

# Gazette Supplement



## Admission of the Vice-Chancellor

**Congregation**

10 January

### Address by the Chancellor

Irene Tracey is the 273rd Vice-Chancellor of this University since the rollcall began in 1230, and only the second woman.

The last Vice-Chancellor, whose successful 7 years in the post we celebrated at a dinner at the end of November, came to us via the Republic of Ireland (Trinity College, Dublin), the United States (principally Harvard) and St Andrews. Her predecessor came via Cambridge and Yale. His predecessor, who once held a Rhodes scholarship, came from further afield, in Auckland.

Irene Tracey was born in the Radcliffe, went to state schools in Oxford and, after university here and at Harvard, she came back to Oxford to become the Nuffield Professor in Anaesthetic Sciences, as well as to the leadership of the Nuffield Department of Clinical Neuroscience and to posts at Christ Church and Pembroke. She returned from there to her old college, Merton, as Warden. She is now set to cross the High, not quite the Rubicon though certainly, as Julius Caesar is reputed to have said, *alea acta est*, the die is cast. Speaking for the whole University, I wish to thank Merton for giving up a fine Warden to allow us, I'm sure, to appoint an equally fine Vice-Chancellor.

As I have just said, we celebrated at the end of last term the achievements of her outstanding predecessor, Dame Louise Richardson, who left strong foundations on which to build and stout defences with which to cope, to use a contemporary cliché, with the headwinds into which Irene Tracey and all of us will have to battle over

the next few years in our private lives as well as in our professional ones.

Our national economy is, alas, in a poor, indeed a lamentable state. Future growth prospects are buffeted by the aftermath of a global pandemic, a European war, a faltering Chinese economy and the self-willed departure from our largest export market in pursuit of an elusive and mendaciously spun notion of national sovereignty. We sought to become Singapore-on-Thames but that improbable goal seems to have gone missing in action.

While our fundraising has been buoyant, with growth in research income, and with the OUP and our endowment performing strongly, over the next few years we will have to provide more funding still for vaccine development and other world-beating research. All this will come at a time when, like others, we have to confront the painful impact of inflation on everything we do. Moreover, it is also going to be necessary to deal with inadequate pay structures for our staff. We have to offer better prospects for those setting out on academic careers and overall, to provide the remuneration which attracts and retains outstanding staff in such a competitive world.

While the government's promises to protect research funding are welcome, we cannot overlook the real damage that will be done, both here and indeed in Europe, if we lose access to Horizon programmes. We must also recognise that the government's education priorities for those students older than 16 under this our 9th Secretary of State in 7 years are likely to be support for vocational training. This is hardly surprising given the underfunding for

years of further education. If we want higher productivity in Britain, a more skilled workforce is essential. This University is hardly in the best position to award apprenticeships. That would not be playing to our strengths, and other universities already do the job very well. What we can do is continue broadening access to able students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to build on the existing infrastructure we have in continuing education in order to provide opportunities for professional and general education for early- and mid-career students. We have an extraordinary record of continuing education going back to 1878, and one objective we could set ourselves would be to build a modern technology for greatly enhancing learning for people across the country in time for the 150th anniversary of our first efforts in this field.

Some of the headwinds that we face are caused by our own particular institutional structure. We are a collegiate University with autonomous colleges, governed by charity law, as part of an autonomous University - autonomous, a fact not always remembered by governments. Creating one University in these circumstances requires diplomacy, self-restraint and the understanding of our respective positions. In practice, there would be no University without the colleges, and little point in colleges if they were not part of the University. There are two issues that will clearly face us in the next few years, issues that cannot be tackled by a University fiat but only by effective and farsighted cooperation between the leadership of the University and the collective leadership of the colleges. This is the sort of partnership that we saw proving so effective during the pandemic.

One recent unfortunate college dispute, on the sad details of which I do not need to dwell, focused attention on both of the issues that need to be resolved. It inevitably and wholly correctly attracted the interest of the Charity Commission. The Commission, after a show of considerable patience, reached the understandable conclusion that it raised the question of the role of trustees at our colleges. At the very least, I believe that the Conference of Colleges will wish to engage with the Charity Commission (which is doing its duty in a spirit of goodwill) to consider how the questions that arise can best be resolved. This is a matter for colleges themselves. Other charities will inevitably watch what happens with great interest.

The other issue raised in this case, partly a result of history and luck, is the wide divergence in the funding of individual colleges from their own resources. These differences across the University can lead to what many believe is sometimes an unequal student experience across the same university. The University as a whole cannot impose a solution but I hope that the Conference of Colleges will consider how this can best be tackled. When we look at some of these individual internal issues, I recall the wise advice of Tancredi in the greatest European political novel, *The Leopard* - 'things have to change in order to remain the same'.

I want in the rest of my remarks to say something about the purpose of universities.

In an open society like our own, liberal democracy is safeguarded not simply by fair and regular elections but by the existence in our community of institutions and rules, checks and balances: the software and hardware of democracy, including the vibrant role of universities. Thomas Jefferson thought that a liberal education was good for democracy.

The importance of autonomous universities in free societies, with the self-confidence to assert liberal values despite the challenges sometimes of social inequity, economic failure and the growth of identity politics, is one reason why authoritarian leaders like Presidents Xi Jinping and Erdoğan and Prime Minister Orbán have clamped down on them.

So what is the purpose of the university and the education it provides? Is it simply to secure higher remuneration for graduates and more growth for our economy? Let me borrow from Cardinal Newman's famous book on *The Idea of a University*, a work that I suspect has been more regularly referred to than actually read.

For Newman, a university was - in his lyrical phrase - a place where 'enquiry is pushed forward... Discoveries verified and perfected... Error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge.' Universities served the present by helping us to understand the past and preserve the best of it; they served the future by shaping the citizens, who could help create it, by passing on a legacy both of knowledge and of civic commitment and attainment.

The way in which technology has democratised access to knowledge does not amount to a death sentence for universities. They may need to adjust the way they operate, without changing their basic purpose, their core values and attributes in a free plural society. What exactly are these purposes and values?

In my own view, we have sometimes paid too little attention to the learning experiences of students. This has after all been one of the things which over the years has distinguished the particular way in which we teach at Oxford, through the tutorial system. Of course online resources can make a considerable contribution to courses of learning, not least in continuing education. But the aim of pedagogy should not simply be to transfer information. University teachers should get their students to think - to know how to frame the right questions (and the wrong ones), to search for the knowledge that will help them to produce answers, to embrace complexity, to argue rationally, to question and to have their own opinions. Can we manage this when universities sometimes seem to be mainly in the business of providing the obligatory pre-workplace ticks in the box? School done, university done - now for the job market. Universities are for learning, not credentialing; we should not simply teach for tests. Students are not customers in an academic supermarket. We should expect more of the experience a

university provides for young people if we want not only a properly skilled graduate workforce but rounded citizens.

We have a reputation, like Cambridge, for usually doing this job of teaching very well, alongside often world-beating research. And this perhaps is often responsible for attracting the sort of attention (very often from journalists whom we have educated) which we could do without. We are, for example, described frequently as elite, like I suppose a Premiership football club. But being elite does not mean we are elitist, a word associated with an inbuilt sense of superiority and membership of a Freemasonry of the clever, powerful and rich. Anyway, that is a silly argument in a country that could do with more elite institutions like some that we already have, for example the British Museum, our other museums and galleries, our Armed Forces, the BBC, our legal system, the Royal Society and so on. I used automatically to add to a list like that our meritocratic, un-corrupt and un-politicised civil service, but I'm not sure that under our recent governments it has been quite so easy to say that - not a problem created by civil servants themselves but by politicians.

What we are not at Oxford and Cambridge is exclusive. We cannot make good all the failures in British society, like social inequality and (in some parts of the country) inadequate state education. Nevertheless, we have to be a force for social inclusion: an academy that understands this obligation in a meritocracy. Our policy on access needs, as I've suggested, must continue to be imaginatively proactive so that we can show that Oxford is genuinely ability-rich and means-blind with a wide, diverse academic community. We do much more on this than we are given credit for. I have been particularly impressed by the efforts of several colleges in this area. We will need to do even more in the future.

So what should we hope, here at Oxford, that our students will have learned as part of a liberal education in every subject from physics to philosophy? It is surely reasonable to assume that if you educate very able young women and men, many of them will aspire to doing responsible jobs and taking on leadership roles in the national and international community.

As we know, this is what actually happens for many of our students. I do not think it is something of which we should be ashamed. It is not unusual for the cleverest young people in any country to rise to the top after having gone to the most demanding universities. And it is worth adding that slightly more than 1 in 10 of our graduates become teachers.

But what values should we trust they had acquired, not because civic leadership is a taught course but because it is a by-product of academic study at our University? We should not, of course, regard our main task to be producing generations of what one of our most distinguished scholars called ‘plausible bullshitters’.

What we should aspire to do is to educate young women and men with a sense of civic responsibility, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and an understanding of how to tell the difference between truth and reason on the one hand and nonsense and mendacity on the other. This may seem prosaically obvious but it is a central part of our contribution to the marriage of private and public good in the outcome of a university education.

We must also stand up for liberal values within the academy. If we allow ourselves to be colonised by a modish political correctness, this will be used against us by people who wish us ill. Universities should be bastions of freedom in any society: free from government interference in their teaching and research, while promoting the clash of ideas. Freedom of speech is fundamental to the identity of universities, enabling them to sustain a sense of common humanity and to uphold the tolerance and understanding that underpins any free society.

So when some students and teachers in both America and Europe argue that students should not be exposed to ideas with which they disagree, they are plain wrong. No ifs, no buts. ‘No platforming’, to use a graceless phrase, is wrong; so too is the call for ‘safe spaces’. A university should not be a ‘safe space’ intellectually. That is oxymoronic. It is true that liberty requires the existence of some limits (decided freely by democratic argument under the rule of law). And some ideas - incitement of racial hatred or political violence, gender hostility

and hostility to sexual preferences - are anathema in almost every free society.

But an autonomous university should wherever possible be trusted to exercise this degree of control itself. Intolerance of debate, of discussion and of particular branches of scholarship should never be tolerated. As Karl Popper taught us, the only thing of which we should be intolerant is intolerance itself.

It is ironic that in Hong Kong and elsewhere students are being pilloried and disciplined - even sent to prison - for arguing for the very freedoms against which some in the West campaign.

The answer to bad free speech is good free speech. The answer to bad historical research is better historical research. If we wish to apply a calculus of morality to events of the past, it should be based on fact and historical understanding, not on subsuming discussion in today’s opinions drawn from what is assumed to be contemporary morality. There was something beyond risible in the government pressing for legislation on free speech in higher education while one of its agencies (to which I am delighted to say we no longer subscribe) issued guidance on the higher education curriculum so manifestly absurd that it sounded as though its principal purpose was to provoke apoplexy in the ranks of tabloid columnists. One mathematician pointed out that the suggestion that we should de-colonise maths needed to confront the fact that the Mayan civilisation was doing sophisticated mathematics in the Americas a long time before Christopher Columbus arrived on the continent.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the great German 19th-century creative force in higher education, argued that one of the principles on which universities’ objectives should be based was unity of teaching and research. They reinforced each other. Not every university has the resources or capability to do very much original research. But I’m not in favour of any government trying to make hard and fast distinctions between those universities which are allowed to do research and those which cannot. Nor am I in favour of governments trying to determine the research that universities can usefully undertake. To take one example of the problems caused when

governments try to make decisions based on the alleged usefulness of research, when do we suppose that we began as a society to recognise that climate scientists belong to the useful category? That is, I suppose, a point on which this University’s Professor of Geosystem Science would have a view.

Whatever the climate predictions, I prefer blue skies research to having decisions on what research should be done being made by government committees.

In one of her farewell interviews, Louise Richardson pointed out that we had once been thought principally a university dedicated to the humanities, but are now recognised as a great university outstanding for studying and researching the sciences as well. That is both welcome and true. But it should not mean that we can now forget about the importance of the humanities, which cannot be easily judged by a crude utilitarian test. We have to support the humanities because we are human. Because the humanities help to answer the question of why we need universities at all. Because they provide us with a fuller understanding of our world and of one another. Because they enable us to think creatively and critically. Because, as Newman would have argued, they inform our moral sense. Because they teach us about life and beauty and love and death.

It was no secret that my predecessor as Chancellor used to worry about whether Oxford, not least given all the global competition, was capable of building on its past achievements and retaining its high reputation as an academy. It has nothing to do with me that almost 20 years on, I don’t believe that any informed observer would say that today. So the former Warden of Merton is taking over what is very much, to use a rather pedestrian phrase, a going concern, and I am confident that despite those headwinds to which I referred earlier Irene Tracey will build very successfully on what has been achieved in the last few years. I believe that the University shares my opinion that she will be as good as she crosses the High as she was in Merton Street. I wish her - we all wish her - a good and happy period of office. And we also wish that her family is able to enjoy, as well as to support, her success.

Lord Patten of Barnes  
10 January 2023

### Address by the Vice-Chancellor

Dear Chancellor, family, friends and colleagues,

I stand here today, as surprised as no doubt you are, that after a lengthy global search this University, *my University*, elected a local girl - in every sense of the phrase - to be your next Vice-Chancellor. To be entrusted with this role fills me with immeasurable pride.

I am privileged and honoured to serve my hometown university, which has nurtured me since my undergraduate days. To see so many dear friends here today, many of whom I've had the good fortune of working alongside, is deeply moving. My challenge is whether I can still call you dear friends after 7 years as your VC...

I must start by thanking the one individual without whose constancy, love and support, as well as his devotion as a father to our three fabulous children and all the while being a climate warrior, I would not be standing here today - my husband, Professor Myles Allen. And let me thank also our three children, Colette, John and Jim, for their love, patience and understanding over the years - just 7 more to go, kids...

I stand here ready to serve. I stand here willing and wanting to devote all my energy - which is vast, as those who know me will testify - and my experience to this great collegiate University. And I stand here confident in the knowledge that my predecessor, Professor Dame Louise Richardson, left me and all of us a fantastic foundation on which to build our collective ambitions. Let me here pay tribute to her herculean efforts in guiding us through the past 7 years with such skill, endurance and leadership. She remains a good friend to me and this University, and I will do my utmost to fulfil and further develop her legacy.

Let me also say thank you to those who have expended enormous efforts organising today, especially the Events team from Wellington Square, the ceremonial team, Merton College Choir and the Merton Girl Choristers, Ben Nicholas as musical director, Cheryl-Frances Hoad for composing a wonderful fanfare for this occasion that our trumpeters played so well - and, of course, to my dear colleagues at Merton College - the Fellows, students

and staff, for letting me leave my Wardenship early and who have been so supportive during my tenure. I'd also like to thank the Chancellor for his kind and wise words. I very much look forward to working with you, Chris, and I thank you and Lady Patten, Lavender, for your 20 years of devoted and skilled service to this University. Finally, I'd like to thank the selection committee for the enormous amount of work you did in the process of selecting Oxford's next Vice-Chancellor - I won't let you down.

I look forward to working with my outstanding team of Pro-Vice-Chancellors and our dedicated and excellent professional and technical services, alongside my dear academic colleagues, members of Council, and this great city of Oxford and county of Oxfordshire as *together* we take Oxford forward in the next phase of its evolution. The Hebbian principle in neuroscience describes beneficial neuronal behaviour in the brain: *if you fire together, you wire together*. My goal is to *fire and wire* this great University more closely with our city, this nation and the globe, working generously with the other great British universities with whom we share our higher education ecosystem.

Yes, I am indeed the 'ultimate insider' - there is no denying I've been here a while, escaping the ring-road just once for a couple of much-enjoyed postdoctoral years at Harvard. I have an intimate knowledge plus an emotional sense of how this place ticks, and of how to get things done in such a complex and devolved organisation.

Take it as a given that I care deeply about Oxford: I am a passionate believer in what we and all our universities stand for. I will be an advocate for Oxford like no other, because I know - in detail - what great things we offer and have yet to offer this city, this country and the world, whether that's via knowledge generation, through discovery research, or knowledge transfer, through our world-class teaching. I will be relentless in championing what we do and making sure the Oxford that I know, live and breathe is the one people hear about.

But as an insider, I also know where the bodies are buried. The risk for *us all* as insiders is complacency - not holding the mirror up often enough to challenge ourselves to think and act in

new ways, to get outside our 'bubble' and to think creatively about how, as stewards of this great institution, we will nurture and develop this place, so that it's fit not just for this generation but for generations to come. Oxford must and will weather the coming storms, and our goal must be to ensure that we remain a place for students and academics from around the world to come and study, research or teach, irrespective of what is happening nationally. To update the Chancellor's quote from *The Leopard* - indeed, to stay the same one must evolve, but as Darwin noted, it's more subtle than that: one evolves to be competitive for current circumstances. Evolving to remain the same might not cut it in today's climes, and so evolve we will so that we remain competitive, as that is the only way our core mission can remain the same: to recruit and retain the very best of the best - you - to deliver our outstanding teaching and research.

Despite what people think, academics are very good at embracing change - we hate being instructed to change, but in reality, we're all about change and evolution. Otherwise, Oxford would not have remained world-leading and competitive for over 800 years. This requires being entrepreneurial at heart - to a surprising degree, perhaps, for a place that is often wrongly perceived as shackled by tradition.

In my view, this natural entrepreneurial spirit has always come from the richness enabled by a devolved, collegiate structure. One of the reasons I have remained here as an academic is that I find Oxford a very free place to operate. If you have a great idea, you can take it forward and receive terrific support from across the collegiate University - drawing on all its depth, reach and convening power. Devolved and more local levels of leadership with genuine responsibility as well as ownership is core to what drives performance, what motivates individuals, and what makes for a rewarding job. This is what Oxford offers; it's a core strength and it's central to our success.

Having said that, I do think a bit of 'cultural exchange' between the various elements of this complex ecosystem is long overdue. I have had the privilege of working in and leading virtually every element of this ecosystem, but that is

rare. A better understanding is needed of the different components, their local issues and how we can better work together, synergistically. I am keen to explore whether secondments might help to facilitate this cultural exchange, allowing us to determine more common frameworks for working together - driving creativity, innovation, efficiencies and consequently better governance.

Now, let me now give you a sense of who I am, and what kind of Vice-Chancellor you can expect, as well as my vision for Oxford.

I am 'made in Oxford', having grown up in Kidlington, attending St Thomas More Primary School and Gosford Hill Comprehensive School, where I had inspirational teachers. My parents were proud Liverpudlians. They were evacuated young and relied on lifelong learning to catch up - they valued a good education above everything. They moved to Oxford shortly before I was born. Sadly, my mother passed nearly 17 years ago and my father nearly 10 years ago. They became proud Oxfordians and were thrilled that the University was part of the city, though they had no expectations that any of us would study here - let alone that the youngest of their six children was to become its Vice-Chancellor. They were extraordinary people, and we were blessed to have them as parents. I am a woman of Faith, and this is an important part of my being and fibre. It is not something I talk much about, and I wear my faith lightly, but it has forged me. And I'm a proud mother of three fabulous children and sibling to a fantastically supportive, very large family.

Until last week, I was an active scientist and academic leader as Warden of Merton College, so I am close to the detail of your day job. Throughout my career I have been strongly committed to service and good academic citizenship, and so I have combined my research and teaching with many leadership roles within science and academia at Oxford, and at national and international levels. Being a woman from a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (or STEM) background is important to me, and I would hope this fact is important to you too in your Vice-Chancellor. As well as just getting on with the job, I learnt later on in my career how

important it was that I was also a 'visible' woman in leadership roles.

Thanks to feedback from many women here today, I learnt it really does empower others to follow. So, whilst there are still too few schoolgirls and women going into and succeeding in science, I hope that in some small way my being a woman in STEM and leading one of the greatest universities in the world will inspire others - and perhaps some of the local schoolgirls who sang so beautifully here today.

As is the case for many a scientist, I have always been in awe of people trained in the humanities, appreciating in my personal life the rewards, joys and sense of purpose and understanding the humanities bring to our lives and world. Robert Wilson knew to reach out to the humanities in his famous line in defence of the Fermilab particle accelerator: 'it has to do with: Are we good painters, good sculptors, great poets? ... In that sense, this new knowledge has ... nothing to do directly with defending our country - or, I might add these days, our planet - except to make it worth defending.' Likewise, as a neuroscientist who has also served on many an advisory committee, I fully appreciate the richness of the challenge of the collision between facts and human behaviour that is the stuff of social sciences. I will work tirelessly to support the ambitions we have set ourselves in all four of our great divisions: Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences, Medical Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities.

For what is the point of a university like Oxford if we don't protect and support subject areas and disciplines that others might not be able to? What is the point of a university like Oxford if it doesn't curate that which is most precious: understanding ourselves, the world and the Universe from multiple perspectives, and stretching and pushing our students to their intellectual limits - the next generation of thought-leaders who will have to grapple with our global challenges? What is the point of a university like Oxford if we don't have the boldness, integrity and confidence to think differently, to think deeply, to speak truth to power, and to teach our students how to recognise truths and untruths in a world of increasing complexity, short attention spans and disinformation?

To be honest, being a VC was not a role I sought or envisioned for myself or my family. I was conscious that should I be appointed then my research and teaching life would largely cease, and I was loving my role as Warden at Merton College. However, I have trained, recruited and with fantastic colleagues helped to build a great community around pain research in Oxford. I know that this important work to help acute and chronic pain sufferers will go from strength to strength and I wish to acknowledge my former and current diverse and international research team - many members are here today - for their support, understanding and passion, as well as the intellectual joy we have shared over the past 25 years. I wish you every success; be assured I will be cheering you on from the sidelines. And it's not unhelpful as a Vice-Chancellor that I'm a real expert in how to inflict pain - but also how to relieve it! I aim to continue to provide the lecture series on pain for undergraduate medical students, as part of my goal to bring the Vice-Chancellorship closer to the day-to-day operation of this University. A hallmark of my tenure will be to advocate for the importance of teaching within universities.

The journey to this moment, standing here under Sir Christopher Wren's magnificent roof, has given me time to reflect on my University from a new and fresh perspective. What finally drew me to the role was the realisation that I would have an extraordinary platform upon which to champion the things I care most about, on a scale that is rare and privileged: our great British universities should be considered national treasures - akin to the NHS, our women's European cup-winning football team, and, yes, Dame Judi Dench. Why wouldn't I want the job, I asked myself.

Knowledge generation and knowledge transfer are at the core of any university's mission. I firmly believe they are also core to a successful society and a stabler world - never more so than in today's world of 'fake news', disinformation, distrust of experts, global political unrest with an unjust war in Ukraine, climate change, and all of this alongside other challenges, such as the governance of artificial intelligence, media deepfakes and defending free speech. The circuit-break of the recent pandemic

gives us an opportunity to rethink how to engage with and deliver our core mission, and so let me now detail four key areas that will be central to my tenure as your Vice-Chancellor: (1) education and teaching; (2) discovery and translational research; (3) local and global engagement; and (4) people – you, our human capital.

#### EDUCATION AND TEACHING

It is my belief that a good education is still the most powerful asset society has to produce transformative life changes, social mobility, greater awareness and understanding of others who are ‘not like us’, and a more peaceful world. Each year we unleash to the world extraordinary intellectual capital via our student body. Our goal is to teach students from any background so that they have knowledge in their chosen subject area, but just as importantly lifelong skills in how to learn, how to engage constructively with differing opinions, how to be unyielding in their search for truth, how to navigate a world of ‘fake news’ and disinformation, and how to remain curious. Their goal is to find their passion and hopefully shape a sustainable, more equal and truly inclusive society. As I often say to students: it’s not just what you learn, but how you learn and then what you do with what you learn. Put more into the world than you take out.

We need to talk more about our amazing and world-leading teaching; we need to make it as visible to the outside world as our world-leading research. We need to be more imaginative regarding how we reward our academic staff for their teaching, how we celebrate this aspect of the day job, and how we champion teaching from the very top of this organisation and throughout. The same could be said for our inspirational teachers in our schools. It’s a remarkable privilege to greet eager young minds each year and to be a small part of developing that raw potential. So whilst I want our younger academics to feel the buzz of teaching, and to know that in the round of one’s career it is the students you teach and imprint that may well be your greatest legacy, trust me: I also recognise that the job of being an internationally competitive teaching and research academic is really, really tough. We need to think creatively about ways to make the job tenable.

And what about our students? Well, I was interested to hear the Prime Minister’s announcement last week about teaching mathematics in schools until the age of 18. I would go further. In this country we deskill our schoolchildren too early with the great ‘divide’ at 16 between science and humanities; in an increasingly data-driven world, all our students need competence and above all confidence in dealing with data. But the same goes for scientists dropping humanities too early – while too many of our humanities students can be bewildered by a simple graph, too many of our scientists are bewildered by clever rhetoric, or simply unaware of the historical context of decisions. So, Mr Sunak: the next generation needs to understand maths, but it also needs to understand itself.

A university like Oxford, with our interdisciplinary collegiate structure, is well placed to offer ways to ‘maintain or up-skill’ – making our students yet more attractive to employers. As more students come to us from varied educational backgrounds, our uncompromising degree courses also require focused efforts to plug specific gaps. Work is underway, but I’m keen we do more. The Chancellor has spoken of the unevenness of the student experience – he is right, and the lumpiness in this devolved structure of not just our students’, but our academics’ experience, too, needs to be addressed. This will require more common frameworks to be agreed and set. I sense we are ready to meet that challenge.

The pandemic forced us to teach, learn, examine and do admissions in many new ways. Thanks to the amazing efforts of all of you and the extraordinary maturity, resilience and creativity of our students, we pulled it off. Let me here thank you and congratulate you for that effort. Some of these new ways of working brought surprising benefits, not least a truly global reach and sense of inclusivity for our seminars, talks, digital sources and content from our great libraries and museums. All this has opened our eyes to opportunities going forwards. Not only does this make us ‘pandemic-ready’, but it gives us new ways to disseminate knowledge to the world and to inculcate abilities to learn and interact intellectually, while staying true to the personalised, individual

approach to education that is our unique selling point. We need to be Dreaming and Streaming Spires.

Like the Chancellor, I too am a huge fan of lifelong learning. We need to change our culture so that learning is seen as a lifelong process and one to enjoy. Jobs for life are a thing of the past. People will need to relearn and reskill. In that regard, I firmly believe that universities need to play a more active and local role in teaching people how to learn, so I too look to the enormous opportunity our Department for Continuing Education has to offer in that regard. Let’s create a global learning community.

There is a French expression (brace yourselves, I dropped French at 16) *reculer pour mieux sauter* – or, as a long-jumper knows, you should step back to jump further. It’s time to step back and examine this core aspect of our purpose. As well as looking at ourselves, we need active and collaborative intellectual leadership between universities to inspire what is possible through a shared vision that places real value on knowledge generation and transfer to all. If we get this right, I believe the repercussions will be profound for the entire global higher education sector.

#### DISCOVERY AND TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

Discovery and translational research is the means by which we, as academics, experience the goosebump-inducing thrill of discovery – finding something that until that moment was unknown to the world. Revealing the mysteries of the globe itself and all that inhabits it: there is nothing quite like it. And through our ground-breaking discoveries we find our purpose, and create a healthier, more culturally enriched, sustainable, environmentally gentle and peaceful world.

The pandemic has taught society why discovery research matters; why well-trained experts matter; and hence, why world-leading research-intensive teaching universities matter. We must build on this awakening and set ourselves yet greater ambitions. As a sector, universities are fortunate in being freer than governments to tackle, together, the challenges but also the opportunities we face as a global society.

We still need to be pandemic-ready; we need innovative solutions to the energy

crisis; and we need to get serious about climate change - and that means solutions, not guilt. Regarding climate, I want Oxford to lead in addressing what is now the most pressing issue of our times. This is an interdisciplinary problem, and we are very well placed to take a bold and innovative lead.

I believe in a geographically concentric view of Oxford as a British, European and global institution. In an increasingly carbon-constrained world, we will benefit disproportionately from a flourishing research and academic sector in our geographic neighbourhood: Europe. While we clearly need to continue to attract the best and brightest from all over the world, there is a balance to be struck: can a global university abstract itself from geography entirely, as some multi-national corporations have done, or is it an integral part of a place-based community? Francis Fukuyama wrote about the 'end of history', and was proved wrong. Some have seen globalisation as the 'end of geography', and I believe they too will be proved wrong. We need to reimagine, quite literally, Oxford's place in the world.

We are fortunate in the UK to have a well-funded base for research. The government recognises that British universities are exceptionally good at research and that it is a key area to support if we're going to have an economically strong, healthy, culturally rich and stable nation. As a woman from STEM, I'm of course delighted that the UK is striving to be a scientific powerhouse and our universities will be key in delivering on that goal. UKRI do a great job championing the case for research, but we must also accept that, with current headwinds and an ambition to tackle some of the world's greatest challenges, we need to have new and additional sources of revenue to support our research.

I am particularly excited by the joint venture and partnership we have with Legal & General - and in particular the innovation district we will be creating. This will bring further opportunities to create spinouts, fuelling what I have witnessed, as a department and college head, as a real thirst for entrepreneurship in our students and faculty. I am optimistic about what this will deliver, not just for the region and local people, but in terms of inspiring and supporting further research and

creating opportunities for employment, through 'porous' boundaries between academia and industry, creating more flexible career structures for our graduates and academics. I see our innovation arm as one route by which we might grow our endowment that supports our efforts - large as it is compared to other UK institutions, it is woefully small when compared to our competitors in the USA. Sustaining our excellence and global position as one of the world's leading universities for generations to come will be challenging without growth and diversification of our funding streams. This doesn't mean unbridled growth in activities or people - there are many ways to grow: in quality of life, in influence and impact, and in connectivity.

Oxford has richly benefited from the extraordinary generosity of donors who have many a time stepped into the breach and saved academic posts from going under, students from not being able to benefit from studying here, or a building from collapsing, or who have had the wisdom to support a new area of research, a new discipline, or an interdisciplinary research centre - giving us the opportunity to pursue our mission unshackled by financial challenges. So let me publicly thank our donors - alumni and non-alumni alike - for their generosity and wisdom in investing in our collective enterprise. And I look forward to engaging with both donors and alumni to identify further opportunities to take this great university forward together in our mission.

#### LOCAL AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Local and global engagement is the route by which our presence is felt as a positive influence in the world - creating opportunities for all. I will focus today on local engagement, but that does not mean I will not be expanding and supporting our global presence.

The University has been integral to this unique city for over 800 years. Our spires and towers, libraries and laboratories, and museums and gardens shape the look and life of this town, but they could not exist without the wonderful city of Oxford and its people. I've been running the Town and Gown 10K for close to 30 years, albeit slower and slower each year; as a literal Town and Gownie, I know how interdependent we are.

The University's impact is far greater than our contribution to the skyline or tourist coach parties in St Giles'. We support more than 28,000 jobs and pre-pandemic contributed £16 billion per year to the UK economy. Our partnership with the local NHS enables us to lead research into some of the most challenging health problems of our time, such as heart disease, dementia and cancer, not to mention the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. The new Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery is using Oxfordshire itself as a case study landscape. University staff engage daily with city and county decisions; our students volunteer for local organisations and schools; and there are countless examples, from Low Carbon initiatives to the Playhouse, of the University, city and county working together.

However, I am also acutely conscious of the tensions. There is intense pressure on affordable housing in our city. That is why we do our best to house as high a proportion of our students as possible, more than any other large UK university. But we want to do more. We are working to establish subsidised staff housing and local services in our new Begbroke development, to further reduce strain on the city's housing stock and public services.

But the city and community must also recognise the challenges we face as a world-leading university embedded not in a London, Boston or San Francisco, but in a relatively small and beautiful city on the edge of the Cotswolds. Oxford's size cannot be a limiting factor in creating opportunities. Let us help each other and be ambitious and imaginative for what we can co-create here, alongside our local partner in Oxford Brookes University.

As Vice-Chancellor, I am absolutely committed to strengthening and deepening the relationships between the city, county and University. Let us think global and act local. Oxford firing and wiring together. I aim to create a new position so that we can take forward our collective ambitions around local and global engagement.

#### PEOPLE - OUR HUMAN CAPITAL

People, people, people - our human capital. An institution is only as good as its people. A cliché perhaps, but spot on - and our need now is to focus on the

lifeblood of any university, particularly if we are to remain the best university in the world and one of Britain's great assets. My husband and I have been fortunate in having supportive departments and department heads at crucial points in our careers and family life. I also had a fabulous sister, Clare Calnan, who was instrumental in our ability to cope with developing careers whilst not short-changing our children on the loving childcare that she provided. Myles and I would not be here today without her contributions. We know others are not so lucky, so we understand first-hand the challenges that face young academics particularly.

Recruiting and retaining the very best staff and adapting to create flexible environments in which they can realise their potential throughout their academic careers is not easy. But we must find ways to shift the needle in your quality of life so that you can continue to deliver your best performance. I have heard the strength of feeling on pay and working conditions, and it is a priority for me to make sure the University is doing everything it can to support staff during these difficult financial times and to be an attractive place to work in the future. As such, I shall immediately commission an independent analysis of all aspects of pay and conditions for all our staff - academic and non-academic - that will report directly to me and Council and on which we can act.

Juxtaposed to human capital is physical capital. In the short term we will develop, implement and successfully deliver several of our major projects, including the Stephen A. Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities. With its 500-person concert hall and spaces for members of our great city to enjoy, it will be a truly stunning and transformational development for the University and the city. The Life and Mind Building is flying out of the ground, and work is progressing on the Legal & General Joint Venture Innovation District at Begbroke and the Saïd Business School development of the Osney Power Station, amongst others. These are not trivial projects to deliver in current climes, but deliver we will, and well.

But alongside these exciting new projects, other aspects of our estate need considerable TLC. The Iffley Road Sports Centre is looking more tired than Roger Bannister did after he finished the 4-minute mile. We need considerable financial investment in our sport offerings. We have a real opportunity here to present Oxford as a place that values sports for students and staff - both at an amateur level, for fun and wellbeing, and at an elite level. This will be another area that I will take an active interest in supporting and championing.

In conclusion, one of my sporting heroines and a great champion of equality, diversity and inclusion, Billie Jean King, famously said that 'pressure is a privilege'. Oxford should feel the pressure, as we are privileged in our resources and talent. So let us play our part in shaping Britain, Europe and the world in this era of shifting globalisation; let us be generous with our incredible resources and the opportunity we provide for transformative life experiences; and let us become the very best we can be. Dear friends - thank you again for the opportunity to lead this University that we cherish and love. Now, let's get to work. Thank you.

**Professor Irene Tracey**  
10 January 2023