

Gazette Supplement



Oration by the demitting Proctors and Assessor, 2023

The following Oration was delivered in Congregation on 15 March by Professor Jane Mellor, Fellow of Queen's, on demitting office as Senior Proctor, by Dr Linda M Flores, Fellow of Pembroke, on behalf of Harris Manchester, on demitting office as Junior Proctor, and by Dr Richard Earl, Fellow of Worcester, on demitting office as Assessor.

Senior Proctor: *Insignissima Vice-Cancellaria, licetne anglice loqui?*

Vice-Chancellor: *Licet.*

Senior Proctor: Vice-Chancellor, Heads of House, members of Congregation and guests, let me start this oration by thanking those who have made this year so rewarding, productive and painless for the three of us. First, the brilliant team in the Proctors' Office headed by Esther and Nicki, with their exemplary reasoning and encyclopaedic knowledge that guide every decision. Next are the Proctors' Officers, the often unsung heroes who keep us safe, and the Bedels and the Verger, who make sure we are properly dressed and in the right place at the right time, and rescue us from our mistakes during degree ceremonies so seamlessly that no one notices. Thanks also go to the various teams who run the events we take part in, choreographing days like today, and finally our Pro-Proctors Tristan, Christopher, Rebekah and Rob. Thank you all.

We begin with the Assessor.

Assessor: I have lost count of the occasions I've been asked in the last year whether I am enjoying my time as Assessor. Another common question is: what does the Assessor do? Sixty-three Assessors on, it is still the matter of welfare that contrasts the role of Assessor with that of the Proctors.

So I would like to take a moment to thank the many people, including my predecessors Helen Swift and Bettina Lange, for their commitment to welfare. It has meant that the year 2022-3 has been a period when earlier actions have come to fruition and new structures have needed to bed down. In particular, I would like to wish Tim Soutphommasane, our new Chief Diversity Officer, future success and hope that the new Common Approach to Supporting Student Mental Health - led by Tim Hitchens - is just a first success in this direction. Some basic questions were addressed at that committee, from responsibility for our graduates' welfare through to the governance and organisation of joint committees between the colleges and University.

I wish then to reflect on what welfare might mean in this University. The very word 'welfare' can be polarising; some immediately associate it with a molly-coddling culture of less resilient students - others, especially if they worked in welfare during the pandemic, have examples to hand of more traumatic cases. Headline figures can often relate to more extreme cases and in any case data cannot capture instances that do not become welfare cases. So I would like to discuss, in a broad sense, the constructive welfare and governance that goes on in the University, though it can be hard to quantify and properly appreciate its impact, effect and efficiencies.

An important example of such constructive welfare is Opportunity Oxford. The programme is entering its fourth year, successfully spearheaded by Andrew Bell with the former Senior Proctor, Lucinda Rumsey, recently taking the reins. Last September, I was lucky enough to be in a Keble hall

filled with the new students, student ambassadors, administrative support staff and tutors. The scale of the programme, and its transformative impact on so many young lives, were incredibly apparent.

Such initiatives are typically seen as extra work for academics - which by some metrics is undeniable - but I've been left wondering, across a broad range of matters, whether the absence of such support is ultimately a false economy. Educationally, we seek to develop independent learners - if this is achieved, by the very definition of 'independent', such students flourish and need less support in later years. I believe more effort early on to induct, prepare and communicate expectations reaps subsequent rewards. Welfare, education and communication work to support better progress.

I have seen such occasions more generally in the University's governance this year, where a policy or initiative might progress far without enough consideration of who will ultimately be executing the work. Such behaviour can lead to wasted time, wasted opportunity and antagonism. Though the wider University is a colossal entity, there is very little that cannot be improved by better communication and more empathy. I have also seen all parts of the wider University pick up the slack associated with a problem, but over-reliance by others on such continued practice, without intervening to offer further support, brings resentment and entrenchment. Too often matters only get addressed when they have become crises.

The three of us have been lucky in 2022-3 that we are largely out of the shadow of COVID-19. It has been easier

to meet, work and communicate as a team and I would like to thank Jane and Linda for being supportive, tireless and easy colleagues to work with. The pandemic has also shown us new possibilities for how we might teach and learn, much of this down to digital technology. Though we are at the early stages of implementing the Digital Transformation Programme, I hope Oxford can fully embrace the potential there in all aspects of everyone's lives.

Finally, it is flattering to speak here at Congregation to a sizeable audience. I deliberately did not assume earlier that I faced an audience who knew what the Assessor does, and I similarly wonder what matters and actions the audience members, particularly those new to Oxford, associate with Congregation. The Proctors and Assessor take seriously the fact that our demission orations are for the attention of Congregation and we have even had to fend off University committees pushing for a preview.

I am too young to remember Congregation not awarding Thatcher an honorary degree but was here for an discussion of John Hood's governance proposals and outside for the *alfresco* Congregation on pensions five years ago. So it has been a shame this year to see how easily Congregation's rules can sometimes be abused and many people's time wasted. The power and worth of Congregation was clear at those previous meetings; it would be good for all of us if meetings of Congregation were seen as addressing matters of unalloyed significance, bringing into much-needed focus the attention of the wider University.

I hand over now to the Junior Proctor.

Junior Proctor: Whilst researching the demitting orations of my predecessors, I have noted that academics exhibit a tendency to revert to type, drawing analogies from their own areas of specialisation in their speeches. Rather than resist this powerful centripetal force, I have decided instead to lean into it. When I reflect on my year in the role of Junior Proctor, I am reminded of the tripartite structure of a *Noh*, *kabuki* or *buraku* play. The Japanese terminology for this is *jo-ha-kyū*, which in this context can be translated as 'introduction, development and fast finale'. *Jo-ha-kyū* describes the movement and modulation through the performance of a play.

Part one: *jo*. My induction commenced with a series of introductions to the central University, many held virtually over Teams as we drew further away from peak pandemic times and closer to 'business as usual'. But what does 'business as usual' look like in a post-pandemic university context? Online open-book exams, Inspera, typed, invigilated exams in Exams Schools, new modes of assessment: the question of what to retain and what to discard remains a potent one. It is a process we should approach with sufficient caution. When navigating the rocky terrain of the post-pandemic ecology, our decision-making must be informed by pedagogical considerations and underpinned by our core objectives of excellence in teaching, learning and research. When these important decisions are being made, we must ensure that the right voices, the voices of academics - those at the forefront of teaching and assessment - are not only in the room but also in sufficient number.

It is imperative that we do not allow a natural inclination to return to 'tradition' or to pre-pandemic norms to tip over into a reluctance, or even refusal, to adapt, to innovate and to evolve. Evolve we must. The landscape of education continues to shift beneath our very feet, ushering in new technologies, and with them, the concomitant challenges involved in teaching, research, learning and assessment in this new environment. To keep pace with this, the writing, regulation and upholding of policy demands adequate resourcing. We are fortunate to have capable colleagues in these roles, but their capacity is not limitless.

Part two: whilst *ha* is often functionally translated as 'development', visually and in terms of its everyday usage, the Chinese character itself suggests a break or fissure. This represents a deviation from the norm presented in the *jo* section. It was during this period that I began to develop a fuller picture of the University, its governance structures, its operations and its core values. With the opportunity to attend over 80 University committees, there are many issues that have come to our attention. I turn my focus to the values of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), which I have observed as increasingly relevant to our institutional identity, if not always in their fullness in our daily reality, then certainly in our aspirations.

Considerations relating to EDI featured on the agendas of most University committees. The institutions under the umbrella of 'GLAM', Oxford's Gardens, Libraries and Museums, are exemplary in this regard, realising these values through the fostering and sharing of best practice, effective communications and a communal vision centred on these guiding principles. Across GLAM, colleagues are actively pursuing an ambitious EDI agenda through meaningful engagement with the University and beyond. I offer up an example.

'These things matter': this was the title of a recent exhibition of the Bodleian Library held at the Weston Gallery. It was subtitled 'Empire, exploitation and everyday racism'. Powerful and impactful, it examined the role certain historical publications played in the construction of narratives of discrimination and oppression. The exhibition engaged with contemporary artists as well as local and online communities, establishing a basis for a dialogue with the works and privileging creative responses to them. GLAM is at the vanguard of public engagement in EDI, tackling difficult and sensitive topics such as colonialism, race, gender, sexuality, disability and identity. These things matter. History matters. Historicity also matters. We cannot erase our history, but we can rethink it, reconsider it and engage with it in new and meaningful ways. GLAM is showing us how.

These things matter. Equality matters. Diversity matters. Inclusion matters. As a woman, as a Pacific Islander from Guam - a space which has, within living memory, experienced the violence of colonisation and wartime occupation - as a scholar of women's literature and gender theory, and as a multi-racial ethnic minority who usually ticks the box marked 'Other', the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are never far from my mind.

As James Baldwin wrote: 'Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced'. As with history and the arts, embedding the principles of EDI requires us to confront some awkward truths about representation and inequality within the University. We are making progress: Oxford was recently awarded an institutional Athena Swan Silver Award in recognition of progress made in reducing the gender gap across

the University. But there is still much work to be done.

To this end, we should be prepared to engage in uncomfortable conversations about the gap between where we are and where we would like to be. These conversations must occur not only at the level of the central University, but also locally, in our faculties and in our divisions, with relevant data for scrutiny. Moreover, it is critical that we consider not only diversity measured by conventional metrics, but also diversity of thought. When we create structures – be they committees or faculties – in our own image, we deprive ourselves of alternative perspectives.

These things matter. And they matter to the University as well; as a testament to this, we recently welcomed our new Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). With leadership and investment in the University's plans for EDI, we can now steer a path forward with strategic vision. Continued funding for this work is critical, as is our collective support. Colleagues will have many questions for our CDO as we move from calibration to consultation to implementation with the University's Race Equality Strategy. I hope that foremost amongst these will be: 'What can we do to help?'

Part three: *kyū*, the 'fast finale'. The Chinese character for *kyū* suggests urgency, rapidity and even anxiety. Hilary term has certainly been a rapid race to the finish line, with no small measure of anxiety regarding, amongst other things, the present oration. In times like these, one can begin to feel some degree of sympathy for the student tempted to employ the services of ChatGPT.

A crucial aspect of our roles as Proctors is as scrutineers of the University, its governance and its operations; this frequently entails greater emphasis on issues than on opportunities. Now, I would like to speak of opportunities. This year the University broke ground on the site for the Stephen A. Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities, a space with the potential to realise the Vice-Chancellor's ambition to establish closer relations with the community. It will provide a hub for the Humanities and the Humanities Cultural Programme, a home for the new Institute for Ethics in Artificial Intelligence, and facilities for teaching and learning, as well as world-

class performance and exhibition spaces. The Schwarzman Centre offers an opportunity to present to the world a new face for the University: not outreach as such, but Oxford redefined – Oxford without borders. This is cultural change.

Back to the fast finale: the closing scenes of a classical Japanese play often consist of a send-off reflective of the overall narrative. In some plays, transgressors are punished, the social order restored and the audience reminded of the dangers of disrupting norms. Our roles as Proctors and the Assessor have, I hope, been less as interlopers and more as interlocutors, as intermediaries speaking across committees, divisions and the collegiate University – enabling communication and discourse. Together we have brought 93 years of Oxford experience across three divisions to our roles. I give thanks to the Senior Proctor and the Assessor for their diligence, wise counsel and fellowship; I could not have asked for better colleagues.

I now hand over to the Senior Proctor.

Senior Proctor: As Proctors, we have worked with some amazingly talented and dedicated individuals, and engaged with activities ranging from ceremonies to casework to committees. The ceremonies showcase Oxford at its very – sometimes quirky – best, allowing us to celebrate the success of our international community of students with their friends and families, and mark events in a timeless Oxford way. Casework gives insights into the workings and motivations of the young minds in Oxford, and reminds us of the gap between our offering, in the way we teach and assess, and perhaps where we should be if we are to equip our graduates with the tools to succeed in the modern workplace. Serving on Council and its committees, we get to see the University through the eyes of both the centre and the different constituencies of the University and, at first hand, the work of the talented and dedicated individuals who serve on these committees, complemented by the wisdom and expertise of our external members: individuals working together for the collective good. However, this is tempered with frustration with the apparent lack of understanding shown by some committees about the processes and people they provide

services or policy for, which may reflect on their membership. This leads to the widening gap between the central University and the colleges, divisions and departments who fulfil the University's mission, helping us to maintain our attractiveness as an excellent place to study, teach and research.

In many ways this year has had fewer challenges than previous years: COVID-19 is still with us but we have our fantastic new vaccines, we have learnt new ways of teaching, working together and even managing complex research programmes, and we can live with it. We have all had to dig into our reserves of resilience and compassion to get through it, but it has taken its toll on our students, academics and support staff throughout the collegiate University. For many, our new Vice-Chancellor's acknowledgment of this is the balm that was sorely needed; thank you, Irene. Language and communication are so important in this area: we are not machines with 'levers that can be pulled' to teach and support more students, churn out more internationally competitive research, do more public engagement, be entrepreneurial, and innovate new courses and ways of teaching. We all want Oxford to remain the place of excellence, academic freedom and light-touch, devolved governance that drew many of us here in the first place, but if we carry on as we have over the past few years, this will be lost and we will become also-rans on the international stage. We can see this beginning to happen with the Research Excellence Framework – many think it is just a bureaucratic exercise and we are somehow better than this, but the reality is that for many parts of the University, we are 'not as good as we think we are'. We need to ask why and find solutions without developing a blame culture, demonising particular parts of the University or thinking it can be solved by imposing yet more processes on us – or on those who support us in this effort – to ensure compliance. Moving forward, we need to allow staff at all levels to thrive: an institution is only as good as its people; in fact, it is those whose roles are often overlooked, under-resourced and poorly remunerated who underpin our success.

Research is a creative process, and this also contributes to excellent teaching.

It needs mental time and space that many of my colleagues feel is being robbed of them by extraneous ‘noise’, interfering with their capacity for creative thought. As a biochemist, I have to remove noise computationally from my experimental data in order to ‘see’ clearly what is going on – to enable me to interpret the data. Much of the ‘noise’ we experience in the University is semantic and cultural, making it difficult for us to communicate effectively. Individuals have diverse world views and perspectives, and great care needs to be taken in conveying ideas and information to them. If the content, language and perceived attitudes of the communicator and their communications do not match those of the target audience, then confusion, errors, exclusion and hurt feelings can result. We see this in our staff disengaging from issues on the one hand and then, on the other hand, in the toxic debates and tensions on pay, pensions and working conditions; these are an expression of the frustrations experienced by those who just want to do their very best at their jobs, in their research and teaching, but feel constantly shackled by demands placed upon them. We have the very best of minds in Oxford – our intellectual capital – yet many feel misled and underappreciated, working in an environment where the operational infrastructure appears to lack transparency and accountability. A new focus and dialogue is needed, with more understanding by everyone, and this can start with clear and direct communication, using inclusive and objective language. As a scientist, I am obliged to communicate complex ideas to the lay public; in fact it is a requirement of my grants. As a University we need to work together to remove the noise, to achieve the clarity in our communications to see the path ahead and – importantly – help everyone understand how this will be funded. We have huge challenges ahead and budgets to set that will require the pain to be shared; there needs to be honest communication to ensure that everyone understands this, and also that those who shout loudest don’t hog all the resource.

Clarity is required in other areas. The big-ticket items present a real challenge and this is where attention to detail could save us a great deal of money. We hear too often the term ‘lessons learnt’: but are they? The new Life and Mind

Building is the phoenix rising from the ashes of the brutalist Tinbergen Building and the nightmare of asbestos and concrete cancer that continues to plague our run-down, ageing estate and will cost a fortune to resolve. How has it come to this sorry state? Perhaps we as an institution failed to ‘see’ what was blatantly obvious – that these buildings are simply not fit for purpose – and do something about it in a timely manner. Or perhaps those tasked with looking after our estate took their eye off the ball, choosing to focus on the shiny and new at the expense of less glamorous activities.

We all recognise the need to become more efficient, leaner and better at what we do. Disappointingly, over the past year we have encountered individuals who actively block change and hold the University back. On the other hand, we have seen some really good practice, and come across individuals who have engaged proactively to change systems and processes to make them fit for purpose and, importantly, make our jobs easier, often without recognition. We see vast amounts of resource being spent by the centre to define, yet again, where the inefficiencies and problems lie. But it is not clear if this resource is yielding results or represents value for money. There is a real lack of transparency and accountability here. Maybe the evidence suggests there are simpler and less costly solutions. Too often we hear that IT systems and programs are hard-wired and thus too difficult to change, or that one system is unable to talk to a second, meaning that data has to be inputted manually. If we got these basics right, we would all be more efficient. Do we need to spend millions to discover this? Services such as IT, HR and Finance are reproduced many times over the University, in the centre, colleges, departments and divisional offices. If the University is to move away from its siloed departmental provision, to services provided by the centre, then it has to ensure that it puts in place services that can be trusted to deliver. The scepticism of many outside the centre regarding such change is based on past experience of provision from the centre simply not delivering.

To end on a positive note, Oxford University, despite the problems it faces, is an amazing place to teach and research; culturally rich and diverse, where the sparks of creativity still fly.

This past year has been a real privilege, especially working with Linda and Rich, but now we hand over to Katie, David and Joe and hope that their year will be as rewarding and enriching as ours has been.

Proctorial Year 2022-3

Academic appeals

	2021-2				2022-3			
	Total	Upheld	Not upheld	Ongoing	Total	Upheld	Not upheld	Ongoing
Taught	95	23 (4)	72	0	124	27	96	1
Research	0	0	0	0	4	0	3	1

Student complaints

	2021-2				2022-3			
	Total	Upheld	Not upheld	Ongoing	Total	Upheld	Not upheld	Ongoing
Taught	11	2 (4)	6 (1)	3	14	6 (3)	6	2
Research	2	0	0	1	3	0	2	1
Other	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

Student academic misconduct

	2021-2					2022-3				
	Total	Upheld	Not upheld	SDP referral	Ongoing	Total	Upheld	Not upheld	SDP referral	Ongoing
Plagiarism	46	33 (11)	11 (3)	0	2	56	23 (2)	14	0	19
Open Book	30	12	18	0	0	25	17	7	0	1
Other	1	0	0	0	1	3	2	1 (1)	0	0

Please note: (i) upheld cases include those that were upheld in part only; (ii) data in brackets are legacy cases carried over from the previous proctorial year.

Student non-academic misconduct

BREACH OF STATUTE XI: UNIVERSITY CODE OF DISCIPLINE

	Total	
	2021-2	2022-3
Disruption of University activities	0	1
Engaging in any dishonest behaviour in relation to the University	1	0
Breach of IT regulations	1	0
Harassment (non-sexual)	4	11
Sexual misconduct/harassment	5	5