

UNIVERSITY OF  
OXFORD

# Gazette supplement



## Oration by the Demitting Proctors and Assessor, 2024

Congregation 13 March

The following Oration was delivered in Congregation on 13 March by Dr Kathryn Murphy, Fellow of Oriel, on demitting office as Senior Proctor, by Professor David Kirk, Fellow of Nuffield, on demitting office as Junior Proctor, and by Professor Joseph Conlon, Fellow of New College, on demitting office as Assessor:

**Senior Proctor:** With relief and gratitude to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor that I do not have to translate what follows into Latin on the hoof – or *ex tempore*, as they say – let me begin by offering some thanks. One of the great pleasures of these roles is having the opportunity to work with many wonderful colleagues across the University. We benefited on a daily basis from the advice, wisdom, expertise, and humour of the staff in the Proctors' Office, especially Pete Mandeville, Esther Villiers, and Tashana Taylor, and the team of dedicated caseworkers and officers who supported us. We were in very safe hands with the Deputy Marshal, Paul Halstead, and his team of Proctors' Officer and APOs, and were beautifully shepherded through our ceremonial duties by the Bedels and Verger. Our Pro-Proctors graciously deputised for us. It has also been a pleasure to meet so many dedicated people working in the University's administration – the Vice-Chancellor and her PVCs, other senior officers, and the staff of Wellington Square's various departments: too many to single out by name or position. We will miss working with you all.

I now pass on to the Assessor to begin our oration – or, I should say, our three independent *oratiunculae*:

**Assessor:** To teach, research, disseminate: and that is It: the everything, the whole shebang: the goal of all we do. Why are we here? Why listen to us? What are the Proctors, joined by the Assessor in 1960, for? All the finery, all our committees, all our many many committees: all bend to one single goal, the advancement of learning by teaching and research and its dissemination by every means.

This is an extraordinary university, extraordinary *because* it is extra-ordinary. This last year has been such a privilege: to see so much of it, and meet so many interesting people.

And so, I don't want to grumble: or yomer, or grutch, or murken – three old but revivable synonyms for grumbling learned from the OED, perhaps *the* iconic publication of Oxford University Press. Earlier this year, I attended the reception for Clarendon scholars at the town hall. These scholarships, supported by OUP, are the University's flagship graduate scholarship scheme. The young scholars, from every part of the world in every discipline of the University, dazzle with their brilliance: we support them as they transform the world and our understanding of it. From *this* ceremony, we exit through the Clarendon Arch, where the inscribed names recall the historical support of benefactors for this university's mission.

Money, of course, is *not* what this university exists for. Money is a means – an important means – but not the end: which is to lead in the world in teaching, research and dissemination by employing the best staff in the best

facilities. But as we value that, so we must recognise that pounds, shillings and pence are the coal that powers the academic engine: or, better, the perovskite photovoltaics powering the zero-emission self-driving vehicle.

Financial questions have cast a shadow on many of the committees that we have attended. One such shadow is the fee charged to home undergraduates, capped by government since 2012 at, essentially, flat cash. This long real-term decline is one sign that Britain – the society we are embedded in – does not love its universities in the way it once did. I do think we should reflect on why this is.

The case for the transformational nature of this university and its educational values, the case for long-form deep learning (of both human and artificial sorts), the case for scholarship cascading down the generations to be in lively conversation with those whose grandparents are yet unborn, the case that these are treasures of great value to both country and world: this case has to be made and won in every generation.

This case is easiest to make when the whole of society looks to us as a place filled with – at least academically – the best versions of themselves; it becomes harder to make if there is any vibe that universities are places where People Like Us bemoan Them Out There; public universities should never look down on the public.

The Assessor role leans towards welfare matters; it has been a pleasure to work with those dedicated to student flourishing in the broad sense: sporting and non-sporting clubs and societies, plus those with varied professional duties to students in need of assistance, financial or otherwise.

In this area, there is one aspect I must highlight. One truly sobering graph is that of the number of students registered with the Disability Advisory Service, a number almost doubling over the last five years and now reaching 28% of the student body. Many issues intersect here. One, staffing and financial resourcing for ever-increasing demand. Two, pedagogy: can corresponding levels of reasonable adjustments to teaching and assessment remain neutral to the education of the overall student body? Three, our educational mission: we prepare students for wider society, where levels of support will be far less than those in Oxford. Finally, a legal system more willing to enter areas of academic judgement previously regarded as non-justiciable. Oh, and did I mention that the regulated fee has been fixed for a decade?

No easy answers. Nonetheless, our degrees remain the most valuable things we offer and we must avoid any sense either that the purpose of exams and other assessments is to give the right results or that such exams ought to be redesigned until they do so.

What degree ceremonies end often started at undergraduate admissions. Our students are the future. Admissions is central to the University's mission, the first step by which old lags such as ourselves turn into younger, brighter lags. Given the numbers of applicants, our admissions processes are key to both our academic excellence – in terms of who we admit – and our broader reputation. Our processes must not just be fair and efficient, but must be seen to be so.

What happened last year is well known; I shall not comment here on ongoing arrangements for this year. What I will say is that, in my view, we the collegiate University should love tests, and their processes, more.

Looking at my own and related disciplines, objective public tests of measurable academic achievement – not social connections, received pronunciation or received opinion – are one of the great historical drivers of access. For those less securely established in society, but with fire in their belly and learning in their heart, they provide a route to the highest levels of professional life. In my own subject, I look at the demographically disproportionate contribution to 20th-century physics of Jewish immigrants to the United States. Here, within the last decade, something similar is stirring, especially in London. What does a school that gets 50, 60, 70 kids into Oxbridge each year, every year, look like? Perhaps you think: ivy-covered pavilions and ivy-covered walls. But today's answer may be a state academy, opened in the last 15 years, with a large majority of pupils 1st- or 2nd-generation ethnic minority Britons and burning with academic hunger.

Amateurs talk tactics; professionals talk logistics. Efficient delivery of our undergraduate admissions tests each year, every year is – in my view – the single most important access activity we do: as a collegiate University we should love them, and their processes, accordingly.

Excellence is diverse. The privilege of seeing so much of the University makes clear the almost uncountable number of forms that excellence takes. Many and multi-faceted are the ways in which the extraordinary excellence of this institution manifests itself: the full range of arts, science, culture, and scholarship. However, across the many committees, it is also obvious that the notion of diversity can sometimes be viewed rather narrowly. Our people are extraordinary, from so many backgrounds, and extraordinarily interesting to talk to. Everyone here is, in some ways, in a majority; in others, in a minority. Notions of diversity that reduce the multifarious, multidimensional diversity of the University to two axes of, broadly, ethnic and sexual matters are ones that impoverish the concept.

In this respect, I sometimes imagine a Gaudy, of the Ghosts of Oxford Past and Future: Robert Grosseteste;

Christopher Wren; Dorothy Hodgkin; HAL-GPT 900000... what would we think of them? What would they think of us? This university's greatness encompasses them all: yet the gap between them and us is far wider than any of our own differences.

People are what make this university great and so there is only point I can possibly end on: to thank the best of colleagues, Dave and Katie, for a wonderful year. And now, the Junior Proctor:

**Junior Proctor:** Serving Oxford as the Junior Proctor has been an honour. We have participated in many memorable traditions and occasions throughout the year, including May Day on Magdalen Tower and the annual Proctors' Bowls Match with Cambridge, although our Cambridge counterparts brought a minibus full of COVID germs to Oxford and it turned into a super-spreader event.

We spent the first six or so weeks of our tenure getting familiar with the job while bouncing around to various committees with the once-confusing but now all-too-familiar acronyms like PRAC, BESC, and SCSG. Many of these committees helped us to get a handle on the state of the University's buildings and the vast sums of money necessary to both maintain the existing estate and to position the University for growth. These matters became ever more tangible for the Senior Proctor and me during our first Saturday of degree ceremonies, when a steady morning rain produced a leak in the Sheldonian roof, shorting out the fire alarm system, rendering the building unsafe for the hundreds of people inside. We forced an evacuation back out into the rain, and worked out a contingency plan on the fly. We held the latter two degree ceremonies of the day in the steamy Convocation House.

The Senior Proctor and I got to witness the institution's resilience again over the summer, in the context of the University's work to alleviate the fallout from the Marking and Assessment Boycott. We worked closely with many dedicated University colleagues to ensure that the vast majority of our students progressed and graduated on time.

People have asked me what committee I enjoyed the most this year. Perhaps the most fulfilling was the Staff Financial Support Fund committee, our fund to support staff who are experiencing a financial hardship. I wish more of our senior colleagues could have a turn on the committee, and gain even more perspective on the day-to-day challenges of our staff. The foregone conclusion on some committees to add a few extra million GBP to the contingency budget of yet another construction project when costs overrun can be seen in a different light when you read that some of our staff and their children faced the winter with non-functioning boilers. So many of our staff are barely getting by, and are just a

leaky roof or a broken boiler away from financial ruin. I hope the Pay and Conditions Review will bring some relief.

As to what I learned the most this year; it had to be about hard choices and trade-offs. We aspire for excellence, but often discuss the 'minimum viable product'. We pursue equality, which is progress, but why not be bolder and pursue equity? One answer is a lack of capacity and resources. It is clear to many of us that we need to both identify new sources of revenue and do things more efficiently and effectively than we are doing right now.

Let me turn to an even more serious subject, that being sexual violence. While 'trashing' still seems to generate the most interest in our community when discussing student conduct, I urge you not to disregard the problem of sexual violence at Oxford just because it is not as visible as confetti in the street.

I want to focus on a word that has been too uncommon from the discussions of sexual violence taking place over our Proctorial term, and that word is *prevention*.

As some colleagues will know, the University is considering changes to Statute XI, largely following higher education sector norms already in place in other institutions. Past practice has usually been to leave it to the police to investigate such matters, given their expertise, but that can be a naïve approach given the myriad well-known reasons why individuals may be reluctant to report incidents of sexual violence to the police. When Statute XI changes are in place, the Proctors' Office will be given more authority to investigate complaints about sexual misconduct by students. This is a welcome change, especially in light of credible evidence published this year on the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment as part of the OURSPACE research project through the Department of Social Policy and Intervention. By the way, some colleagues may be dismissive of this evidence because of a low survey response rate, but even if the true proportions are a small fraction of what is reported in the survey, Oxford still has a problem that should not be ignored. But let me point out that this is not Oxford exceptionalism; sexual assault and harassment are a problem sector-wide.

Returning to the importance of prevention, let me be clear that in advocating for a greater focus on prevention, I am not suggesting that we should ignore investigations. Indeed, the Proctors definitely should investigate cases of sexual misconduct reported to them, and we took the decision this year to investigate several cases rather than instructing victims to go to the police instead. Nevertheless, we concluded just three cases this year, a surprisingly small number to me in light of the survey evidence just mentioned and other indicators

about the prevalence of the problem. So let me ask you rhetorically: what does it say about the legitimacy of the institution when so few incidents of sexual harassment and misconduct with students get reported to the Proctors? I can tell you from my many years of research on the legitimacy of government institutions that it signals a problem.

We have heard concerns this year that there are perceived jurisdictional gaps in the ways the University and colleges handle non-academic misconduct broadly defined. Some people have expressed a concern that matters are not investigated or taken seriously enough because they fall between the cracks for some reason, into a gray area where the ability of the Proctors to investigate does not quite apply. Even if the reality is different from this perception, the institution needs to understand that this perception is prevalent among at least some members of our community.

Whilst I welcome the Statute XI changes and the extra resources that will come with it, I do not think they are sufficient for addressing the problems of sexual harassment and misconduct. Hence, I encourage the institution to think about ways to enhance the perceived legitimacy of the ways it handles both student and staff conduct, and I encourage the institution to put even further thought into prevention. And for those colleagues who think that online consent training is sufficient to prevent the problem of sexual violence, particularly when that training is voluntary, I urge you to reassess your view. Consent training is important, but still not sufficient.

With that, let us turn back to the Senior Proctor.

**Senior Proctor:** Wondering how it has felt to be a student in the last year, and about to draft my portion of the oration, I consulted the University's webpages offering advice on the use of AI in learning. Under 'ideas for academic writing', it suggests that generative AI can 'help you get started', because it can be 'useful in overcoming writer's block by providing some inspiration or points to consider when you are about to start'. Duly armed, I asked a chat-bot what a proctor's demitting oration should say. It responded with flagrant plagiarism of the speech offered by the Senior Proctor in 2019. The opening lines, however, could never have passed from his pen: *'As I stand before you today, my heart swells with both pride and nostalgia. It has been my privilege to serve as Senior Proctor; a role steeped in tradition. Now, as I demit this office, I reflect on the journey we have undertaken together.'*

Well: I suppose negative examples are also inspiring. And it is true that I stand here with mixed feelings about demitting; that it has been an absolute privilege to hold this role; that it comes with many arcane duties; and I am, indeed, about to reflect on the year just passed. It's

not that the proposed introduction is *wrong* – but it's a banal simulacrum of thought: the idiosyncratic speeches delivered by my predecessors distilled to a mulch of predictable verbiage. It should give us pause that we are encouraging our students to use this for inspiration, even with caveats about academic integrity and the need to develop one's own skills. We should have higher expectations, and there should be no substitute for the difficult, necessary work of learning how to think, write, and speak for oneself.

Part of the struggle in beginning is the blizzard of pressing topics which we have encountered. Everything seems urgent. Should I address the challenge of fostering freedom of speech and academic freedom, while preserving culture which treats all members not just with minimal respect but with positive welcome? The pressures on student-facing services, including the Proctors' Office, managing increasing caseloads and complexity with insufficient resource? The progress that has been made on EDI under the new Chief Diversity Officer, and the need to keep striving for an institution in which no-one faces artificial barriers on the basis of their identity? The challenge posed by our aging estate, and the eye-watering resources that go into maintaining it? Our problems in recognising and mitigating risks to our core mission? Spin-outs? Begbroke? Workload?

It is not just this oration which is too limited to do these justice. Following the pandemic and recent economic challenges, attention, energy, and capital are all in short supply. One of the new locutions which a year in administration has taught me is to use 'tension' as a verb, in a sense yet to make it into the OED: to set competing demands in balance, in order to decide where to put one's limited resources. This is the University's major current and coming challenge: tensioning the needs of our overworked, underpaid staff and the costs of safe, adequate buildings in which they can work; or our future financial commitments against the need to make up current shortfalls. It will, inevitably and tautologously, create tension. My plea is that our academic priorities are always at the forefront.

Take, for example, digital projects. Some, like the ongoing digitisation and cataloguing of collections in GLAM, are a tremendous boon to the global academic community. The aim of the University's Digital Transformation project, meanwhile, is to free time and relieve frustration, replacing recalcitrant online systems. But it is difficult to be entirely optimistic, remembering previous platforms which produced new obstructions, and innovations which impose unwanted changes in academic practice, like the new OED, which reduces the philological scholarship of the entry to nuggets of tabbed information, or online platforms for tests and exams, limited in comparison with the paper we are told we must leave behind. Adaptation is necessary, as is realism about costs; but technology

should follow academic need, and not vice versa. This is not – or not only – the Luddite lament of a humanities Canute, chucking her clogs into the digital machine, to mix some metaphors; it is a plea that the digital cart does not preposterously pull the academic horse.

Oxford is, as the Assessor said, an extraordinary institution. But ‘extraordinary’ is an equivocal word. We are lucky to have many gifted and experienced colleagues who come to us from other institutions and domains, including very impressive external members on committees, putting their expertise at our service. Much about Oxford baffles or frustrates those who come from elsewhere: the difficulty of enacting change; our delicate and intricate counterpoise of colleges, divisions, and administration; our independent academics and departments, difficult to corral to central imperatives. I have often heard a sentence started in exasperation: ‘If this were any other organisation’, followed by some common practice we don’t observe; occasionally, fulfilling some colleagues’ worst fears, ‘If this were a more autocratic organisation’, followed by measures which can’t be imposed, though someone thinks they should be. The Proctors and Assessor, sitting on every major committee, can testify more than anyone to sclerosis in our current governance: too much time on repetitive presentations; not enough on focused discussion and decision. But we should balance the humility to recognise where we need to improve and learn, with confidence in preserving those idiosyncratic qualities and practices which make Oxford such a rewarding institution in which to learn, teach, and research. Change in teaching and assessment practice is often advocated by reference to ‘sector norms’. But we should not aspire to be sector normal, just as we should not invite our students to be inspired by the banalities of AI prose. For worse and for better, this is not any other organisation: it is a university, and an extraordinary one. More active academics willing to serve on its central committees would help redress the balance.

I opened with tips on how to begin writing, published this academic year. I end with much older advice on how to start. The Roman poet Horace recommended that an epic should begin not at the origin of its story, but in *medias res*, plunging the reader or listener into the middle of things. The strange syncopation of the Proctorial term with academic and calendar years makes this the lot of Proctors and Assessors, dropped into the latter stages of the rhythm of the year’s work. The demitting team meanwhile leave *ex mediis rebus*, ejected mid-conversation. We saw the beginnings of several large projects whose implementation we will see only as working academics. Our admission ceremony last year was picketed by colleagues protesting pay erosion, precarity, and workload; the forthcoming Pay and Conditions Report promises some succour for those concerns, and we hope the optimism vested in it is realised. We now transfer the Proctors’ and

Assessor’s role of representing academics, and bringing the University’s mission to bear on decision-making, to Tom, Conall, and Ben, in full confidence that they will do it with aplomb. If they are half as lucky as I have been, in having colleagues as wise, witty, supportive, and inspiring as Dave and Joe – to whom I now offer my final heartfelt thanks – they are about to have a wonderful year.





