International University Karate Meeting – Oxford 2025

The first weekend of May saw Oxford University host the 2025 International University Karate Meeting. Sensei Spiros Ventouras, chief instructor of the Oxford University Karate Club, was joined by Sensei Yoshinobu Ohta, chief instructor of JKA England, along with Sensei Masao Watanabe and Sensei Yoshiyuki Osada, chairman and president respectively of the Japan University Karatedo Federation. Despite the busy exam season, students from seven universities across the UK gathered to train together, including our club's president, Lukas, and vice-president, Alex.

Ohta-sensei, Osada-sensei, Lukas, Alex, Watanabe-sensei

The first day was led by Spiros-sensei, who primarily covered kihon. His instruction covered principles applicable for all movements, suitable for the diverse range of karate styles represented at the event, though they were by no means easy to internalise. Drills focused on efficiently stepping forward and controlling the body's centre of gravity. Partner-work drills were also used to put these movement skills into practice, focusing on countering immediately after blocking, a skill easily neglected after training block-counter combinations with very set timings such as kihon ippon kumite. Perhaps the most memorable drill came at the end of the lesson, where Spiros-sensei demonstrated using the bent leg of a deep side lunge to drive forward and step a great distance into a straight punch – an exercise that wouldn't look out of place in a Karate Kid movie.

On the second day Osada-sensei (Shito-ryu) led with a simple forward-stepping exercise. Sensei demonstrated how to naturally slide forward with each step, maintaining the body's centreline. Telling stiff university karate students to gracefully glide ahead went down about as well as a giraffe on roller skates, so Sensei advised to completely relax into a squat after every few steps. Next, Watanabe-sensei (Wado-ryu) joined to assist with partner-work drills, focusing on tai sabaki (whole body movement) and *receiving* an opponent's attack as opposed to blocking it. Again, there was an emphasis on light flowing movement that many found challenging. Finally, Ohta-sensei (Shotokan) went through the Shotokan kata Gankaku – most memorable were his use of the hips, and imagery of forming a tulip with the hands for the very last turn. Watanabe-sensei also contrasted Gankaku with Wado-ryu's form of the kata, Chinto, and explained how the style's stances and techniques were motivated by the founder's connection with kendo.

The seminars gave rise to plenty of karate material to ruminate on, but perhaps more importantly, the collective spirit when training together, and friendships formed whilst exploring Oxford after the seminars, made the weekend genuinely unforgettable. There aren't many events where you can find some of the most enthusiastic university karate students from across the UK strolling along a river and debating who has the easiest degree (the word 'management' did come up frequently).

Personally, I must give many thanks to Johanna Hoffmann, the outgoing president of the Oxford University Karate Club, for organising such an excellent event. I hope such gatherings of university students can continue long into the future, and I cannot wait to meet again all of the excellent karateka (students, alumni, and sensei alike) that I had the pleasure of talking to over the weekend.

Alexander Lo
CUKC Vice President
21st May 2025