

Gazette Supplement



Oration by the Demitting Proctors and Assessor 2021

The following Oration was delivered in Congregation on 17 March by **Professor Simon Horobin**, BA PhD Sheff, MA Oxf, Fellow of Magdalen, on demitting office as Senior Proctor, by **Professor Freya Johnston**, BA PhD Camb, MA Oxf, Fellow of St Anne's, on demitting office as Junior Proctor, and by **Dr Helen Swift**, MA MSt DPhil Oxf, Fellow of St Hilda's, on demitting office as Assessor.

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

Vice-Chancellor: *Licet.*

Senior Proctor: Ahead of last year's admission ceremony, at a meeting of Senior Proctors past and present, I was offered the following piece of advice: 'Try to identify the major issue for your year in office as soon as possible.' That turned out to be somewhat easier than anticipated. We took up our roles on 18 March, had a day's induction in the Proctors' office in Wellington Square, and have not been back since. All our meetings have been held online; we have met huge numbers of people but none of them in person. Apart from at the ceremony for the Vice-Chancellor's Oration in October, our subfusc remains unworn and our ceremonial Latin untested.

Our experience of the abrupt transition to remote working has, of course, been shared by the entire University. As Proctors and Assessor we have had the opportunity to see how effectively staff have managed this change. For periods of this year, we and many of our colleagues have juggled homeworking with homeschooling. Meetings in which children make cameo appearances, or ones in which Peppa Pig can be heard in the background, have become the norm. While there remain technical challenges with online meetings, as well as human ones - 'You're muted' and 'Is that an old hand?' are undoubtedly the phrases of our proctorial year - the shift has gone

extremely smoothly. But while many have embraced remote working, it is worth pausing to consider what gets lost in the online world. The informal interactions, the socialising, as well as the chance to debate issues in a freeform manner are very much more difficult via Microsoft Teams. This can pose particular challenges for colleagues in the early stages of their career, seeking to understand how the wider University operates, make contacts and establish collaborations. While many staff have appreciated not having to commute into Oxford, there is a danger that this is replaced with an 'always on' culture that means the additional time gets swallowed up by extra work. Such issues will be considered under the New Ways of Working consultation, initially aimed at professional services staff, but going on to consider academic staff, to which we encourage everyone to contribute.

The speed with which these radical changes have been implemented shows how quickly the University can make decisions when they are required, but it does also highlight the importance of robust scrutiny and governance procedures. There is also a need for a period of reflection and consultation, with staff and students having the opportunity to comment on their experiences. Numbers of responses to feedback exercises so far suggest that this process needs to be revisited once the pressures of the academic year are behind us. This year has seen the implementation of rapid, sweeping changes to learning, teaching, examination, assessment and admissions. While students and tutors look forward to returning to in-person teaching as soon as government legislation allows, it is clear that some of these innovations, such as the availability of recorded lectures, online exams and remote interviewing, have benefits for accessibility and inclusion beyond the

end of the pandemic. The pace of this academic year has left little opportunity for reflection and forward-planning; it is important that the University engages in strategic thinking about the future of online teaching and assessment, drawing on the expertise and experiences of all the relevant parties. The technological challenges are considerable; for instance, lack of reliable access to Wi-Fi in college and University buildings can disrupt access to online learning and the effectiveness of remote meetings at a fundamental level.

This year we have witnessed the incredible success of the Oxford vaccine and its roll-out in partnership with AstraZeneca; everyone associated with the University can take huge pride in this impressive achievement. But in many other areas of the University it is apparent that the burden of teaching and administration during the pandemic, combined with restrictions upon travel and fieldwork, access to laboratories and libraries, and resources being diverted from non-COVID clinical research, has meant that research has necessarily been heavily disrupted. It will be one of the challenges of the coming year to ensure that the University's research agenda does not get left behind, especially for early-career researchers who are dependent upon external funding, or those on fixed-term contracts.

Having sat on many of the crisis management committees that have been in place over the last 12 months, we can testify to the rigour and scrutiny to which decisions have been subjected. I would like to pay particular tribute to the team of people who have acted as secretaries to these groups, assembling papers at short notice and often having to turn these around overnight or at the weekend. But it is important that the emergency groups that have operated throughout the pandemic do not become

long-term alternatives to the University's statutory governance procedures. If the government's roadmap for a summer return to normal remains on track, the University will need to determine the process for decommissioning these groups and deciding which issues can be taken under the usual mechanisms rather than under the crisis-management framework. Some of the groups formed specifically for this purpose have continued to meet after their work has been completed; the Student Experience Group speaks to an ongoing sense that aspects of student life are not well served by the University's existing committees. The success of the Mental Health Taskforce shows what can be achieved by a small group formed for a specific, short-term goal, but leaves questions as to how student welfare will continue to be served given the considerable ongoing need. It is important that concerns like these do not get lost in the return to the business-as-usual governance structures.

Junior Proctor: While the anomalous nature of this proctorial year must be its most striking property, some things have remained tenaciously the same. One of our predecessors remarked in 2018, with apparent weariness, that audiences of demitting orations 'expect to hear ironising comment on governance processes... long meetings... committees', as well as some jokes about 'unpronounceable acronyms'. The location in which such bafflingly styled committees are convened may have shifted from the windowless rooms of Wellington Square to the differently stifling confines of Teams, but the linguistic conventions have persisted. These include the curious range of mixed metaphors cited in the Senior Proctor's oration of 2016, tending obscurely to combine stakeholders with any number of dashboards, roadmaps, drills, traffic lights, and pipelines.

The point of attending to such metaphoric phenomena - or phenomenal metaphors - is not only to poke fun at the solecisms and confusions of bureaucratic terminology. This year's demitting Senior and Junior Proctor, as well as the incoming Senior Proctor, are members of the Faculty of English Language and Literature. It is therefore our academic duty to attend to words and what they mean. Once you start to do that in the context of University committees, you quickly become entangled in a web of mystification. You discover that a strange language - notionally English, borrowed

chiefly from the legal and corporate realms - is foisted as a matter of course on to academic and student lives, and that the results can prove very odd indeed.

Much of this linguistic imposition is undertaken in the name of risk management. But it might itself be categorised as a risk to apply language from one sphere of activity to another one that neither fits inside nor is compatible with it. The risk registers and reports of risk management that circulate around the University committees throughout the year use language in such a way as to set off alarm bells, at least to anyone who cares about what words mean. What can it imply to describe certain forms of teaching as 'business-critical', for instance? Or to extend the University's anti-fraud policy - a set of measures designed to prevent illicit monetary gain - to allegations of student plagiarism? It has sometimes felt this year as if a long line of square pegs were being coerced into an equally long line of round holes.

One of the first things to happen, linguistically, in response to the pandemic was that people began to talk compulsively 'around' things. There must be very few committee meetings that we attended this year in which the phrase 'issues around' was not deployed by someone, and typically more than once. It is part of a problem-solving linguistic armoury. The perceived usefulness of the phrase appears to lie in the spatial implication of 'around' - its all-encompassing, three-dimensional quality. It suggests comprehensive inclusion, a sense that everything possible is being done about every conceivable facet of a problem. And yet, at the same time, it gestures less decisively towards the here and now than to longer-term plans and intentions that may never be acted upon.

The Proctors and Assessor may serve for only one year, but they are charged among other things with looking to the future. As the Senior Proctor has just pointed out, the past twelve months have been characterised by an extraordinarily rapid series of changes across the collegiate University - to the ways in which we interview and admit students, for instance, as well as in how we teach and conduct examinations. These changes have proved remarkably effective as immediate responses to a crisis, but it will take time to work out how well they serve our needs post-COVID.

If open-book examinations continue to be employed as forms of assessment, for example, students will need much fuller and clearer guidance on how to refer to published materials, as well as on how to make legitimate use of their own tutorial essays and preparatory notes. Faculty members have been required at very short notice to record their lectures and release them online, a development that has understandably been welcomed by students but which has not yet taken sufficient account of individual lecturers' present or future ownership of what they have written, or responsibility for quoting material that belongs to someone else. In the coming year, proper consultation needs to take place regarding the online publication and long-term availability of lectures in this format. Such consultation needs primarily to draw on the knowledge and expertise of those giving the lectures themselves.

Intellectual property is not the only feature of academic life to have been endangered this year. Serious threats continue to be posed to freedom of speech, that aspect of a university which (to quote our own policy) allows us 'to become better acquainted with the variety of beliefs, theories and opinions in the world', including 'views that some find unsettling, extreme or offensive'. Like our predecessors, we have been delighted to find the Vice-Chancellor both willing and able to defend freedom of speech as the lifeblood of our university - as indeed of liberal society in general - and to withstand several recent assaults on that freedom. It remains vital to ensure that no speakers invited to address an Oxford audience find themselves abused, censored, or silenced.

The Proctors and Assessor cannot themselves hope to implement or oversee most of the changes that they recommend. Looking back on our predecessors' reports to University committees and reading their demitting orations, it quickly becomes evident that the same concerns appear over and over again: in particular, expressions of the need for members of Congregation to be better represented on central committees, to stand for election, to lend their voices to the working groups that make decisions which will permanently affect the lives of academics and students. If more University lecturers and college tutors were sitting on more of these committees, the linguistic glitches and categorical mismatches I mentioned

earlier would stand a better chance of being corrected or even prevented. In any event, it can only be a good thing for the various constituencies of the University to spend more time working collaboratively with one another, exchanging views and explaining their various idioms and idiolects to one another.

One of the best models for such collaborative work and communication is the Proctors' Office itself - in which a team of dedicated individuals trains and supports three new, hapless academics every year as they try to get to grips with the peculiar machinery of this institution. We three are especially grateful to them for their extraordinary patience, generosity, commitment, and good humour. Thank you one and all.

Assessor: As my predecessor noted on his demission last year, 2020 marked sixty years of the role of the Assessor, or, more precisely, since the inception of its precursor, The Representative of the Women's Colleges after their formal recognition as full colleges of the University. The role's special interests were identified as student health, welfare and finance. There has arguably never been a year in which the Assessor's duties have been more pertinent to the University's mission. The vision of education embraced by the role considers the student as a whole person. Disruptions to normal student experience caused by COVID-19 have underscored the essential contribution of people, resources and structures which support student well-being, and have importantly highlighted the plurality of 'normality'. Student experience has never been conceived of monolithically, but this year has cast into yet sharper relief the importance of parsing it to account for all constituencies. It has also underlined the interconnectedness of academic and non-academic activity through which students thrive. In particular, a stronger strategic commitment to sport across the collegiate University would better recognise the myriad ways in which it contributes to well-being.

The language of 'well-being', 'welfare' and 'mental health' has, right-thinkingly, pervaded the University's pandemic response, and to productive effect in the case of the Student Mental Health Task Force, for example. But these words mean quite different things, are perceived very differently from different people's realities, and require carefully precise definition to be translated

effectively and properly inclusively into people's lived experience. This would be a timely moment for the University to interrogate its strategic vision for student welfare, to maximise anticipatory inclusivity, building on excellent initiatives such as the Inclusive Teaching Enhancements Project; reactive intervention by excellent but ever-increasingly over-stretched specialist services may thereby be better focused. For staff, the newly founded Well-Being Programme Board is a positive step, not only considering support provision, but also reviewing daily working practices - what creative shifts could be envisaged, allied with the flexibilities promised by New Ways of Working? 2020 was the year of 'agile' and 'nimble' response; this must never become at the expense of thoroughgoing review - 'new ways' of thinking may imagine fundamental change to 'business as usual'.

The multi-dimensional nature of student experience, together with particular inclusivity challenges that the University is addressing through the Race Equality Task Force and work towards Mental Health Charter accreditation, raises questions of governance and strategic direction. Is there sufficient space within the vast portfolio of a single PVC for Education, however superbly supported, to champion all dimensions? How might the comprehensive scope of the University Mental Health Charter across both student and staff populations be an opportunity for re-drawing the current organisational framework for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, which itself requires new dedicated representation in senior leadership as the present Advocate steps down? A fresh raft of new initiatives and undertakings, such as including EDI criteria in the University's internal audit, is welcome. However, more projects and more monitoring require urgent increased resource, especially for the work of the Equality and Diversity Unit. Without EDI fundamentally embedded within the fabric - intellectual, infrastructural and inter-personal - of everyone's day-to-day participation in the University, 'One Oxford' and the sense of collective 'we' on which it is rightly predicated, risks continuing to ring hollow for some of us.

One Oxford is at the heart of the University's current Strategic Plan, which has itself required careful review and sensible extension in response to COVID-19. Reaching now into 2024, and attending also to the implications of

Brexit, it may additionally need to adapt to implementation of the ambitious Environmental Sustainability Strategy. Etymologically, the Assessor's role is to 'sit alongside', in the sense of 'to give advice', 'to aid'. The sitting has never been truer, through endless days inspecting the University's operations via laptop screen. When the role of Assessor returned to being part-time in 2019, it was relieved of Proctors' Office casework and also formally lost its project work as a 'role of enquiry'; it retains this latter dimension, however, in the sense of its holder asking questions across all fora. Fundamental to the post is how it aids through challenge, serving the collective good on behalf of Congregation and having a voice at the table for effective advocacy. Echoing my predecessor's dissatisfaction with the part-time packaging, I feel additionally that there is an opportunity being missed: the exceptional very full-time gallop of the past twelve months has made me all the more aware of lost potential in how valuable the post could be for precious thinking time - the chance to sit at over one hundred committees yields such rich fruit for reflecting on good governance at macro and micro levels. The restoration of project work should be considered; the Assessor's unique vantage point could better be exploited.

We all three as Proctors and Assessor sit alongside the work of colleagues without whom our roles would be impossible at any time, but by whom we have been extraordinarily supported this year - above all, the Clerk to the Proctors and permanent staff of the Proctors' Office: Alison Sealey, Esther Villiers, Nicki Corani-Young, Paul Halstead, Tim Pearson, Sarah Ashley, Maria Bindasova, Jonathan Gordon, Theo Papaioannou, Caroline Barnes, Clare Brennan and Paul Franklin, as well as those temporarily brought into the Office to help manage workload. We must additionally mention the Assistant Proctors' Officers and Bedels with whom, in the absence of in-person ceremonies and events, we regrettably did not have opportunity to work. The University is an immense network of remarkable local communities, each viewing it from a different angle - this is at once a great structural challenge and an outstanding richness. I return to my college and sub-faculty missing those communities who welcomed me as Assessor, and with gratitude for this opportunity to have sat by a different view.

Proctorial Year 2020-21**Summary of academic appeals**

	2019-20	2020-21
Total taught-course appeals	102	70 (3 legacy)
Taught-course appeals upheld in full or in part	26 (1 ongoing)	12 (1 legacy and 4 ongoing)
Total research student appeals	7	3
Research student appeals upheld in full or in part	1 (1 ongoing)	1 (ongoing)

Summary of complaints

	2019-20	2020-21
Total taught-course complaints	18	14 (3 legacy)
Taught-course complaints upheld in full or in part	5 (3 ongoing)	2 (1 legacy and 4 ongoing)
Research student complaints	11	8 (2 legacy)
Research student complaints upheld in full or in part	5 (3 ongoing)	1 (1 legacy and 2 ongoing)
Other	0	1

Summary of disciplinary cases

	2019-20	2020-21
Engaging in offensive, violent or threatening behaviour	5	4
Engaging in action which is likely to cause injury or impair safety	1	0
Engaging in any dishonest behaviour in relation to the University	6	1
Possession of drugs	0	0
Breach of IT regulations	1	1
Non-sexual harassment	3	10
Sexual harassment	11	3

Referrals of alleged breaches of the Proctors' Disciplinary Regulations for Candidates in Examination

	2019-20	2020-21
Academic misconduct - plagiarism	63	46
Academic - other	0	20
Referred back to the examiners	10	29
Referred to the Student Disciplinary Panel	8	1
Ongoing	11	14
Non-sexual harassment	3	10
Sexual harassment	11	3