus is on the history of yoga and its practitioners. I've spent many years living in India with traditional practitioners of yoga. The core of my research work is editing Sanskrit text from manuscripts, old texts on yoga, trying to reconstruct the history of the traditional practice through that. But also through using insights from the time I've spent with practitioners in India. I look quite a lot at the art historical record as well.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What qualities do you look for in students?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: At the Faculty of AMES we really put up a lot of importance on the study of language, of course. That's the core of all our degree subjects, so really an aptitude for learning languages is pretty key if you're going to do a degree at AMES. And then, once we're working with students here, we seek to develop their critical enquiry. Then, we want them to ask broader questions of their subject. The scope for study here is very broad. For each topic, you'll get an essential reading list. Then, you'll get a much broader reading list which will allow you to go off into the directions that interest you. We really encourage people to do that. Then, we also have specialists in so many different fields that we can maybe steer you towards as well. So, if a student wants to develop an interest in more ethnographic approaches or historical approaches, we can foster them.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How can applicants best prepare when applying to Oxford?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: If you're thinking of applying to Balliol, to Oxford, to read as an undergraduate, a degree course at AMES (Asian and Middle Eastern Studies) – which the focus, the heart of it, will be learning a language – it's a good idea to read up on the position of that language, and the culture of which it's a part. To understand a certain amount about the language. In terms of when you're applying, we don't expect you to have a working knowledge of that language. But, it's certainly helpful if you have studied other languages, because the courses are very intensive at the outset with the language acquisition. So, if you haven't had training in language learning before, you're going to find it quite difficult. If you do get accepted, it's a good idea to make a start on the language as well before you get here. We'll send out materials, suggest things for what you might want to read and start working on. Most of the languages that we teach at AMES have a separate script. You know, new script, not the same as the Roman alphabet used for English. So, it's a good

idea to make solid steps at acquiring that, picking that up before you start. Otherwise, you'll be scrambled trying to learn grammar and script at the same time in the first few weeks.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What type of work do you give to students to prepare for a tutorial?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: In the tutorial system here, I normally give four tutorials a year. They're on topics to do with Indian history when I'm teaching undergraduates. So, we give a core reading list beforehand, and then there's a broader reading list as well, so you can go deeper into certain aspects of each topic if that's what you want to do. We encourage that of course. Then, students will email me their essays before the tutorial. It's not like the old system where you used to come and read it out, and the professor would sit there sort of perhaps harrumphing or cheering or whatever. Now, you send it to me beforehand. I will read them before the tutorial. There will be maybe one, two or three students in the tutorial. I'll encourage dialogue between the students as well. Sometimes, they will have answered slightly different questions on a similar theme, so that helps to develop a conversation, in that one student can present their ideas to the other student, and I will facilitate that dialogue.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How are your tutorials structured?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: Tutorials are structured in a fairly free form way. It depends on the subject, it depends on the student. I like to encourage dialogue between students. Often, I have one, two or three students. Two, I think, is best, but sometimes three works very well too. I like maybe the students to be answering slightly different questions about the same topic which means they can then speak to each other, inform one another, and I can facilitate that dialogue as it goes along.

[Question displayed on screen:]

When you start a tutorial, do you focus on the essay or on the questions?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: In the tutorials, I will have read the essays beforehand. Students email them to me beforehand. So, the essays themselves will raise questions that I will want to discuss. Perhaps I feel that an idea hasn't been fully developed, or there's a rather brilliant idea that hadn't occurred to me before, and I will ask one student to explain that to another one, or explain it to me if I haven't fully understood what they've written. I'll have a whole list of questions normally, as arisen out of each essay. So I like to promote a dialogue between the students as the tutorial progresses.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What other classes are there, outside of the tutorials, that will help students with their degrees?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: Each degree at AMES really focuses on developing language skills. It's pretty intense. Particularly, I mean, speaking from the point of view of Sanskrit (my subject). The first year, you're really having three Sanskrit classes a week. By the end of it, you can read major texts, important texts of Sanskrit history. Bhagavad Gita, or bits of the Mahabharata; you know, the famous Indian epic. At the same time, you're also having a minimum of two lectures a week. But, there's lots of other things going on. One of the problems, which is not really a problem of Oxford, is that there are so many exciting, interesting lectures going on all the time. You're expected to go to

two core lectures each week on Tuesday and Thursday. And you'll be doing an essay every fortnight. They will be based on the lecture content.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How well-defined is the structure of the course?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: Speaking about the Sanskrit undergraduate degree in particular, it's well-structured but there's plenty of scope for tailoring things to particular interests. Also, you get to do a dissertation in the third year if you want to, where you can go really deep into a subject that particularly interests you. We have some flexibility, it's normally a pretty small cohort. Beginners Sanskrit, there might be 15 or so, but they're doing differently. They might be doing doctoral studies, they might be masters students mixed in. But then, when you set off for the remainder of the undergraduate degree, there's quite an amount of flexibility that we can put in. We can see what students are interested in, we can, you know, read particular kinds of poetry that they might fancy reading, and we can steer you towards dissertations that might reflect your interests as well.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What do you enjoy the most about conversing with students?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: The tutorials I've had with my students – I've only been in Oxford for a year – but they have actually been the highlight of my teaching so far. Sometimes it's rather daunting, because I'm having to teach tutorials, perhaps, on subjects that I'm not an expert on. You know, I'm teaching tutorials on the entire 5,000 years of Indian history. I particularly remember one tutorial where I had students who were also Classicists. At AMES, you can combine subjects. You can do Classics with Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, or you can do Religious Studies with Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. We call those CAMES and RAMES. I had a great trio of students who were looking at the third century BCE inscriptions of Ashoka, which is a fascinating subject but not really a specialist area of mine. I work, you know, 2,000 years later on. But, they were Classicists, and they had looked at how the inscriptions are multilingual, and they had Greek translations as well, and they looked at the variations between the different inscriptions in the Greek translation. So, I actually just sat there and learned from them as they put forward theories about how the text for these inscriptions might have been transmitted in the third century BCE. So, I learn things from my students during tutorials as well, which is wonderful.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How have your students helped inform your understanding of your subject and research?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: I particularly enjoy lecturing on subjects that I already feel that I'm an expert in, because of the quality of the feedback and the questions I get from the students. In fact, this year I'm doing a series of lectures on the history of yoga, which is not really part of any particular course. But, it's probably the best attended lecture series I'm giving, because people turn up and they find it interesting and entertaining, I hope, to some extent. But the questions I get during of those lectures, or sometimes at the end of those lectures, often had not occurred to me. And people will, you know, either see problems in what I'm presenting, or they look at it in a different way. They ask questions which will often then go on to inform my own research in the future, which is great.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What is the best thing about teaching at Balliol?

>> PROFESSOR JIM MALLINSON: Teaching at Balliol is great. I mean, I don't actually teach that much at Balliol myself, because I'm a University appointment and most of my teaching is done in the faculty, but I do lecture here. My history lecture series is done in the wonderful new Gillis Lecture Theatre, here in Balliol. But teaching at Balliol, teaching at the University full stop, is wonderful for the quality of the students. I mean, the students are normally extremely talented, and very inquisitive, and they come at me with questions that I'd never expect. And then seeing them develop, seeing them broaden their interests, seeing also the extracurricular activities are fantastic. In Sanskrit, for example, we put on a Sanskrit play. That's a lot of fun, and it's not part of the course at all. It sort of brings everyone together, and I wasn't involved last year. I watched it last year, very impressive. So, I've signed up this year for a cameo role. I'm looking forward to that, looking forward to seeing how the students put it on, because last year was extremely impressive. In fact, this week I'm going to a production of Euripides' *Orestes*, put on by one of the CAMES students – so a Classicist who's also doing Sanskrit. I'm looking forward to that. Finding out about the various extracurricular things that the students do is great, there's so much opportunity here at Oxford for doing all kinds of interesting things.

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For more information about how to apply to Balliol, see www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/undergraduate-admissions