

Gazette Supplement



Oration by the demitting Proctors and Assessor

Assessor: Insignissima Vice-Cancellaria, licetne anglice loqui?

Vice-Chancellor: Licet

Assessor: We have shared numerous celebrations in our year of office. 2019 saw the centenary of the DPhil. 2020 is still more memorable as the 100th anniversary of the first degrees for women. And the Sheldonian itself had a significant birthday, its 350th, in fact.

For those of us involved in the plans to build a huge new humanities centre, it is consoling to remember that the Sheldonian was itself constructed during and despite the plague that ravaged England in the 1660s – a pestilence so severe that it drove parliament to Oxford for a while. As the Sheldonian went up, so did Oxford's pesthouse, despite arguments about the efficacy of quarantine and some evidence that compulsory self-isolation did not work. There is, as this suggests, much that we might learn from this period.

Nor are these the only lessons I want to draw from that time and this place. Look up and you will see Robert Streater's masterwork, unveiled at the opening of the Sheldonian in 1669, and greeted by the poet Robert Whitehall as a project exceeding all other art: 'Future ages must confess they owe', he wrote, 'To Streater more than Michael Angelo!'

Well, perhaps. But above us is a telling allegory nonetheless: Truth Descending upon the Arts and Sciences. Here is the whole of the University, from medicine to history; from chemistry to law. It is a vision, shall we say, of One Oxford: a reminder of our interdependence as well as our claims to universality; a call to recognise the importance of all our colleagues. This year saw the launch of a student wellbeing

strategy. Now it is surely time for the University to do the same for its staff.

Still more important than the positive vision of Oxford presented here, however, is the question of who and what is excluded from Streater's ideal. For the descent of Truth effects a purification. Just as the plague-ridden were expelled to the pesthouse, so here Envy, Rapine and Ignorance are cast out of the courts of learning.

Like all true allegories, there is more than one meaning at work here. This building, this picture and even parliament's presence in Oxford in the 1660s were the product of a particular nexus of ideas and people. Royalist and Anglican, they revelled in the Restoration of the monarchy and sought to ensure that the new settlement of Church and State embodied in Oxford University would never be undone.

Envy, Rapine and Ignorance are thus not merely abstract evils, they symbolise the freethinkers, puritans, republicans and Roman Catholics who threatened this dispensation: malcontents that the University was expelling and parliament legislating against at precisely the same time.

It was a disastrous decision. This early-modern no-platforming left Oxford ideologically pure but intellectually impoverished. The 18th-century University was not, in fact, a place renowned for learning. Real scholarship happened elsewhere: places where debate was free; places less inclined to exclude those with whom they disagreed.

As such, it is a terrible warning for us now: a warning for those within the University who seek to silence dissenting voices and a warning for those outside who are tempted to regulate our response. It is all

too easy to imagine – as our predecessors imagined – that we have a monopoly on truth and should exclude those in error. Governments, then and now, are likewise prone to think that state intervention is the solution to all problems. The events of the past are a caution for both. It cannot be right for a university to restrict debate. Nor is it appropriate for the state to intervene. Removing the liberties long held by universities and handing them over to nameless, faceless bureaucrats is an odd way of taking back control.

2020 marks the 60th anniversary of the Assessorship – a moment which, almost uniquely in a University addicted to such celebrations, has not been marked by any event at all. As we look at the Sheldonian, we might also observe that there are thrones here for the Vice-Chancellor and for both the Proctors. We Assessors, being humbler creatures, perch wherever we are told.

This, too, is symbolic. It reflects an ambiguity that has existed ever since the Assessorship was created: an ambiguity that has become more pronounced with the sudden decision to declare the post part-time. I conclude simply by reflecting that it is not, in reality, a part-time job. The Assessor does not need a special seat, but the role does require a full-time buyout if it is to be both attractive and feasible in the years to come.

Junior Proctor: The Assessor, as the eminent historian he is, has just illuminatingly shown us how experiences from the past can inform our present. As a linguist and literary scholar, I will focus on the importance of voices and narratives. The Senior Proctor will bring in his much topical and relevant expertise as a microbiologist.

As Proctors and Assessors, our year has seen several important new developments, including the creation of a society for

postgraduate students (Parks College), the receipt of a major gift for the Humanities, and the signature of a new partnership with Legal and General that should allow our university to build much-needed affordable housing for our staff and for postgraduate students as well as potentially building functional and commercial estates, such as storage for the libraries and museums, and innovation hubs. These new developments are all part of our University Strategic Plan, which also includes an exciting Access and Participation Plan engaging the whole collegiate University. There is thus much to congratulate ourselves about: we are moving forward and Oxford is not the old-fashioned bastion of status quo that some would love to portray.

However, alongside this narrative of success, there is also a narrative of challenge, and lessons to be learnt. The University Council and its committees have started to address the need to understand and remedy some of the University structural weaknesses through the drafting of a finance 'green paper' that explores how our income is generated and how we have been spending it. This will in turn allow for an in-depth reflection on what our budgeting and planning principles are (in the so-called 'white paper'). Arguably these much-needed initiatives might have been very helpful if they had taken place before the drafting of a Strategic Plan with some 26 priorities, several of them still unfunded... Still, they will help to better assess what the impact of current and future decisions will have on our University's infrastructure and we might also be able to re-assess what strategic aims are feasible (in terms of resources) or not. The main challenge here is: does our University have the means of its ambitions while also being able to address its core needs? And therefore what should our core priorities really be? Indeed, in building possible future narratives, we should have the courage, flexibility and humility to change course if things do not go according to plan.

We should also remember that any narrative has many voices and points of views, those of its main narrator(s) but also those of its other characters. They can at times be discordant but should certainly not be disregarded. As Proctors and Assessor, our duty during the past year was to connect the dots between many different committees and many different constituencies of our University. We were sometimes speaking in our own voices but also most often trying to bring in the voices of others: students, academics, researchers, staff. We sat on committees that had very different points

of views and learned to see the University through their perspectives as well as ours: from the passion and enthusiasm of the staff from the University's museums, gardens and libraries to the rigour and dedication of the Finance and Estates staff and then again to the care and commitment of the students' support and welfare teams.

As Proctors and Assessors, we have also reminded our many interlocutors that language has power, that language is power. Decisions need to be made and communicated in a transparent way in order for people to engage with them. Support needs to be expressed in words as well as in actions in order for people to feel empowered. For example, we have felt encouraged by the robust stance the University has made in adopting the Oxford Living wage and we hope that the colleges will follow suite. We are hopeful that there will continue to be productive discussions regarding pensions. We also welcome our University's renewed commitment towards sustainability. Finally, as a European citizen, I am proud that our University, in the voice of our Vice-Chancellor, has been standing strong on supporting our international community of students, academic and staff.

In conclusion, as a University, our narrative is and should be a narrative of challenge: challenging ourselves as individuals and challenging the outside world. Institutions such as universities do not lack in clear principles, ethical policies and mechanism for self-scrutiny, but sometimes in the courage to apply them at both an individual and institutional level. That Oxford created and is maintaining the proctorship and its role of scrutiny is a testimony to its vision and courage, and it was therefore an honour for me to represent the Congregation in this office.

Senior Proctor: Forty years before I was admitted as Senior Proctor, I dreamed of attending Oxford. I visited Exeter College and received strong encouragement from a certain Raymond Dweck. He spoke to me for an hour in his laboratory in the, now demolished, concrete magnificence of the Biochemistry Tower (the paternoster was a memorable experience). On returning home, I was told by my sixth form college that, in their view, I was not good enough to apply to Oxford. Consequently, I did not apply and instead went to Reading for a BSc in Microbiology and then on Cambridge, to complete my PhD – the rest, it might be said, is history. Today the area of the UK where I grew up, Havant in Hampshire, remains one of the lowest areas for participation in higher education. Whilst the access initiatives

launched this year represent a welcome presage of change, access and equality remains a work in progress.

At the same time, I read a book that has shaped my entire career: *The Natural History of Infectious Diseases*, by Frank Macfarlane Burnet, the influential immunologist, who shared the 1960 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine with our own Peter Medawar. I was fascinated by Burnet's approach to disease as an ecological process, but his closing remarks suggested that I would not have a career in this area. Writing in the mid-1970s, he contended that the rational conclusion was that infectious disease was thing of the past. Science should therefore turn its attention to other issues, such as human aggression and the causes of wars. This misplaced optimism was all too plausible in an era when tuberculosis and malaria were declining, smallpox was almost eradicated, and HIV/AIDS had yet to be described. When I began my independent research career in public health and vaccinology in 1988, the AIDS pandemic was intensifying, but there were optimistic claims (which I personally didn't credit at the time) that there would be a vaccine within five or ten years.

These personal anecdotes underline that, while narratives are very significant to us as individuals, individuals are prone to error. Academic endeavour, and emphatically Science, is a collective process. This is the surest, arguably the only, assurance of long-term academic success. This also explains why our University has been so successful in the past decades: our University is a real academic community undertaking a collective endeavour of almost unimaginable scope and ambition. A year at the centre of our University has affirmed my view that, arcane though some of its features may be, Oxford works, and works very well indeed. The very name 'The Chancellor, Masters and Scholars' implies collectivity and partnership. In today's terms 'The Chancellor', the administrative part of our University, supports the research, teaching and learning of 'The Masters', the academics, and 'The Scholars', those who come here to learn.

That is not to say that our University is perfect. While, contrary to popular myth, we have successfully managed an enormous amount of change in the past decades, there remain areas in urgent need of reform. Principal among these are our examination procedures. The Junior Proctor and I have emphasised this in our report to Education Committee. The current pandemic is exposing the need for change, but there

are many reasons why modernisation has been necessary for some time including increased robustness, removing attainment gaps, and welfare needs. Another area in need of reform is the role of Congregation, which is increasingly detached from decision-making. It can become a single-issue body that is roused only when a group of committed individuals want to initiate a particular change. This has the danger that decisions are not made with regard to the broader context. We must use our democratic structures more effectively and reform Congregation procedures. Appropriate use of technology can enable members to participate more effectively in decision-making. 'The Masters', which no longer means only academics, need to lead the decision-making processes as they are the community that, collectively, best understands the challenges and needs that we share.

To return to the personal. I became involved in University administration through an emergency, the Tinbergen

Crisis. I demit as an even greater crisis faces our University and our World. When the crisis is over we shall face a range of new challenges. The world will be a different place and we shall have to adapt to those changes. We shall have to revisit all of our assumptions. Arguably, these changes have been approaching for a long time and for a variety of reasons. From the evidence of the past year I have every confidence that our University will survive and thrive, as long as we remain committed to our democratic ideals and we approach the challenges collectively with robust debate and open minds.

Having been intimately involved in the operational response to the Tinbergen Crisis I am optimistic about our capacity to weather the current storm. Our University is fortunate to have committed and talented individuals at all levels. Having observed the response of the Estates Team to Tinbergen, and having become intimately acquainted with almost every other team over the last year, I am very aware of the level of

commitment and ability throughout our University. Even as we speak, a host of able individuals are working tirelessly to ensure that the business of Our University continues. Frequently unsung, it is this army of enthusiasts that keeps us going. We thank them deeply and personally and wish them well in their endeavours as we demit and fade back into obscurity.

We must also thank our Clerk and all the staff of the Proctors' Office: Alison, Esther, Stephen, Maya, Sarah, Claire, Caroline, Theo, Jonathan, Richard and Nicki. Without them the jobs would be impossible. Our heartfelt thanks also go to Proctors Officers, led by Tim, Paul, and Paul, and the Bedels: Dave, Dave, Gary, Caroline, Alan, Dave, Pat and Andy. Their unflagging, enthusiastic and able support we very gratefully acknowledge. My final words of thanks go to my peers, 'The Masters', and especially the Fellows of Hertford who elected me to this role. It has been a rewarding and fascinating year and I would not have missed it for the world.

Proctorial Year 2019-20

2019-20 2018-19

Summary of Complaints

Total Complaints and Academic Appeals	138	86
Legacy cases from 2018-19	35	4 (17/18)
Upheld in full or in part	37	7
Complaints and Academic Appeals outstanding	8	18
Total Taught-course appeals	102	62
Taught-course appeals upheld in full or in part	26 (1 ongoing)	8
Total Research Student Appeals	7	4
Research Student Appeals upheld in full or in part	1 (1 ongoing)	1
Total Taught-course complaints	18 (3 ongoing)	9
Taught-course complaints upheld in full or in part	5	2
Research student complaints	11 (3 ongoing)	3
Research student complaints upheld in full or in part	5	ongoing

Summary of Disciplinary cases

Engaging in offensive, violent or threatening behaviour	5	3
Engaging in action which is likely to cause injury or impair safety	1	1
Engage in any dishonest behaviour in relation to the University	6	n/a
Possession of drugs	0	1
Breach of IT regs	1	2
Non-sexual harassment	3	2
Sexual harassment	11	6

Breaches of the Proctors disciplinary regulations for University examinations

Academic misconduct (plagiarism)	63	75
No further action	N/A	11
Referred back to the examiners	10	10
Referred to the Academic Conduct Panel	20	35
Proctors' decision	12	n/a
Referred to the Student Disciplinary Panel	8	1
Ongoing	11	18