THURSDAY 27 MARCH 2025 • SUPPLEMENT (1) TO NO 5452 • VOL 155

Gazette supplement

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Oration by the Demitting Proctors and Assessor 2025

Congregation 19 March

An Englishman, an Irishman and an Anglo-Malaysian walked out of the Sheldonian Theatre and into a stark breeze-block-walled office a little over a year ago. Since then, between us we have attended over 1,000 hours of committees for which there have been over 80,000 pages of papers; we have decided around 350 substantive cases; with the help of our Pro-Proctors we have helped award degrees to an Empress, a Princess, a Baron, and thousands more; we have attended at 3 building occupations and 2 encampments; enjoyed many lunches and dinners; experienced three 8am Latin masses; and 'drawn', in inverted commas, one bowls match with the Cambridge Proctors whilst being dressed in what we wear now. We have learnt a lot about our University, about the good and bad sides of its people, and about ourselves; we have met a colourful cast of characters; made memories we will treasure; and had many, many laughs.

Sharing an office has been just another difference about the past year for us. I must thank my colleagues for their support and collegiality. I feel this is the moment at which I should report the outcome of my competition with the Junior Proctor about who forgets the fewest times to remove their mortar board for either God or the King. Unlike in our bowls match, this was actually a draw – we both forgot four times.

We thank Pete, Esther and the Proctors team in Wellington Square who have provided sage advice and turned around the backlog of academic cases. We owe a debt to the legend that is Paul Halstead, the Deputy Marshal, and his team whose skill and professionalism has guided us through occupations, protests and other dramas. The Bedels and Verger have kept us in line and been patient with two Proctors whose natural shabby-scientist chic consistently fell short of their expectations on smartness. We thank our Pro-Proctors who have stepped in to take some of the Latin off our hands. There have been countless people across the University who have helped us, or who have made themselves available to us when we wanted to know more about something, and we thank them as well. We also express our gratitude to our colleagues in colleges and departments who have covered for our absence. We thank those who have invited us to many events and dinners – although I note in passing that the 4 kilos I have gained from these did hamper me when I had to squeeze under, through and around the barricades the protesters had erected when they occupied the Rad Cam. And, most importantly, we thank our families who have supported us in this adventure.

Nick, Grant and Raphael – you have a wonderful year ahead of you. The costume aside, as last year's Assessor said, these are the best jobs in our University. Do right by your office, use the voice this gives you wisely, but most of all enjoy the year ahead of you. What you say, do and decide is your concern. But we have left for you in the office some items you may find useful: the emergency shoe polish, some barely alive pot plants, and, to be used in committees I will not specify here, the bullshit bingo cards.

We will now each give our individual thoughts on aspects of our year. And – following custom – we will start with the Assessor.

'Like all men in Babylon I have been a proconsul; like all, a slave; I have also known omnipotence, opprobrium, jail.' In the short story 'The Lottery in Babylon', the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges imagined a world in which an all-powerful organisation plotted the fate of human beings through the luck of the draw. At times, in the Proctors' Office, it is tempting to see the actions of The Company behind such twists and turns of fate.

It has been said of the post of Assessor that it is something of a non-job, the role in the University that few people know exist, and even fewer understand; not for nothing are its current part-time status, and the nature of its duties, being reviewed. The simplest explanation I have heard is that while the Proctors hand out fines (jail is no longer an option), the Assessor doles out (mostly quite small) cheques. To their discipline, my largesse. Thankfully, the Assessor no longer decides on parking permits, for many years the duty most likely to garner opprobrium.

Two ongoing debates dominated the start of the year. The first was pay and conditions, which filled, alongside protests and occupations, much of the business of Council in the period after we arrived in office. Some material improvement across the pay scales, and in addition to nationally agreed deals, was welcome. Years, decades even, of below-inflation pay rises in the sector have put us behind our national competitors, and failure to recruit and retain the best people to academic and other roles remains a very real risk. For recently arrived colleagues, perhaps with a family and dreaming of the property ladder, Oxford remains prohibitively expensive.

The second issue that caught our attention early in the spring of 2024 was the Digital Transformation Project. Anyone who has attempted to make a Teams call in the centre of town, particularly if sandwiched between buildings, will have noticed that our IT infrastructure is not up to scratch. DTP, as it's known to its friends, is an attempt not only to drag our digital and information systems somewhere into this millennium, but also to change the way we commission and run IT projects, moving towards a system of continuous improvement. We have argued on various committees that any initiative must show clearly how it serves our fundamental aims of teaching, research and dissemination. Everything we do must contribute to that mission, and we must get the basics right.

The University faces a huge risk in its building stock. There are important parts of the estate which are falling down, almost as we walk past. The latter is something close to my own heart, as a fellow of a college with a RAAC problem. Yet fixing our ageing buildings is not an attractive offer for potential donors. When a shiny new building goes up, are we properly costing upkeep? And does the upkeep that the estate receives meet the standards that we expect and need? There is, too, a huge job of work to reduce our carbon output across the estate. On various committees, the Proctors and I have endeavoured to keep such questions at the forefront of the collective mind. Fundamentally, the University is on sound financial footing; we have suffered shocks and survived them. We should not make short-term financial decisions that harm our long-term academic success.

Traditionally the Assessor's brief includes Student Welfare. There are two areas where I think the university can be proud of its efforts. Firstly, the work of Student Welfare and Support Services (dealing with such areas as disability, counselling and mental health, and sexual harassment): these services are hugely in demand, reflecting wider social issues in the country, not least that in economic, health and opportunity terms it grows harder each year to be a young adult in the UK.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the work of the Equality and Diversity Unit. Universities have been something of a political football or, to switch metaphors, the no-man's land in an exaggerated culture war. A result of this is legislation that simultaneously encourages and limits free speech and the right to protest, depending on the matter in hand. The EDU has endeavoured to explain the aims of inclusion and diversity in language that unifies rather than divides, and to embed the goals of anti-discrimination within a culture that promotes excellence and achievement from and for all, regardless of background.

The Assessor chairs various committees around student finances. With the team in Student Fees and Financing, we have worked to streamline processes and communicate more clearly with students. Financial assistance for students will need an ongoing commitment from the University and its colleges. We now have Palestine Crisis Scholarships in place for graduate students, an example of how the University and its colleges can help in times of great suffering.

On many occasions during this year – and perhaps mostly during some of the ceremonial duties that the Assessor joins the Proctors in performing, on May Morning, at Encaenia, or when playing bowls against our Cambridge counterparts – I have wondered which particular prize or forfeit has emerged from the Babylonian tombola. The luck of the draw now falls to our successors, and I wish Rafael in particular all the best in this role. With the support of colleagues in the Proctors' Office and the Proctors' Officers, and of the Proctors, Tom and Conall, this remains the best job in the University. As this is, by many measures (and all those that really matter), the best university in the world,

that would make the role of Assessor the best job in the world. Thank you – and with that, I hand over to the Junior Proctor, Conall.

We shall turn now, from Borges', or perhaps more aptly, Ben's Babylon to Conall's conundrums. As outlined in the University's own description of its governance: 'The Proctors have a responsibility generally to ensure that the Statutes, Regulations, customs and privileges of the University are observed.' The statutes are a weighty tome, but thanks to the wonders of digital transformation they are also available in cloud form. As the University we have but 17 statutes; where Council has 51 regulations, Congregation has but 3. The Proctors, being a model of restraint, have only 1. Of the customs and privileges we are to observe the details are less certain. We are furthermore tasked with '…scrutiny, principally of the academic, planning and financial affairs of the university'. This governance role has seen us serve on no fewer than 99 committees this year, in addition to various ad hoc working groups. For our 9 meetings of University Council we worked through 3,068 pages of documentation; for our 4 meetings of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee we ploughed through 1,754; and our 8 meetings of Education Committee, not always noted for brevity, required but 1,253.

Our governance is certainly voluminous, sometimes claimed to be democratic, but is it effective? We noted how often we saw the same paper cycle through multiple committees, easing the reading burden of the Proctors and Assessor, but perhaps not the best use of everyone's time. The papers came with a cover note where the purpose of the paper was highlighted – we were asked 'to consider approval'; 'to canvas opinion'; or 'to highlight an…issue…for noting'. We were surprised how often committees were used to disseminate or receive information rather than to make decisions. And we were occasionally dismayed to find the express wishes of a committee or committees being overturned elsewhere without a rationale or an explanation. If we ask colleagues to serve they deserve the courtesy of an explanation when their views are being set aside.

Unsurprisingly decision-making is slow. For some this is regarded a strength: we are not easily swayed by prevailing orthodoxies or political winds. They argue that Oxford is a supertanker that is not easily turned. However, 800 years in the water can leave a lot of barnacles stuck to the hull. Across the broader university sector there are storm clouds on the horizon, regulatory, financial and, for some, existential. Indeed, for some of our colleagues at other institutions these storms have already struck. Council has little time to think strategically save for the occasional away day and spends most of its time on day-to-day matters. We need to make time for strategic thinking, not just in Council but in its subcommittees, to navigate the difficult waters ahead. That's the Proctorial diagnosis – is there a Proctorial cure? I would argue that we need fewer committees, populated by the right people at the right level, and, most importantly, trusted and empowered to make decisions and then held accountable for those decisions. That sounds simple but in Oxford it is anything but! My natural optimism, or possibly naiveté, has clearly not been dulled by my year in Wellington Square.

Representation matters, and not just for the staff but also for the students. It has been a year of major change for the Student Union. After several years of being paralysed by internal political squabbles the SU has been going through a transformation process with a view to making it more representative of, and responsive to, the views of the larger student body. With fewer sabbatical officers the burden of carrying this off has fallen on a few and we have been lucky in the sabbatical officers who have stayed the course. The SU VPs, Lauren Schafer and Eleanor Miller, have been exceptional in their efforts to see this transformation through, and in bringing the views of students to the various committees on which they serve. We owe them our thanks, and hope that the new structure, which includes a voice for college JCRs and MCRs, provides a more democratic and representative student voice in the future.

The Statute that most exercised us, and others, throughout the year was Statute XI, which covers student conduct and discipline in both academic and non-academic contexts. We are pleased to report that academic casework is under control – cases are now being dealt with within-year and within expected timescales.

We are very pleased to note that, as of this morning, there are no outstanding academic appeals in the Proctors' Office!

Our proctorial predecessors have expressed concern that this situation does not hold true for non-academic casework, especially in light of research on the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment across the sector, and the lack of such cases in the Proctorial caseload. Proposed changes to Statute XI last year were meant to streamline and facilitate the investigation of cases of serious misconduct (for example sexual misconduct) without complaints having to be made to the police; but these changes became enmeshed in concerns around the freedom of speech, human rights right law, and the right to protest. A working group is currently revisiting Statute XI to ensure that any changes are consistent with all relevant law including the Human Rights Act 1998; the Education (no 2) Act 1986; the Equality Act 2010; as well as associated domestic and international case law. We welcome their work and hope that it provides a basis on which the University can agree a single procedure that aligns with that of the colleges and provides students reassurance that their cases will

be dealt with in a timely and professional manner. We owe them that much. The status quo, where the same behaviour in college and University settings can have very different consequences in the different settings, is clearly unsatisfactory.

The right to protest, which was writ large in concerns around the changes to Statute XI last summer, brings us on to the protests relating to the political and humanitarian situation in Gaza and Israel, which dominated much of Trinity term. It seems little understood in the wider University that the Proctors have a duty, under the University's code of practice of freedom of speech, to facilitate protests, and will actively work with organisers to ensure that protests can take place within the bounds of the law and University Statutes. Unfortunately, no-one took us up on this.

I do not propose to replay all the events of the last year, but I would like to pay especial tribute to the Gardens, Libraries and Museums staff at the University Museum of Natural History, the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Radcliffe Camera Library who were on the front line of 2 encampments and 1 building occupation, and carried out their duties with professionalism and courtesy in very difficult and stressful circumstances. Similarly, the staff at Wellington Square and the Examination Schools remained admirably calm and composed in the face of their respective building occupations. And to those who would justify some of the behaviour we witnessed last year, much of it by non-students, I would simply say this: the path to persuasion does not pass through broken plate glass windows, the demonisation of the Vice-Chancellor or the smearing of University officials with racist epithets online. Instead, it lies in the force of argument, not the argument of force. It lies in a free, open and robust dialogue, where all are treated with respect, courtesy and consideration, in the best traditions of this great institution.

Perhaps Borges' Babylon is indeed an apt metaphor for a year as Proctor. We have been heroes and villains, often at the same time. We have climbed towers on May Morning and climbed barricades in June. We have tried to be scrupulous in scrutiny and persistent in our Proctorial duties. We have been gadflies in governance and pernickety on policy. We have met princesses and poets, where royalty met rhyme. Only in Oxford are these things possible and it has indeed been a labour of love. The baton now passes to our successors, and I would like to wish them every success. I could not have hoped to have better companions this year than Tom the Senior Proctor, Ben the Assessor, and the wider team in the Proctors' Office: the Proctors' Officers and assistant officers, and the Bedels and Verger.

Let us now turn to the Senior Proctor and see what Tom's tombola has thrown up for him.

One of the events we were lucky enough to witness was the tour de force that was the ex-Chancellor's demission speech. Lord Patten spoke on many themes, some of which I would like to speak about today.

One theme Lord Patten spoke of was our colleges and how they nurture the next generation of scholars, innovators and leaders. We have seen many other instances this year of that personal attention our students get from their colleges that make our University so special. In small communities people can be individuals and thrive in their own unique ways. This is something we must protect. And it is also true that college administration can be, and for the poorer colleges has to be, lean – initiative-itis is not a disease colleges have caught. But this year we have also seen some things that are ridiculous. In no way is it sensible for an incident of, say, harassment to be judged against different criteria depending on whether it is between students at the same college or at different colleges. Nor does it make sense for the benefits students and faculty receive from their college to vary as it does. But most critically we live in a world where the higher education sector faces more and more regulation and administrative overhead – that regulation is stifling even those institutions not blessed with the college system. For us with our independent colleges, the administrative burden and the need to get independent institutions to agree on policy is increasingly unmanageable. But we do need to manage this – and we do have to make it work. We can, and must, preserve what makes colleges special – but somehow we must find ways of streamlining the decision-making, compromising to find consensus, and working better together.

Lord Patten also spoke about his inspirational tutor. And in our year we have seen other instances of inspirational tutors in our colleges who are the people who put the dreams into our dreaming spires. Asking our academics to be world-class researchers and innovators can clash with those same academics delivering first-year tutorials and dispensing pastoral care. The proposal in the Academic Career Framework is to create separate tracks for those who teach and those who research. We have been heard in meetings that we should do this because 'this is what other universities do.' But we should not aspire to be like other universities. And I do not believe separating off those who fall behind on research into a teaching track is the answer. We have as strong a set of undergraduates as any institution in the world and they need to be stretched by interacting with the finest, research-active minds. More importantly, I feel there is a misunderstanding about what the most important thing is that our students take from their tutorials and lectures. Our students are clever enough, and nowadays have lots of resources, to figure out how to solve standard problems themselves. But we want students who will go beyond what is in their textbooks and reading lists. Our job is to inspire them, to be the

next generation of innovators and leaders in their field – the only way we can do this is by small-group teaching driven by those who themselves are at the cutting edge of research, pushing the academic consensus, building spin-outs, advising on policy, etc. And maintaining this is also future proofing – learning standard skills is something that is getting easier and easier and that was before AI turned its hand to giving tutorials. You can learn factual knowledge anywhere – you don't even need to be sitting in a university. But inspiring a new generation to push the frontiers of knowledge and then use this to make our world better is something that is a harder thing altogether – we in Oxford are great at this because our world-leading academics do teach – we need to keep playing to this strength. We must not let the perceived workload problem lead us to throw away what we do best. So I am afraid I do want to keep asking our academics to be both educators and researchers, both innovators and mentors. But we can only ask this if we support people properly – if we give them the right tools to succeed. This means we need to get right the computer systems, the buildings, the mentorship and the administration on which this all rests. And yes – we need to compensate those who succeed in doing all of this an awful lot better.

My colleagues and I have reviewed what we have seen this year and not done so uncritically. But as we come to the end of our year of service and depart to the peace of our labs and our libraries, we would like to stress that this place of learning, of novel ideas, and innovations that change the world, is one of which we are very proud to be part. Oxford – with all thy faults – we love thee still. Thank you – it's a cliché – but it has been a privilege to serve.

Academic year 2023–24

Academic misconduct

	2022–23			2023–24		
	Total resolved	**Upheld**	**Not upheld**	**Total resolved**	**Upheld**	**Not upheld**
Plagiarism	46	37	9	74	65	9
Collusion	-	-	-	26	7	19
Cheating	-	-	-	8	4	4

*collusion and cheating not categorised in 2022–23

Non-academic misconduct

	Cases received 2022–23	**Cases received 2023–24**
Harassment [2(1)(h)]	10	25
Sexual misconduct [2(1)(m)]	6	8
Occupation [2(1)(e)]	-	19
Other breach of Statute XI	1	4
Criminal Proceedings [Part E, 46]	7	7
NCA/NCO requests	5	9
Total:	29	72

Please note that these figures now relate to academic years, where previous supplements' figures were based on Proctorial years.