COUNCIL is due to discuss its next three-yearly self-review at its away-day in September and it has already announced that the review will take active steps to engage with members of Congregation by way of preparation, in fulfilment of its stated wish to improve the interactions between Council and Congregation (Oxford Magazine, No 397, 5th Week, TT 2018).

The previous self-review, facilitated by Alice Perkins and the result of wide consultations with individuals and University bodies, noted, regarding the relationship between Council and Congregation, that:

"Many people [raised the issue of relations with Congregation]...saying that the Council cannot effect change without taking Congregation with it. Fear of Congregation’s reaction to change has acted as a brake. Many people thought this could and should be mitigated by much more open dialogue both in writing and through discussions with Congregation, engaging people before views became entrenched. One or two elected members commented that they could have played a more effective role in this. There is support for much more transparency about issues which Council is discussing and for a pro-active approach to informal debate in Congregation on say, an annual basis....".

As Council reported recently (Gazette, 10th May, 2018) a number of recommendations of the 2015 self-review have been addressed, including restructuring of Council agendas to allow discussion of genuinely strategic issues, streamlining reporting processes of Council committees and so on. But where are the recommended changes regarding relations with Congregation?

If Congregation is to be adequately consulted before September the way this is done in itself matters: this will be a measure of how far Council is willing to go in terms of transparency and genuine cooperative collaboration but also offers the opportunity to develop new methods of communication, especially ones that engage the widest possible numbers of staff and ones that work towards consensus – for example, by an iterative refinement of collective views by means of a succession of position papers and straw polls rather than the usual tokenistic, management-designed one-off questionnaire.

Such objectives are not going to be easy to meet. If initial plans are laid out by Council and only then presented to Congregation the arrangements could be seen as already imposed on Congregation rather than developed cooperatively from the start. Such a situation could be avoided if, for example, Council were – via an email announcement to all members – to invite any interested members of Congregation to sign up to an informal meeting with members of Council to (a) plan methods of communication over the summer and/or (b) draft suggestions to feed into the self-review. In any case it seems essential that Council should make available all relevant papers it prepares for the September away-day well in advance.

In so far as the self-review seeks a genuine improvement in Council interactions with Congregation it is relevant to consider the modus operandi of Congregation itself. Congregation as such has no way of talking directly to Council: at present there is no way in which the views of the more than five thousand members of Congregation can be aggregated and represented informally, i.e. free of the formalities of meetings in the Sheldonian.

One would hope that simply by improving ‘internal communication’ (e.g. the timely provision of informa-
tion on policy in ways that Oxford Magazine has regularly discussed) the need or wish for formal meetings of Congregation will become reduced; they will be reserved for only the most urgent and significant issues. But there is a danger that Discussion meetings (as opposed to debates ending with votes) would also come to seem less necessary, whereas in fact they are important as a forum for the democratic expressions of opinions, for information sharing and for putting such material into the written record. One theme for Council to explore might be new measures to positively encourage Discussion meetings—by perhaps relaxing the restrictive formalities (such as prior submission of speakers’ names, advance determination of the sequencing of speeches by Welling-
ton Square and strict time limits) that currently apply to Congregation meetings—and to make it easier for Congregation members to trigger such meetings, which are now usually initiated by Council.

The contrasting form of self-governance that can be seen in the Regent House in Cambridge—the equivalent of Congregation—may offer some useful pointers for our own consideration of alternatives and for possible application here. ‘Notes from Cambridge’ in this issue illustrates how a wide range of attendees who are not members of the Regent House and have no vote—including students and retirees—can speak at its regular meetings, usually held fortnightly in term. Because a Cambridge Discussion never concludes with a live vote there is no need to give speeches an adversarial structure. This results in a more fluid and spontaneous sequence of speeches than is possible in Congregation. Despite the potential for disruption or abuse of the system, this is not what happens in meetings of the Regent House: it is important to emphasise the point that these most central mechanisms of self-governance are in practice employed responsibly by staff (and students) in the Regent House as in Congregation. All speeches are published verbatim in the Reporter. Readers of the Gazette will be surprised if they compare the Reporter by the extent and detail available there of information relating to exchanges between the Regent House and Cambridge’s Council.

Council’s self-review happens to coincide with consultations with Congregation—and the wider University—in the drafting of the new five-year Strategic Plan and it makes sense to consider them in conjunction. In our commentary in ‘Reminders’ we highlight some of the more pressing issues for the University that the Plan is seeking to address, size and shape perhaps most pressing of all. The overall message—or at least impression—is one of continuous expansion. An expansion in student numbers—politically driven as it might be from many directions—is incompatible with many other considerations in the Plan (especially local environmental constraints and sustainability) and threatens the very ethos of the collegiate University. Yes, some subjects need to increase student numbers to meet changing circumstances. The nettle that the Plan understandably seems to avoid is the corresponding and realistic truth that other subjects might also need to reduce their intake.

Another topic that is avoided is the shameful and short-sighted treatment of retirees (see, for example Professor Millar’s letter in ‘To the Editor’). It is high time that Oxford resolved the tensions, unfairnesses and squandered financial resources resulting from its EJRA policies: Cambridge appears so far to have successfully avoided the vexations over EJRA that we have experienced. The answer may be to provide ‘hotel’ style research facilities that make it possible for research to be continued, while holding fast to the fixed retirement age so that posts are freed up as a matter of course for aspiring academics.

The consultation processes involved in the drafting of the Plan have so far been exemplary. Yet to come is Congregation’s approval of the final document next term. There will then be a final stage; the detailed specification of implementation measures and mechanisms by the appropriate central committees. Here the going may get increasingly difficult. It is intended that relevant committees will report annually on their meeting of targets and that an overarching group (chaired by the Vice-Chancellor) will oversee the whole annual process. Will the results be fully reported to Congregation? That will be another test of Council’s understanding of transparency and self-governance.

T.J.H

* Readers will already have noted that editorship of the Magazine is now shared with Ben Bollig.
The University published the latest draft Strategic Plan in sixth week. There is much to be welcomed in the proposed process. A series of “roadshows” have taken place for members of the University to comment and ask questions and results of an online consultation have also been made available via the University’s single sign-on pages. University staff have been invited to respond on the latest draft over the summer.

Much of the Plan is written in general terms with an aspirational tone presenting aims with which very few will disagree:

“The University’s distinctive democratic structure, born of its history, will continue to offer a source of strength. Our colleges will offer environments which are supportive to individual scholars, promote interdisciplinarity and are characterised by a defining and enduring sense of community.”

Or this impressive list of desiderata:

“In order to ensure that the University remains world leading we must continue to recruit and retain the very best staff. We will ensure that our reward arrangements, including pension provision, are robust, transparent and competitive. We will address the challenges of living in Oxford by maintaining excellent childcare provision and increasing the availability and affordability of staff accommodation. We will ensure equity of treatment of staff through regular gathered field exercises to reward contribution. We will work to enhance the wellbeing of our staff and to support working parents and all those with caring responsibilities.”

Again, all worthy targets. More controversially, a recurring theme in the Plan is size and shape. The implicit and often explicit assumption is that the University will continue to grow:

“We will accommodate growth in student numbers that is strategically important to deliver the University’s core mission and academic priorities, and will continue to encourage the development of new and innovative courses and fields of study, to ensure that our portfolio reflects advances in knowledge and meets the needs of today’s students.”

A particular priority for growth is in the area of graduate students. The Plan states that:

“We will increase the funding available to support the most able postgraduate taught and research students, and increase the proportion of fully funded graduate studentships.”

Two questions spring swiftly to mind. Firstly, how to maintain the quality of graduate students, which has been criticised by concerned and well-informed voices on these very pages. Secondly, how is such growth sustainable? There are constraints imposed by the University’s location within the city of Oxford, geographically and politically. And criticisms of the wider obsession with growth which seems to inform so much policy today have been convincingly expressed by environmentalists and economists alike.

The earlier online consultation reveals one of the sources of pressure to up numbers:

“The divisions were of the view that the plan should include targeted growth in the doctoral student population, this was identified as the most important priority by at least one division. [...] In some instances there was also a call for increased undergraduate and PGT students.”

Other respondents however raise some very specific concerns about the drive to expand:

“Has the case for growth been made? [There exists a] clear sense that there is not a unified view on this point across the collegiate University: is growth in student numbers required, or changes to the shape of the student body of greater priority?”

Growth adds further practical pressures across town. Again, for online respondents,

“The lack of affordable housing located within a reasonable commuting time of the city, with quality local schools, was cited as one of the main reasons for staff leaving the University.”

The Plan does seek to address this. Again, the rhetoric is ambitious:

“A staff and student housing programme will be developed to deliver additional accommodation to mitigate the impact of the high cost of private sector accommodation in Oxford. Where the opportunity and location allows, we will acquire properties which will ensure that the estate can develop and expand to meet the needs of research and education.”

These are, in many respects, excellent aims. But how is the University to be held to account if targets are not met? And what of potential conflicts that expansion occasions. Sensible suggestions can be found in the online consultation:

“1) Investment in academic activities should take priority over infrastructure
   a) A call to invest in people – a strong perception that buildings are valued more than staff, and that there is too much investment in buildings.”

Bricks and mortar will remain a controversial area for the University. This is not the only area where the online consultation is worth citing at length:

“Staff’s employment conditions should be made an ‘enabling strategy’, in view of the; a) Erosion of academic salaries in real terms for 10 years. b) Impact of proposed pension changes. c) High cost of living in Oxford. d) The University may become increasingly uncompetitive internationally in terms of recruitment and retention.”

Readers may find other areas of the draft Plan rather more troubling:
“Surplus targets will be identified for our academic divisions in order to ensure that sufficient cash is generated to invest in our infrastructure.”

These nominal and arbitrary targets are the reason many areas are in permanent structural deficit and operate under constant pressure to identify savings, with obvious deleterious effects on academic activities. And as responses to the online consultation states:

“Every academic subject is equally worthy, academically speaking; and even if we consider social/economic worth, it is not immediately clear what subject areas will be more or less important in 50 or 100 years.”

While the University targets growth in graduate numbers in the draft Strategic Plan, there is growing public and media pressure to grow in different directions. As The Times reported in May:

“Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), has called for Oxford and Cambridge to open new colleges for students from poor backgrounds and other under-represented groups, saying that competition to gain admission to the two universities was now so cut-throat that expansion was the only solution to diversifying the student body.”

This is in line with the draft Strategic Plan which gives as an “Education Priority” to:

“Substantially increase the number and proportion of undergraduate places offered to students from groups who are currently under-represented at Oxford.”

Comments on this matter can also be found in the online consultation:

“Access and Diversity are hugely important issues which need to be tackled. In many respects Oxford needs to stop throwing money at the problem and sit down and really consider what the best way to improve this is. If we are to benefit society, it follows that we will be diverse. The reverse does not follow: being accessible doesn’t necessarily benefit society by itself (e.g., if we destroy the quality or standards of our teaching, it won’t matter that we are accessible); diversity does not make one world-leading by itself (it is perfectly possible to be diverse and second rate). So we should think of these things as means to our ends rather than objectives in their own right.”

Hillman, argues (HEPI Report No 106, May, 2018) as The Times recorded:

“If existing colleges are reluctant to increase their undergraduate entry, then it is time to consider founding a number of entirely new Oxbridge colleges to boost the number of students from under-represented groups at our oldest, richest and most prestigious universities.”

Hillman cited St Anne’s and St Catherine’s as earlier examples of colleges founded with the explicit purpose of widening participation, as well as Girton at Cambridge.

The Times Education Supplement chimed in with a headline stating that new colleges could be of assistance to “disadvantaged sixth-formers”, and quoted Hillman, stating that elite institutions must “provide more places, so that entry is not such a fierce battle.” For Richard Adams, writing in The Guardian, “White working-class boys in England ‘need more help’ to go to university.”

Many of us may agree with these aims. How we achieve them within the constraints of the city, against a background of growing government interference, and while maintaining academic excellence in a time of political uncertainty, is the real challenge.

1 “Synopsis of responses to the web consultation on the strategic plan.” http://www.ox.ac.uk/staff/consultations/strategic-plan-consultation


4 See e.g. Herman Daly, “Economies of scale,” interview by Benjamin Kunkel, New Left Review 109 (Jan/Feb 2018), and in particular the proposal by “steady-state” economists to “force progress onto the path of better rather than more” (p. 89).

5 Rosemary Bennett, “Oxbridge urged to expand by creating new colleges for the poorest students https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oxbridge-urged-to-expand-by-creating-new-colleges-for-the-poorest-students-mw57fzc2e


The editors
The Idea of a University in the 21st century

This Newman Lecture was delivered by the Chancellor, Chris Patten, at Pembroke College on 24th May 2018.

Newman Societies around the world, and indeed this series of lectures in Oxford, commemorate the life and naturally the elegantly written books and essays of Cardinal John Henry Newman (Ox, Trinity and Oriel), beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in Cofton Park, Birmingham in September 2010.

They also remind us of the termination for this University and other universities in Britain, of the world of the Test Acts, ‘no Papery’ and discrimination against non-Conformists, Catholics and Jews. I imagine that Archbishop Tait (Balliol), Bishop Bagot (Christ Church) and many of their mid-19th century contemporaries, not least the heads of several Oxford colleges, would have been disinconcerted or worse that, one day, both the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor of this University would be baptised Roman Catholics. They might have been even more concerned by the fact that this is a matter for the University, and society beyond, of absolutely no consequence whatsoever. These days, there would be more interest in our views on Brexit, a present-day issue of almost theological intensity, with agnostics, traitors and a few martyrs waiting to be burnt at the stake. Don’t worry: I won’t go there. Brexit is out of bounds today. Phew!

In no particularly confessional spirit, however, I thought that the very name of this lecture should encourage me to set out some thoughts on the state and purposes of universities in Britain, some 160 years after Cardinal Newman gave his famous lectures in Dublin on this subject, lectures that were bound together in his later published and frequently cited book, ‘The Idea of a University’. I hope no-one will take offence when I say that this is a book which I place high on my list of those volumes more referenced than read. Look at almost any book on universities, turn to the index, and you will find several references to Newman’s long essay.

These usually cover a limited number of the same quotations, so you cannot help wondering whether these references have simply migrated from one index to another! I should say straight away that I absolve from these references have simply migrated from one index to another! I should say straight away that I absolve from this criticism the best recent book that I have read on universities, turn to the index, and you will find several references to Newman’s long essay.

In no particularly confessional spirit, however, I thought that the very name of this lecture should encourage me to set out some thoughts on the state and purposes of universities in Britain, some 160 years after Cardinal Newman gave his famous lectures in Dublin on this subject, lectures that were bound together in his later published and frequently cited book, ‘The Idea of a University’. I hope no-one will take offence when I say that this is a book which I place high on my list of those volumes more referenced than read. Look at almost any book on universities, turn to the index, and you will find several references to Newman’s long essay.

While Newman had many interesting things to say about a university education, his long essay is not usually put in its proper context. For example, I read a lecture the other day by someone who should know better about Newman’s ‘Idea of a University’ which included this extraordinary statement: ‘Catholic schools used to have low educational standards, yet they produced strong adherents of faith, whereas today their high educational standards tend to produce successful citizens weak in faith’. Several thoughts immediately spring to mind. First, there would have been outrage if an Imam had said something similar about Islamic schools. Second, I am sure that Catholic teachers think their task is to provide an excellent education and to do this in a Christian environment. I guess that would have been the view of my grandparents. Both head teachers at Catholic schools. Third, Catholic schools are so popular with parents because they strike this balance. (The lecture was not, of course, given by someone with children). I do not, for a moment, think that Newman would have thought it a good idea to be careless about the quality of a child’s education, provided he or she learnt the catechism. Sometimes Newman’s arguments are bent like this out of all recognition and they are sometimes disparaged for what are decidedly over-simplified, even skewed interpretations of them.

Newman was writing about what should, in his view, be the purpose of the university he had been asked to establish in Ireland. It was not to be secular, as Sir Robert Peel had hoped it would be when he first suggested its establishment. This was one of several measures to promote the emancipation of Catholics. When Newman gave his lectures, he was not only attempting to define a university which was Catholic, yet also open to all knowledge, he was—this was the background to his academic labours—trying to cope with the anti-Catholic fall-out of the Achilli Libel trial, the divisions in the Irish hierarchy about the whole university project, the personal management of some pretty high-maintenance Oratorian colleagues (just think about Father Faber, for example), and the problems of being an Englishman in Ireland. This lecture inevitably bore the stamp of a 19th century Oxford education, both good and bad. We should not forget the strangle-hold which Oxford and Cambridge exerted as long as they could over the setting up and development of other universities.

Newman’s rebuke to those who attacked the idea of a liberal education has often been unfairly exaggerated by critics to suggest a hostility to any professional or technical training at a university, a point to which I shall return. In addition, ‘The Idea of a University’ has not been sufficiently recognised as (what Ian Kerr, Newman’s biographer, calls) a ‘more or less covert attack’ on ‘the narrow dogmatism of a defensive clerical Catholicism’. I want to draw on one or two of Newman’s arguments, while certainly not thinking that his essay provides the template for a 21st century university. What he does still give us are the arguments for an unconstrained and uninhibited pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Too few do that today, and I cannot think of anyone who does it with such literary grace.

About twenty years ago, the commentator and broadcaster, Fareed Zakaria, wrote an essay (which was turned into a book) called ‘Liberal Democracy’. Zakaria’s argument was simple, but horribly accurate as a prediction. He was writing within ten years of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with it the collapse of Russia’s European empire. We had all celebrated what seemed to be the triumph of democracy and capitalism.
Authoritarians had lost hands down. The future appeared to belong to democracy.

Zakaria pointed out that democracy was simply the way you chose your leaders and that what was most celebrated in Europe and North America was liberal democracy. The notion that a good and open society was just based on the ballot box and the polling booth was nonsense. Many authoritarian regimes had been built on an election—with one citizen, one vote, once. Others simply had the Potemkin institutions of a democracy, in practice facades for show. Others, still, had systems which gave all the power to a majority group, which rode rough-shod over minorities. This was what happened in some Balkan countries, and is often the result of government by referendum.

Yet liberal democracies are not simply a matter of giving people a vote. Democracies, as I have just said, suggest the way you choose your leaders. Add liberal values—instutions and norms of behaviour—and you have liberal democracies which go beyond the choice of a government and which define how you actually govern communities. They combine the best of classical traditions—individual freedoms and rights—with constitutionalism and the rule of law. You add Greece to Rome, and lean heavily on Aristotle.

The Founding Fathers of the United States did not think they were establishing a democracy, but a constitutional republic, the checks and balances of which would make it difficult to produce an authoritarian ruler—a Hanoverian king or a corrupt, populist huckster.

In a liberal democracy, elections take place in a community where there are institutions and rules which safeguard individuals and minorities; they mediate or channel the popular wit. These institutions and values—the hardware and software—include the rule of law, independent courts, due process, freedom of speech, worship and assembly, and vibrant civil society including universities. The behaviour of politicians in a liberal democracy respects the right of others to disagree with them, refrains from bending the law to attack critics and opponents, respects minorities, and values a free press and autonomous universities that decide for themselves how and what they teach and research. It is, of course, a considerable distance from these blatant assaults on the academy to the sniping, carping and querying of the good faith and integrity of universities in America and even our own country: Erdogan and Orban are in a completely different league to these critics of university autonomy and the values of a liberal education. There is, however, a growing tendency to question some of the fundamentals of university education: for example, self-governing independence in teaching and research and the commitment to evidence and fact-based argument. We have also witnessed an assault on science and the scientific method and a persistent and growing tendency to regard universities and their central mission as part of a liberal conspiracy directed against the majority of the community. In Britain, the fact that seventy-five percent of those with a university education—and probably a higher figure among the university-educated young—voted in the 2016 Referendum to remain in the EU must, of course, be the result (so suggest those who hunt avidly for traitors and ‘enemies of the people’) of warped and propagandising teaching and curriculums.

We need today to speak out for the role of universities as bulwarks of liberal democracy. If we do not ourselves do that in universities, it is unlikely that anyone else will do the job for us.

There has recently been a suggestion, backed up by box-ticking exercises, that British universities have less academic freedom than any others in the European Union. Stefan Collini latched on to this in an article in the Guardian. I am hugely sensitive about government meddling in our universities. I would prefer our governments to make a better fist of their principal tasks, not meddle in universities which do pretty well left alone. But the Collini argument is ill-judged and seems to depend a good deal on whether countries have written constitutions or not. The idea, for example, that Hungary has more autonomous universities than us is absurd. On the other hand, a much more realistic study by the European University Association, suggested that academics in the UK had more autonomy than their counterparts in other European countries, thanks to the high levels of organisational freedom and independence in recruiting staff—and, I would add, freedom over admissions. Having visited and spoken at many European universities, this would certainly match my experience. So we are far from perfect, but better than most others in Europe.
The issue of autonomy is not, in fact, the present fulcrum of the debate on universities. Most of the arguments seem to concentrate on how and how much universities are funded, and—almost in passing—the purposes for which they spend these resources. We are about to traverse this terrain once more with the Government enquiry into student fees and related issues. I shall begin by stating the blindingly obvious, which determines the parameters of any enquiry, in the past, today, or in the future. Unless universities strike oil beneath their quadrangles, there are only four ways of funding them. They can raise their income from taxpayers, from students, from research or from endowments. In Britain, the contribution from taxpayers, as a proportion of GDP, is lower than in many of our competitors.

The welcome expansion of universities in Britain after the Robbins Report in 1963 was funded by reducing the spending per head of those being educated. Public expenditure on universities was never given the same priority as spending on schools, not least spending on early-years education. At the other end of education, spending on 16-18 year olds, especially in further education colleges, has been curtailed so that it is now at a similar level to the figure 30 years ago. In passing, I note that if we were as concerned about the low productivity in Britain as we should be, we would be up in arms about the fall in spending on 16-18 year olds and on further education colleges.

As for universities, there have been real terms reductions in the public resources provided to universities in 18 of the past 25 years. This has inevitably caused a real squeeze on university salaries, described charmingly by the Treasury as part of the increase in university productivity! This undoubtedly contributed to the storm over pensions. I hope the problem can be sorted out this summer. The long-run cost to this government of higher education, that is the difference between up-front spending and the expected repayment of student loans by graduates, has fallen by one third in six years.

As direct taxpayer support for universities has fallen, a growing share of higher education costs has been carried by student fees and income contingent loans. The view of the OECD is that this is a sustainable system that is probably fair (not least as between more and less academically able young women and men) and certainly efficient. It does not appear to deter those from less well-off backgrounds from going to university; comparisons with Scotland, where there are no fees, support this argument. The system is not perfect. Turning maintenance grants into loans has been a big mistake and it is wrong to apply an usurious interest rate to loans.

The scale of fees—mainly as a result of public spending constraints—is not caused by senior salaries; a populist headline. Nor (my personal bet) is the system going to be scrapped and replaced by public grants by any government of any political colour, whatever promises are made. To do this would either require huge cuts in the universities’ budgets, or a national economic miracle sustained by years of unprecedented growth in our GDP. Dream on? Moreover, if that were (improbably) to happen, other priorities, like paying for the NHS would be ahead of universities in the queue for more expenditure. There is a huge difference between the real world grind of government spending rounds, under both left and right wing administrations, and soap-box oratory through a loud-hailer. My guess is that most students understand this very well.

There are plainly utilitarian arguments for spending on education at every level, though I doubt whether there is the sort of umbilical relationship between expenditure on students, colleges and universities and levels of economic growth that is sometimes claimed. But there is plenty of evidence that learning and training do have a role in economic development, not least when girls and young women are given greater educational opportunities. So when political leaders strut their stuff about the importance of creating a knowledge-based economy, how can we do other than concur? Who, after all, advocates working for the establishment of an ignorance-based economy, though I suppose that one can inadvertently stumble into one?

The fact that we are often swept along by other risible arguments about this or that effect of education on GDP should not encourage us to dismiss out of hand these economic claims. Indeed, while they are not the only reason for investing in learning, they are a pretty important one and are directly relevant to the university’s roles in safeguarding liberal democracy. After all, populism is frequently engendered by economic marginalisation, itself created by the redundancy of former skills and the failure to attain new ones. Globalisation requires changes to meet competition and this in turn entails raising the quality of what is taught in schools, work places and colleges. It is worth noting, in looking at the political consequences of the left-behind communities in the United States, that Americans spend one sixth of the OECD average amount devoted to labour market re-training.

But what, you may ask, does training for skills, vocations or professions have to do with universities? Did not Newman himself argue that the emphasis on the core importance of a liberal education at universities meant that there was no place for sciences or for professional training? No, in fact he did not. That was not what he argued nor what he practised in his efforts to establish the new university in Ireland.

A liberal education had an idealistic purpose, but the way to achieve this had to be practical and practicable. Whilst noting that the humanities, theology for example, and science lived in different domains and needed to be kept in balance, they intersected in any search for knowledge and the pursuit of learning. While the objective of a university was to impart knowledge, he did not want everything except the liberal arts to be excluded. Taking the example which he knew best, Newman noted that there was a difference between theological training (for example in a seminary) and a theological education in a university.

Training, or vocationalism, was grounded in general learning and comprehension.

These distinctions are, I suppose, a pretty good argument for the sort of tripartite, hierarchical system of higher education established in California by Clark Kerr, running from free community colleges through state universities to research intensive universities with easy transfer between the three different sorts of institution. Our own system, not least because of its early domination by Oxbridge, and much later the
ending of the binary distinction between universities and polytechnics, has made this interaction more difficult. But some universities have sought to bridge these divides, for example with the partnership at Sheffield with apprentice training. At our own university, I seem to recall that the debates years ago about the establishment of a (now very successful) Business School, reflected the sense that such an institution would cross the red line between what was academic and what was professional or vocational. That is a debate long since laid to rest.

So what universities offer is germane to attempts to promote what the French would doubtless call social solidarity, through the improvements of the job and remuneration prospects of those whose life chances have been blighted by generational change in industry. That in turn, to rehearse one of President Trump’s favourite metaphors, would help to drain the swamp in which populism and hostility to liberal values and institutions flourish.

This does not validate the rather chilling argument of the Chairman of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education that ‘the sole purpose’ of higher education was to give young people the more developed skills that would earn them bigger pay packets. Nor is it a justification for another flawed utilitarian argument that research (and even teaching) at universities should be funded by government primarily to meet their centrally determined priorities for economic growth.

What first of the question of learning and teaching? For Newman, a university was—in his lyrical phrase—a place where ‘inquiry is pushed forward ... discoveries verified and perfected .... error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge’. A university served the present by helping us to understand the past and preserve the best of it; it served the future by shaping the citizens, who could help create it, by passing on a legacy both of knowledge and of civic commitment and attainment. Economic usefulness might be a by-product of these purposes. But universities are different from factories or vocational institutions; they have laboratories, but are more than laboratories. They are, as I have argued, a pillar of liberal civilisation and order, not primarily agents of GDP growth. They are usually more likely to contribute to that utilitarian goal when their liberal purposes are understood.

For some, this traditional idea of the university— for example, as acknowledged by Newman and Humboldt in Germany—is so much old hat; universities are apparently being ‘MOOCed’ out of any 21st century relevance. Now, for a start, we should beware prediction. This is true in politics, as we recall the election of President Trump, or the outcome of the EU Referendum campaign here. It is also true in economics where ‘black swans’ add randomness to the hazards of prediction. And it is true about social and educational developments, like the future of books. Yes, we have moved on from the Gutenberg bible; and yes, e-books have taken a toll on traditional hardbacks and paperbacks. But there are unlikely to be fewer books in future; we will just find them differently. Reading is not passe; it is part of our DNA. *Res ipsa loquitur.*

So the way in which technology has democratised access to knowledge does not amount to a death sentence for the universities of Heidelberg or Leiden or Louvain or Cambridge. Universities need to adjust the way they operate, making these choices autonomously. What they should not do is to choose, or be pushed into choosing, to change their basic purpose, their core values and attributes in free, plural societies. What exactly are these purposes and values?

In my own view, we pay too little attention to the learning experiences of students, and I fear that this problem may be exacerbated by a simplistic focus on the contribution that on-line resources can make to courses. After all, the aim of pedagogy should not be simply to transfer information. University teachers should get their students to think—to know how to frame the right questions (and the wrong ones), to search for the knowledge that will help them to produce answers, to embrace complexity, to argue rationally, to question and to dare to have their own opinions. Can we do that without close contact between students and their teachers? Can we do it in systems that fail to insist on good academic performance and that tolerate drift, dragged out courses and high drop-out rates? Can we achieve it without placing a high value on the pedagogic role and insisting on the highest teaching standards? Can we manage it when universities sometimes seem to be mainly in the business of providing the obligatory pre-workplace ticks in the box? School done; university done—now for the job market. Universities are for learning not ‘credentialing’; we should not simply teach for tests. Students are not customers in an academic supermarket. Newman would have found this idea pretty well incomprehensible. We should expect more of the experience university provides for young people if we want not only a properly skilled graduate workforce, but rounded citizens. We all know the Plutarch quote that ‘the mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled’. How often is that reflected in what we say and do about higher education?

Two things follow from this argument. First, we should want as many young people as possible, who have the ability to benefit from a university education, to be accepted at the most appropriate place of learning for them. The objective should be the same everywhere. But given the different academic strengths and cultures at universities, the attainment levels of would-be students will inevitably differ from one institution to another. This is the issue that provides the most frequent criticism of our own university and of Cambridge. We are two of the greatest universities in the world and because we are ancient and better known than others, we attract criticism that others—like the great London universities—tend to avoid.

Because we are both very good and well-known (worth a newspaper story any day of the week) we are described as elite, like I suppose Manchester City Football Club, or even Chelsea. But to be elite does not mean we are elitist, a word associated with an in-built sense of superiority and membership of a free-masonry of the clever, powerful and rich. That is a silly argument in a country that could do with more elite institutions like, for example, some that we already have: the British Museum, the Royal Society and an uncorrupt, meritocratic, unpolticised Civil Service. What we are not is exclusive. We cannot make good all the failures in British society, like social inequality and (in
some parts of the country) inadequate state education. Nevertheless, we have to be a force for social inclusion, an institution that understands this obligation in a meritocracy. We should not be expected to lower our standards or accept as students young men and women who might be uncomfortable with the intellectual demands made on them. No one would thank us for teaching courses on which there were high drop-out rates.

That said, our policy on access needs to be imaginatively proactive so that we can show that Oxford is genuinely ability-rich and means-blind, with a wide, diverse academic community. We do much more about this than we are given credit for. (I note in passing that one or two independent schools which used to criticise us for not taking more of their pupils, now suggest that it may not matter that we take more students these days from state schools since going to Oxbridge is not in any event all that is it cracked up to be. Maybe they prefer American universities with their little tilts towards what is called ‘legacy preference’.)

Our own efforts to promote diversity have grown exponentially over the last few years from the hugely successful UNIQ summer (and for this year, Easter) school, to our Oxplore digital outreach programmes for 11 to 16 year olds, to targeted outreach programmes to UK students from ethnic backgrounds, to teachers’ awards for those working in state schools who have encouraged their pupils to apply for Oxford, to individual student outreach programmes like those associated with Pembroke, Wadham and University College. Those who want us to show our commitment to inclusiveness are pushing at an open door, provided they don’t want the door to be wide open regardless of the particular talents (not the only talents in life) of those who want to cross the threshold.

So what should we hope, here at Oxford for instance, our students will have learned from a liberal education in every subject from philosophy to physics? What Newman hoped for was that a good university education would produce a gentleman, which sounds these days rather old-fashioned, snobbish and – that word again – elitist. How would we translate the idea for today? It is surely reasonable to assume that if you educate very able young women and men, many of them will aspire to doing responsible jobs and to playing leadership roles in the national and international community. This is, as we know, for many students what actually happens. I do not think it is something of which we should be ashamed. Universities themselves are the most meritocratic part of our education system. Where there are problems in Britain of inadequate social mobility, they tend to lie elsewhere in society. It is not unusual for the cleverest young people in any country to rise to the top after having gone to the most demanding universities. But what values and responsibilities would we hope they had acquired, not because civic leadership is a taught course, but because it is a by-product of academic study at our university? We should not, of course, regard our main task to be to produce generations of (what one of our most distinguished scholars calls) ‘plausible bullshitters’. What we should aspire to is to educate young women and men with a sense of civic responsibility, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and an understanding of how to tell the difference between truth and reason on the one hand and nonsense and mendacity on the other. This may seem prosaically obvious, but it is a central part of our contribution to the marriage in the outcome of a university education of private and public good.

We should also stand up for liberal values within the academy. If we allow ourselves to be colonised by illiberal political correctness, this will be used against us by people who wish us ill. It follows from what I have said already, that universities should be bastions of freedom in any society: free from government interference in their teaching and research while promoting the clash of ideas. Freedom of speech is fundamental to what universities are, enabling them to sustain a sense of common humanity and to uphold the national tolerance and understanding that underpin any free society. This is what makes universities dangerous to authoritarian governments which seek to stifle the ability to raise and attempt to answer difficult questions.

When some students and teachers in America and in Europe contend that people should not be exposed to ideas with which they disagree, they are plain wrong. No ‘ifs’, no ‘buts’. ‘No platforming’, to use that graceless phrase, is wrong. So too the call for ‘safe spaces’. A university should not be a ‘safe space’. That is oxymoronic. It is true that liberty requires the existence of some limits (decided freely by democratic argument under the rule of law). Some ideas – incitement of racial hatred or political violence, gender hostility and hostility to sexual preferences – are anathema in almost every free society. Universities should be trusted to exercise this degree of control about these matters themselves. But intolerance of debate, of discussion, and of particular branches of scholarship should never be tolerated. As Karl Popper taught us, the only thing of which we should be intolerant is intolerance itself. It is ironic that in Hong Kong and elsewhere students are being pilloried and disciplined for arguing for the very freedoms against which some in the West campaign.

The answer to bad free speech is good free speech. The answer to bad historical research is better historical research. If we wish to apply a calculus of morality to events of the past, it should be based on fact and historical understanding, not on subsuming discussion in today’s majority opinion or what is assumed to be contemporary morality. Consider, for example, the story of our country’s colonial history.

Edmund Burke savaged the Indian Raj. Fortunately, there was no British tabloid press in those days to attack him as anti-British and unpatriotic. I recall, on the other hand, that the former Congress Party Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, found some good things to say, in a speech a few years ago in Oxford, about the decidedly mixed legacy of the British in India. He got into great trouble for doing so when he got back home. I agree with both of them. Should I be ‘no platformed’ as a result? Discuss!

I am, of course, a little biased. I ran what was pretty well the last of Britain’s colonies. When I came to hand over sovereignty to China, I made clear that no-one at the end of the 20th century should try to excuse or justify the fact of colonialism. But, equally, some of the things that happened in colonies were good and beneficial. That was certainly true in Hong Kong, a city of refugees many of whom had fled from the effects of
totalitarian communism in mainland China. How can it possibly be outrageous to look soberly at this balance? If members of an academic community are thought to behave intolerantly to one another, they are likely to encourage outsiders to behave intolerantly to their own institutions.

To summarise then, being better trained, better educated, benefits students without us needing to look any further. There are naturally other accrued advantages, including (as David Willetts’ book has noted) better health and enhanced life expectancy. But I want, finally, to say something about the research role of universities to which those who are taught at them make a significant contribution.

Wilhelm von Humboldt argued that one of the principles on which a university’s objectives should be based was unity of teaching and research. They reinforced each other. Not every university has the resources or capability to do very much research. Indeed, one reason why research spending in some American universities is so massively effective is that the Federal Government and other public and private benefactors focus research investment on a very limited number of academies. I would not advocate any government trying to make hard and fast distinctions between those universities in this country who are allowed to do research, and those who cannot. Nor am I in favour of governments trying to determine the type of work that universities undertake. There are those who argue that universities live in Ivory Towers. In Canada, a few years ago, the Harper Government tried to base policy on this idea. It wanted curiosity driven blue-sky research to be put on one side in favour of work that the government thought might be directly relevant to industry’s current requirements. But was it in fact useful? The evidence of a government’s ability to make these choices sensibly is not at all compelling. The Commission set up by President Roosevelt to advise on likely innovations in the thirty years after 1937 missed nuclear energy, computers, lasers, jet engines, Xerox, radar, antibiotics, sonar, the genetic code, many pharmaceuticals and so on. To take a more recent example of usefulness, when do you suppose we began to recognise that climate scientists belong to the useful category? Whatever the climate predictions, I prefer blue skies to government committees!

The impact that research makes is not an unreasonable concern for those who fund it. More important is the excellence of the work done, and I doubt the ability of funders to ascertain with much precision (if at all) the likely outcome of free-ranging academic inquiry. Good research in the sciences answers the ‘whys’ and entrepreneurial innovation provides a bridge to the ‘hows’ of developing technologies and business models. The basic contribution that universities make to innovation is that research; they are not in the first place entrepreneurial motors, though some may prove adept at such activity. But I doubt whether there is a simple model to take off the shelf of the ideal university contribution to discovery and innovation. What is required is an environment which makes this creative process more, not less, likely. Features on this landscape will almost certainly include public investment, tax policies, workforce skills, physical infrastructure, land-use planning, and access to talent from other countries.

It helps, of course, to add to that North California’s climate! But I doubt the ability to re-create exact replicas of Silicon Valley, without begrudging those who think it worth making the occasional study visit there.

What will not work, in my view, is to try to constrain scholarly inquiry, and to direct it to those areas which governments believe most likely to give swift economic results.

I have left to last a question that would have been given short shrift by Cardinal Newman, if indeed he had felt it necessary to give it any shrift at all. Why bother, some ask, to study and research the humanities? Why do I cherish the work at this university of all those academics whose work on literature, history, music, philosophy, classics, theology, foreign languages and so on does not obviously add to British capacity to innovate, to our national productivity or our GDP?

The answer is simple. We must support the humanities because we are human. Because the humanities help to answer the question of why we need universities at all. Because they provide us with a fuller understanding of our world and of one another. Because they enable us to think creatively and critically. Because, as Newman would have argued, they inform our moral sense. Because they teach us to love jazz and Beethoven, Raphael and Cezanne, a Shakespeare sonnet and a Flaubert novel. Because they teach us about life and beauty and love and death.

I am sure that a few of our students of the humanities—and others, too—will read Cardinal Newman (the ‘Apologia’ as well as the ‘Idea of a University’) and that this will encourage them and those who teach them to speak up and defend the liberal values which universities must continue to assert. It is not alarmist to point out that in a world of growing authoritarianism, when liberal institutions and norms are under threat, we are in the front line. We may not need to wave placards or build barricades. But we should certainly be on our guard and pretty vocal about it too, both in Britain and (as a great world university) abroad too. No one else will do the job for us.
Fellowship in all its forms

JIM NAISMITH

Perhaps a little background, I spent 23 years at St Andrews University before moving to Oxford almost a year ago. St Andrews is a fine place with a long tradition of collegiality that I benefited from enormously. There I served as the elected member of the Science and Medicine Professoriat on the University Court, the governing and corporate body. I am a firm believer not just in self-governance as a concept but in practice. Self-governance is demanding—we academics need to come forward with our own positive suggestions, otherwise we are left only with the power of “No”. Saying “No” is ultimately passive; we wait to hear what is to be done to us. It is a betrayal of those who came before us and it impoverishes those who come after us.

When I first arrived here I was outside the college system being a Senior Research Post holder (RSIV; I think). It’s a chilly world there; the intellectual stimulation from discussion with like-minded colleagues from different disciplines is almost entirely absent. I have been fortunate and am forever grateful to the Fellows of Jesus College who offered me a Senior Research Fellowship. For me the college fellowship allows the collegiality (literally and metaphorically) essential to academic life. From my new perch I see how the colleges shrink the University to a human scale; enabling the creation of diverse and stimulating communities despite the size of the institution.

What’s more in Jesus (and I assume other colleges) there is unbreakable shared commitment to teach and mentor the next generation through the tutorial system. It is this collegiality, around a purpose, that seems to me the hallmark of the colleges; the core purpose is what makes them distinctive Oxford innovation. It would provide younger researchers the chance to develop more fully and allow a more egalitarian environment there are wider arguments for the better for them and given the societal push for a more egalitarian environment there are wider arguments in its favour.

In some ways, this proposal sounds rather like creating another Nuffield College, or Linacre, Wolfson, Kellogg, St Cross or St Anthony’s. I would be the first to admit that they serve as a starting point, but there are some key differences. The membership of this new college is bigger and broader, in that all post-docs, technical staff, support staff as well as non-college research group leaders and students would be members but also, at least to begin with, narrower focussing mainly on science. Another important difference is that the college freed from the costs of a physical manifestation would have less need to drive for endowment nor is its job to fund research or operate entirely autonomously from the University. My reading of the history suggests it is by the trick of changing systems and not associated with existing colleges can hold fellowships. In the tradition of empirical evidence, why not trial this with research staff in Mathematical, Physical, Engineering and Life Sciences? Such a college would of course have no undergraduate teaching responsibility and need have no fixed premises. To avoid it being simply a social club, the college could take responsibility for the pastoral care and mentoring of taught post-graduate Masters’ students, research students of Fellows of this new college, visiting research students and visiting researchers. Many colleagues who fit in these categories, in my limited experience, often struggle to fit into the current system, which is largely dominated by the unique tutorial system of undergraduate teaching. In almost all cases, these people live outside the colleges. The new college could be a significant change for the better for them and given the societal push for a more egalitarian environment there are wider arguments in its favour.

As the University begins to plan for a major programme of building much needed student and staff accommodation—some of this for post-docs as well as other early career colleagues—having a “college” centred there might help colleagues identify with the wider University community, even if the college itself was largely a virtual organization. Such a “college” may also put a human scale on the landlord of these new housing developments. One can imagine this new Research College, organised around the twin purposes of post-graduate mentoring and the creation of a research community coming to be seen as a distinctively Oxford innovation. It would provide younger researchers the chance to develop more fully and allow a much larger section of the Oxford community to share in Oxford’s magic.

The University has many fine premises that could be easily used for regular academic social events which with just a little bit of imagination would make a huge difference to the success of the new enterprise. Despite forgoing fixed premises, such an initiative would require some additional funding, which is always hard to come by. The delivery of mentoring and pastoral care to post-graduates would generate income and senior Fellows could be expected to pay a fee (just as I pay for fellowship of various
other professional societies). The existing colleges would of course lose the fees income from these post-graduates, but would be freer to focus on what they do best, teaching undergraduates. The graduate colleges would remain unchanged although one might hope for a close working relationship. I can’t emphasise how strongly I support and greatly admire the undergraduate tutorial system; my suggestions should if anything allow a greater focus on this. Asking organisations, in this case the colleges, to do too many things often means they do some less well.

I am not suggesting that existing colleges would cease having post-grad members; initially just perhaps taught Masters and only PhD students who wish to and are supervised by Research College fellows would enrol in the new college. Statutory positions would remain as now, linked to the established colleges. I would imagine some colleges might see an opportunity to rebalance efforts to ensure the health of the undergraduate tutorial system. The point of the new college is to add to the overall well-being of the University, enhance our reputation and improve the quality of our people. These things above all should be our goal when handing over the University to our successors.

As a new kid, I have no idea how one does anything in Oxford. I am a firm believer in saying things in the public square and testing ideas by discussion, not dictat; hence this article. If it stimulates a discussion, then it has been worth it.

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**Cornwall**

1 Summer Holiday, 1978

Each year the motor caravan wove down
To Cornwall, with a churn of Calor gas
Whose iffy hiss became a perilous crown
Of blue petals; a treadle worked for trails
And coughs of narrow water; and a mass
Of orange scratchy cushions dense as bales.

Safe in its travelling room, we ran by schools
Of light on water, glittering and begetting.
Splay-footing with my father round the pools,
Miniatures of the sea, in blue-black rocks
I found strange creatures ready for my netting
Near hauls of bladderwrack or dabberlocks.

A fête we went to had a straight-backed band,
Dancing that pleased my mother, fancy dress
With cups, and paperbacks I briefly scanned;
A man might idle with their epic themes,
Love, spies or sharks, beside the waves’ excess
While far blue tankers stood like ships in dreams.

Each place held kind relations bringing teas
With cliff-shaped cake or dainty carins of scones.
As sands grew chill, devoid of families,
We reached our airy site, each cupboard full,
Like noble savages with all mod cons
For any fool can be uncomfortable.

2 Charity Dinner, West Cornwall Golf Club, 2011

In black tie, we are bound for Charter Night.
These headlight-glamoured mizzling lanes restore
Primordial summers. Everything feels right:
My mother saying neatly ‘OK left’
At junctions; pockets stocking every door
With tissues, juice or sweets; my father’s deft
And youthful driving. Close to Rose-an-Grouse
Our low car rolls by dark and slivery sea
Then gravely crunches to the glowing clubhouse.
Stiffly, my parents step. Inside there rise
Gold names and silver cups for mastery
Time and experience roughly amortize.

After the meal, before the band, I stray
Out to the hummock dunes, where reefs of vapour
Make Hayle at night look like the Milky Way,
A net that drips with light, a host of chances
For races, fêtes, and photos in the paper.
I turn, and in the hall my mother dances,
Waving her arms but staying in her chair.
My father beams with pride around the bar,
His foot miraculously cured in there.
My parents move in light. Here they both are,
Rarer than Cornwall’s gold and silver ore,
As past the links tall breakers charge the shore.

KIERON WINN

*The first part of this poem was published by TLS in 2017. We are grateful for permission to re-print it here.*
AROUND the University, many colleagues are being asked to consider policy and practice regarding the recording of lectures. The University has invested in software and equipment for the “capture” of lectures—both sound and on-screen visuals—and a number of units have trialled routine recording and uploading for students to access. The driver behind this is, in part, the legal—and entirely sensible and correct—requirement to make reasonable adjustments for students who, as a result of disabilities, are unable to take adequate notes in their lectures. Many lecturers will have become accustomed to receiving requests from students, or, more recently, from tutors, administrators, or the Disability Advisory Service, to record lectures. In the past, students brought along a recorder, their own or the institution’s.

At the moment, University policy is that recording is the exception, not the rule:

“3. Students who have been given permission to record lectures or other formal teaching sessions as a reasonable adjustment on disability-related grounds do not need to ask for permission to record from individual academics.

4. Students may request permission to record any lectures or other formal teaching sessions. All such requests should be made in writing (including by email) prior to the lecture course or equivalent, to the academic responsible. Subject to paragraph 3 above, the decision on whether to grant permission is at the discretion of the academic. Students may only record lectures where the academic responsible for the session has given their consent prior to the start of the lecture in writing (e.g. by email), and recordings of lectures may not be made by students unless this consent has been given. Retrospective requests are not permissible under this policy and covert recording of lectures will be treated as a disciplinary offence.”

The clauses above make it clear that the purpose of recordings is to help those students with a particular need, rather than as a general resource for all. It is underpinned, it seems, by the assumption that attendance at lectures is usual. Nevertheless, there are some troublesome details:

“9. Students may store recordings of lectures for the duration of their programme of study. Once they have completed the programme of study, students should destroy all recordings of lectures or other formal teaching sessions.”

This makes sense in theory: a partially-sighted student may need recordings for revision purposes; for others revising from paper or screen may be unreasonably difficult. In that sense, keeping recordings until Finals could be considered wholly unobjectionable. But at the same time, if the policy is meant to prevent recordings going beyond the confines of Oxford or the specific purposes of the course in question, one wonders how this can possibly be policed. I have not heard of students being called to the Examination Schools to have smart phones or laptops erased, even if this would stop potential “leakages.”

Increasingly, centralised recording facilities installed in lecture theatres are being employed instead of individual arrangements. The IT Services website provides further details of the technology available:

“Lecture Capture (Replay) is third party software that downloads onto a computer and can record the computer screen, slides, video and audio. [...] Lectures can be automatically recorded on the presenter’s computer or a personal laptop. Recordings are then automatically uploaded and transferred to a secure cloud server immediately after the lecture. Recordings can either be released immediately or they can be reviewed and edited to make minor changes before released to students.”

The “Replay” system, provided by the company Panopto, has been trialled in pilot surveys, and is in use in other institutions, including York and Royal Holloway.

Some Faculties are proposing a change to the current system, whereby all lectures are routinely recorded. Those students with permission are then able to access them. This puts the onus on lecturers who do not wish their classes to be recorded thus, as they are obliged to opt out. Under these proposals, the recording and mass storage of lectures become the norm, not the exception, in contrast to the status quo ante. In one draft policy document, it is suggested that students would be able to download lectures to their own devices, but would be required to destroy the recordings after a given period of time. Again, no mention is made of how this would be policed, although misuse would be considered a disciplinary offence.

Colleagues have reported discovering recordings of their lectures in unexpected places online, without being aware of any disciplinary action, or indeed any investigation, having taken place. It is hard to imagine administrators or IT officers being able to prioritise such surveillance. Further proposals would extend the scheme from just students with appropriate dispensation to those unable to attend owing to illness (medically certified or otherwise). It is also suggested that lecture capture could offer a solution to clashes.

At a previous institution, in the late ’00s, I recorded my lectures and seminars and made these and the related Powerpoint slides or notes pages available for students enrolled on my modules. This came with a proviso: at least 75% of the cohort had to turn up to lectures and seminars, or I would not record the session in question (I should add that no student in the class had permission to record on disability grounds). Perhaps as a result of this policy, attendance seldom fell below 90%—one summises that no student wanted to be responsible for the session disappearing into the ether. This method worked because the recordings were not seen as substitutes for lectures. They supported students who weren’t as skilled at taking notes, and they worked as a revision tool for all. But it also helped form a sense of community within the group, sharing and discussing material outside the classroom.

That said, my method was far from perfect, and I wouldn’t particularly have wanted anyone outside the
group to listen to the recordings. A certain roughness around the edges, admissions of uncertainty, and the occasional robust debate, made sense within the shared context, but might have sounded inappropriate taken out of it. There was also the problem of controlling the material. I recently saw Powerpoint slides that I made available via a virtual platform reappearing some ten years after their original posting, now on a third party site.

There is a further issue: at my then institution, lectures and seminars were compulsory, and students enrolled on a module and attended all the sessions. There were disciplinary consequences for non-attendance, and some modules factored-in register appearances to an eventual mark. At Oxford in the humanities lectures are mostly voluntary, and registers are rarely taken. The optional nature of lectures—and the fact that students can pick and choose according to their interests, to the reputation of a lecturer, or to fit their timetable—is a distinctive and attractive feature of Oxford courses, training our students in independence and self-management. And, as the old adage goes, 80% of life is showing up.

Another, and troubling aspect to expanding the availability of recorded lectures is that lecturers might very literally make ourselves redundant. During the recent strike, there were widespread reports of institutions using recordings as substitute classes, thus diminishing the impact of industrial action. According to The Scotsman:

“A teaching union has accused Edinburgh University of preparing to use old recordings of lectures to break the ongoing strike over pensions. The University and College Union (UCU) says the head of the university’s law school e-mailed senior staff asking them to identify lectures missed due to strike action ‘in order to have its recorded counterpart from last session uploaded’ for students.”

A university spokesman said: ‘The Law School has, for a number of years, made recordings of lectures from previous sessions available to students when lectures have had to be cancelled. This is a continuation of that existing practice. Law students are required by the Law Society of Scotland to study specific subjects as prerequisites for professional practice’.

And at Warwick, according to Rohini Jaswal, writing for The Tab, the University “propose[d the] use of Lecture Capture to combat strikes”: “The university have suggested using lecture capture ‘where there is content appropriate for the relevant programme of study’, as one a number of “alternatives to lectures" lost to the strike.”

In many science subjects at Oxford it has become established policy that lecture notes are available and Powerpoint-type slides are routinely attached (in print and/or online). One result, I am told, is that lectures tend to become more closely structured around the slides, with a concomitant loss of spark. There is also little incentive to students to turn up as the bulk of the "content" is available in notes which their colleagues can collect for them (or they can access themselves virtually). Nevertheless, colleagues report that students still turn up in reasonable numbers. In Oxford, not only are lectures not compulsory but they are relatively few in number and very often—certainly for higher year-groups or in more specialised subjects—designed by the lecturer to match his/her interests at the time. So there is something of a tradition that (at its best) the lecture is a one-off and even spontaneous affair, different each year and in a sense unrepeatable. If all lectures are thought of as automatically being recorded for posterity that spontaneity may very well be lost.

Criticism of lecture capture comes from some perhaps surprising sources. Writing for a St Andrew’s student newspaper, The Stand, Jackson Peters gives a number of arguments against the move to increased recording. Perhaps most striking is what he calls, “Loss of a ‘Personal Touch’”:

“[C]onsider the loss of humour as a consequence. [Some lecturers] like to occasionally crack [jokes] as a means to keep their students engaged and add levity to a drab morning lecture. If they knew their every word was recorded, lecturers would surely shy away from this practice, instead sticking to a much more rigid script.”

A number of colleagues have expressed similar concerns. In a lecture, context is vital. One comes to judge the mood of a room, the degree of familiarity with an audience, and the appropriateness of a remark. Mass recording robs us of that sensitivity, and places context, and thus the potential to give and take offence, out of our hands. I would like to think that I can gauge what is a suitable aside or quip to a group I know; to an unseen listener, it is anyone’s guess.

The same might be said for student participation. Under the model of recording and uploading everything as standard, those students present give their tacit consent to having their own interventions recorded. Undergraduates at Oxford are not always as vocal as they might be, nor questions in lectures as forthcoming as one would hope. The prospect of their doubts and uncertainties, their not-yet fully formed impressions and interpretations, being recorded for posterity, may well make them more taciturn still.

As Bruce Charlton noted on these very pages:

“Typically lectures are taken for granted (which makes it unlikely that they will be improved) but the attitude is often hostile, and sporadic attempts are made to replace lectures with almost-anything-else in the name of innovative teaching.”

As well as being spoken communications, lectures are properly delivered by an actually present individual person. This living presence creates a here-and-now social situation which unfolds in real time. Because humans are social animals, we are naturally more alert and vigilant in actual social situations.”

This is a simple idea, but one worth defending.

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2. http://help.it.ox.ac.uk/replay/index
6. OM 388, 2nd wk MT17, p8.
7. OM 388, 2nd wk MT17, p9.

14 EIGHTH WEEK, TRINITY TERM, 2018

Oxford Magazine
Until recently I never had much time for woodpigeons. They always seemed quite puddingy, birds that galumphed and little else. Once, in the garden, I watched one perch on the water butt. I glanced away for half a second and it had fallen in. I picked the daft thing out and sighed as it pottered to and fro on the grass drying off. My abiding memory is of looking down at it as it drifted, blue-grey and white, on the dark water, with one white-ringed uncomprehending eye gazing at me as I lifted its feather weight.

I could make a case for woodpigeon as glutton. When I put the bird food out, a robin lands almost immediately. Then the magpies come, confident, intelligent, but one or two hours later I look out of the window and there are woodpigeons stamping up and down, great shoeboxes of birds, picking up every last grain.

Woodpigeon as prey: the neighbouring cats have had a few, and a sparrowhawk once smashed one in the act of taking off. Once or twice the “chack-chack” alarm call of a blackbird has launched a pigeon into the glass of our back door. It’s a gruesome sight when a bird with a broken neck, its head drooped by its flank, is shuddering through its final breaths.

And yet—“Coo, coo, I love you…”

My daughter gave this summary of the pairing of pigeons in our garden. Just outside our back door is a panel fence that only looks pleasant in summer, when the raspberries are ripening. Pairs of woodpigeons use this fence as their love arena, where the male,uffed up and startlingly iridescent green around the neck, trots sideways to and fro from the female, dipping and ducking as he does so. When the female accepts him they beak-wrestle, heads pushed close together and seeming about to wind neck about neck. It’s an engaging sight, as is the display flight, like an up-and-down stroke in Japanese calligraphy, the descent marked by spread wings and tail as if the brush tip were being pressed a little harder to the page.

An even more appealing aspect of the woodpigeon is its call. It’s been given voice in English as the refrain “take two cows taffy, take two cows”, and yet those specific words work against the feeling it creates for me. That feeling is the assurance that it’s spring or early summer, that after gloom and hard work in winter there will be a time in which sunlight will filter through the leaves and the pigeons will call into the twilight.
Update on the EHEA
(formerly the Bologna Process)

JUDITH MARQUAND

The triennial Ministerial Conference of what used to be called the Bologna Process, but is now called the ‘European Higher Education Area’ took place in Paris on May 24. The Policy Forum including representatives of countries outside the EHEA took place the following day. All countries which are members of the Council of Europe are represented. Even Belarus is now on the path to full adoption in the EHEA.

As usual, each country had submitted a report on developments since the previous Conference, in 2015. As usual, the Secretariat had produced an Implementation Report pulling together the information from members. As usual, the Implementation Report was long—330 pages this time. But what was interesting was the quiet progress which it demonstrated in adoption of the six original principles in almost every member state. Only Belarus still has a long way to go. Moreover, the acceptance of student-centred learning and teaching methods at last appears to be making some progress, as does the strengthening of quality assurance arrangements agreed at the previous Conference.

There are still areas of weakness, both by topic and by geography. Almost half the members are not very open to cross-border quality assurance, and a quarter are resistant to external monitoring of their ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) arrangements. The United Kingdom is among the laggards in both of these respects. However, a rather different constellation of members is weak according to various social indicators—recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning; in providing for the portability of grants and loans; and in supporting the mobility of students from under-represented groups. It is not just the previous group of suspects, some of the countries with a Communist past, which tends to show weakness in these respects. They have been joined by Greece and Turkey.

Thus most countries, whatever their governmental style, appear to be making some effort to conform to most of the Bologna requirements. Only in recognition of prior informal learning and in support for the mobility of students from disadvantaged groups are many of the former Communist countries lagging. What cannot of course be judged without studies in much greater depth in individual countries is how much of this is genuine change and how much is window-dressing. It does look as though motivation to conform, or at least to appear to conform, remains strong throughout the EHEA. For the future, the EHEA will focus on developing the third, doctoral cycle in ways compatible with the qualifications framework, on compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and on quality assurance in line with the 2015 guidelines. Of considerable potential importance is its decision to set up a system of thematic peer support groups, based on ‘solidarity, cooperation and mutual learning’.

The Policy Forum the next day pointed out that the EHEA had provided a framework and practical tools which had raised the quality of higher education provision. It pointed to learning outcomes, the diploma supplement, qualifications frameworks, and quality enhancement and assurance. Other regions, in S.E. Asia, Africa, the (southern) Mediterranean and Latin America were now engaged in broadly similar endeavours. The Policy Forum also initiated a global dialogue on two common concerns—social inclusion and the wider civic role of higher education. It proposed the establishment of a Global Working Group over the period 2018-20 and invited expressions of interest by countries in holding high level workshops to take this discussion forward.

The next Ministerial meeting and Policy Forums will take place in 2, rather than 3, years’ time, in Italy.

So, despite the changing and inauspicious political context, the EHEA, formerly the Bologna Process, still appears to be making quiet progress.

Driving through Spring

Driving through Spring
White snowdrops, yellow aconites
Begin the season’s rites.
Pale primroses beside the trees,
A haze of bluebells scents the breeze.
Swathes of yellow daffodils
Cross the meadows, climb the hills.
Vibrant cowslips stand in place,
Then they’re covered by Queen Anne’s Lace.
May pours over the hedge like snow,
Smothering the grass below.
Pink May blooms as white May fades.
Then green, in multitudinous shades,
Spills into summer.

LINDY CASTELL

Lindy Castell is a Visiting Research Fellow at Green Templeton College, having retired from running the Cellular Nutrition Research Group, Biochemistry Department; she continues to write, collaborate, and act as a graduate student adviser. She was Editor-in-Chief, Nutritional Supplements in Sport, Exercise and Health: An A-Z Guide, Routledge, April, 2015.
On Friday May 25 the students in a demonstration occupying Cambridge’s main administrative building, Greenwich House, were removed by a professional firm of eviction specialists, who were enforcing County Court and High Court rulings. The protesting students were demanding the University’s ‘Divestment’ from fossil fuel investment. The story was covered serially by Varsity and also by the BBC. Protester graffiti in Senate House Yard were photographed by the Cambridge News. A petition was circulated for signature, demanding that students involved in the demonstration should face no disciplinary procedure.

Two days earlier, on 23 May, the Reporter had published the text of a Topic of Concern Discussion held on 1 May, in which students had called with passionate determination for the standard of proof in student disciplinary cases to be lowered from ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ to ‘on the balance of probabilities’. Ironically, were they to be successful in this call, that would make it easier for the demonstrating students to be disciplined, as it seems likely that they will, especially given the demonstration.

The standard of proof in the University courts was settled at ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ in the case of academic and academic-related staff when Cambridge’s version of the Model Statute designed by the Commissioners under Education Reform Act 1988 s.202 became Statute U (now in the Schedule to Statute C and Chapter III). This was done so as to match the protection for its University Officers with that already available to its students under the disciplinary procedures to which they were historically subject. So there is even more longstanding authority for this protection for students than for the University’s academic and academic-related employees. And to change it again now would create complex difficulties where a student complained of the behaviour of a student.

Most of the speeches on 1 May had been given by women students. They were almost exclusively concerned with the handling of cases of alleged sexual harassment, though almost entirely these were envisaged as arising between students not between students and employees of the University.

Cambridge has no written student contract but it made an attempt in 2017 to provide a procedure for addressing complaints of sexual harassment. That had not satisfied the College and Students’ Union ‘Women’s Officers’ who made up more than a dozen of the speakers. Several who said they had themselves experienced sexual harassment included one of these student Women’s Officers. ‘Not only is this new procedure deeply flawed, it barely scratches the surface without reform of the standard of proof used in disciplinary matters’, said one:

‘The informal procedure makes no findings, it simply puts forward ‘suggestions’ that the respondent and complainant must both agree to in order to be adopted. If for any reason both parties do not agree to the suggestions, the process ends and complainants are then referred to a disciplinary procedure that is not fit for purpose.’

Many, she explained, ‘could not bear to put themselves through the trauma of being ‘asked to call ‘witnesses’ and having their evidence treated as if they’d entered the criminal justice system’, as that would require.

Another Women’s Officer who said she had twelve weeks’ experience in her office, and had been shocked by the stories women were bringing to her, described the trauma experienced when:

‘Victims are badgered into reliving their scarring experiences while being expected to convincingly convey the trauma they have faced. If they fail to do so and a false acquittal is reached, they are branded as liars and the cycle continues’.

In her view the requirement of the higher standard of proof ‘perpetuates the narrative of victim-blaming and minimization, including the maintenance of rape myths such as a person falsely claiming rape after sex or lying about their experiences with intimate partner violence’. It was asked ‘why do we as an institution fear more for the harm done to the accused, than we do for the victim?’

The smaller number of male speakers had their own views on that point:

‘Tell it to those who were falsely accused that the effects are not severe and have no effect on their lives. Tell that to the former Oxford Union President who was dragged through the newspapers, both at University and national level; tell that to the young Jay Cheshire who, even though he was freed of charges and rape allegations, took his life under the pressure of public opinion.’

‘Victims are badgered into reliving their scarring experiences while being expected to convincingly convey the trauma they have faced. If they fail to do so and a false acquittal is reached, they are branded as liars and the cycle continues’.

‘The most important point for the authors of this motion is that every alleged victim who comes through the door is to be believed. I think that’s the wrong way to go’, said another male speaker. Another criticised ‘trial inspired by populist arguments such as #MeToo’. One male speaker put it crisply. ‘You don’t punish someone for something when you don’t know that they’ve done it.’

There was a minor proportion of speeches by academic staff but surprisingly no academic pointed out that it is not for a student to ‘utilize’ a disciplinary process as many student speakers seemed to think they could. In Cambridge a complaint which might lead the University to initiate one is considered by the University Advocate, who determines whether it should do so. It might have been helpful for someone who understood the formal procedures and the reasons for them to make
all that clear on behalf of the University Council during the Discussion.
Nor was there more than a passing mention of matters other than alleged sexual harassment which might lead to the disciplining of a student. The vast majority of such cases in recent years concern alleged plagiarism.
Occasionally student discipline cases involve disruptive conduct, such as that of the PhD student who prevented David Willetts from speaking and was suspended for seven terms in 2012. Yet ‘the due maintenance of good order and discipline within the University’ is the historic basis of student discipline and the reason why as Statute D,1 puts it:

‘The University shall from time to time prescribe such regulations as may be thought expedient in regard to the wearing of academical dress, the rendering of assistance and obedience to all persons in authority in the University and the definition and determination of charges, offences, and penalties.’

All this raises a number of broader questions about the University’s relationship with its students, and whether it still includes elements other than those proper to a consumer contract. One speaker on 1 May said that ‘the University must properly recognize its duty of care to its students’. Another saw it – as the ‘Divestment’ demonstrators were also reported as doing – as a matter of fighting for democratic governance of the University by students. One Women’s Officer called on students to ‘organize to make sure that our specific needs are met by the institution’. The vocabulary of the May 1 Discussion reflected current fashion: ‘survivors’ (76), ‘victims’ (53), ‘perpetrators’ (30).

Young mammals allowed to live together in a social climate where mating is freely allowed are going to experiment. Whose responsibility is it when they are students who complain about the consequences? Their sexual activities may take place in University accommodation or not. Does the University have a duty of care? Does that extend to punishing the one student if the other is upset? If there has been rape or assault or controlling or coercive behaviour the law calls that criminal behaviour. Would a lower standard of proof (such as that used in Oxford) meet such a case?

If, as the speakers in the Discussion demand, the University seeks to lower the standard of proof in its courts, the Regent House will be offered a Report and there is likely to be challenge. The range of potential reasons for student discipline will have to be thought through much more fully and the whole question reconsidered in the light of a probable claim that there can be no discipline for those who enter a consumer contract. That will take some time. Meanwhile the Divestment demonstrators are likely to stand trial under the existing procedure, where they will enjoy the protection of the higher standard of proof.

On May 31 a Consultation on the whole student disciplinary procedure was published. Comments are requested by 22 June which seems short order at a time of year when academic staff are marking examination papers and students are leaving for the Long Vacation. But this places the battle about the standard of proof in a much wider context. The need to revise or redesign the Cambridge student disciplinary procedure has arisen repeatedly for some years, prompted by a series of controversies or current ‘questions arising’. These have been addressed but have largely turned out to be of the moment rather than enduringly significant. The result has been ‘patching’. The present proposals would amount to further patching.

There have been three Reports in succession, in each of which an attempt to address a topical concern or concern is noticeable. The first of these was the Joint Report of the Council and the General Board on the University’s student disciplinary procedures, published on 24 June 2015 and discussed on 7 July 2015. The second two Reports began with the Joint Report of the Council and the General Board on the consideration of student complaints of harassment and sexual misconduct (Report of 23 November 2016), discussed on 2 December 2016.

Among the concerns expressed in that Discussion was:

‘The absolute importance of having a procedure that is open and transparent, ensures fairness to all parties, and recognizes the rights of both parties.’

It was suggested at that time that the student accused of sexual harassment faced potential unfairness in several ways. For example, in the investigatory meeting designed to help the University Advocate to determine whether a disciplinary process should be initiated:

‘It seems fundamentally unsatisfactory that the accused student is not subject to any protections akin to those to which the police must adhere in interview or risk the interview being ruled inadmissible in any subsequent criminal proceedings. There is no entitlement to advance disclosure prior to the meeting, meaning that the accused student is required to give an account ‘blind’.’

The University had, it was argued, a duty to ‘accused students’, ‘to deal with them fairly’.

Nevertheless, the Grace was put to the Regent House. Then it was withdrawn ‘following continuing expressions of concern by members of the panel of volunteers in the Faculty of Law who provide legal advice and representation for student members of the University charged with disciplinary offences’, and a second Report published on 15 January 2017, making some changes. That too was discussed and concerns were raised again about the fairness of the procedure. Nevertheless, the Council submitted a Grace and it was approved.

The present further hasty patching exercise seems unlikely to bring this serial reviewing to an end in Cambridge. Not least among the problems now emerging are those hitting the headlines nationally: student mental health and the extent of a university’s responsibility for dealing with claims such as sexual harassment where the alleged offence was between adults and may not have taken place (if it did take place) on university or college property. In an attempt to provide a forum in which it could be determined whether a student had committed a disciplinary offence or was mentally ill, Oxford introduced a Fitness to Study Procedure (Statute XIII (B)). Cambridge created one of its own in 2015. But such procedures have turned out to create new problems. Students have hit the headlines with complaints that they
were ‘punished’ and ‘expelled’ for being ill under such a procedure.²¹
Cambridge is not the only University which now needs to rethink its student disciplinary arrangements from first principles.

G.R.Evans

¹ https://www.constantandco.com
² https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gSPzyK0Fnmw8suk7i6CuZ7b57V6XPgznZ_s9apM7uIjA/edit
⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-44261525
⁵ https://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/cambridge-news/why-graffiti-senate-house-university-14660545
⁶ https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/oct/18/oxford-university-punished-me-students-expelled-ill.

How to initiate Congregation actions

How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation
It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22nd day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (i.e., a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8th day before the meeting.

Questions and replies
Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18th day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in the Gazette in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

Postal votes
Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present (“on the floor”) at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6th day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

Flysheets
To generate a flysheet for publication with the Gazette, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml
Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the Gazette.
The Congregation website is at: www.admin.cam.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation.
Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: congregation.meeting@admin.cam.ac.uk).

On 7 June a House of Commons briefing paper on Sexual Harassment in Education was published, suggesting that it does, https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8117

[12] On 7 June a House of Commons briefing paper on Sexual Harassment in Education was published, suggesting that it does, https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8117
Encaenia

Sir – I quite understand that consideration of the numbers involved has led to the decision (by whom?), to cease to send invitations to the Encaenia Garden Party to former members of the University who are over 75, and therefore are no longer members of Congregation. But it is unfortunate, given that this is the only University event in the calendar in which they have been, until now, able to participate.

Has there been some general announcement of this change, and the reasons for it, for instance in the Gazette? If so, I have missed it. There has certainly been no personal message, or expression of regret, addressed to those who would have been expecting to attend this year. I cannot help feeling that this falls below the standard of courtesy and consideration which we should expect from the University.

Yours sincerely
FERGUS MILLAR
Brasenose College

Editors’ Note; Further enquiry has happily resulted in an immediate reversal of this policy.

Admissions

Sir – I have been commissioned by Prospect Magazine to write a substantial piece on Oxford admissions. The obvious spur for the idea was the recent release of admissions data by the University and the subsequent reaction. It seems to me there are many misconceptions on all sides of the debate and it would be useful to address some of them.

I would very much like to hear from anyone with first hand knowledge of the outreach and admissions system: what’s working well; what could be done better? To some of our critics we are failing to admit a sufficiently diverse cohort of students. One counter-argument is that Oxford shouldn’t be expected to carry the can for the failings of the state schooling system. The University spends a great deal of money on forms of outreach and support and yet has, in recent history, failed to meet most of the agreed targets for admitting students from under-represented backgrounds.

I have a good sense of the discussion at some levels in the University, but I would love to hear from anyone with relevant experience—including admissions tutors, outreach officers or students from under-represented backgrounds. I can be contacted through the University email system or via acrusbridge@gmail.com. Or I can be privately messaged via Facebook or Twitter. I am happy to treat contributions/conversations as being off the record if that would be easier.

I’ll be writing the piece over the summer and would be grateful if anyone could be in touch by July 13.

Yours sincerely
ALAN RUSBRIDGER
Lady Margaret Hall

Oxford FRSs in 2017

Sir – I noted Colin Thompson’s letter in the last issue of the Magazine. Readers may be aware that a number of Oxford academics were awarded Royal Society Fellowships in the year 2017. So is there any explanation for the fact that they are recorded in the University’s Annual Review 2016/17 (page 22) as having been awarded fellowships of the “Royal Academy”? Perhaps the Public Affairs Directorate who produced the document can say more.

Yours sincerely
PETER OPPENHEIMER
Christ Church

P.S. Readers should be aware that this is merely the most blatant among a string of obscurities, inconsistencies and outright errors that I have found in the later pages of said publication.

Quality Assurance

Sir – I must apologize to Peter Williams for suggesting that the QAA had ceased to exist (Oxford Magazine, No 397, 5th Week, TT 2018). My point was that its damaging interference in our activities did cease rather abruptly, and that in those days it was possible for this University, and others, to have a major effect on what such bodies did.

It would be good to think that similar things could happen now. Back then, those running the University were acutely sensitive to the needs and problems of academics, and there were those in bodies like the QAA—including Peter Williams—who had similar sympathies. Now managerialism seems to be gaining control on every hand.

Yours sincerely
RALPH WALKER
Magdalen College

TO THE EDITOR

Lucy Newlyn, literary editor of the Oxford Magazine, will be pleased to read literary submissions of any description—e.g. verse, critical prose, very short stories, segments of dialogue, reviews of new dramatic productions and books, etc. Submissions should be no longer than 750 words, and where possible should be sent by email attachment to lucy.newlyn@seh.ox.ac.uk together with a two-sentence biog.
London, 1967

Kept memory & metaphor at bay in favor of immediacy & actuality for the sake of originality, self-defense.

Now, at this late stage, tear down those old fences, & deftly recall crossing London Bridge at twenty on strong legs in two dumb boots transporting that then young, courageous body.

Memory's abandoned goldmine has me in the backseat of a top-down yellow convertible with three nurses, two in front, one with me no seatbelts, departing the institution on Montebello Road in Boston past the Hi-Hat Miles Davis often played at, headed toward the bakery in Jamaica Plain for that cake they knew I loved. All a monthly ruse so parents could talk bottom-line shop with father’s mother, my Nanzu, who also worked there way past her prime.

Robert Gibbons is the author of ten books of poetry, including Jagged Timeline, published in Denmark, and translated into Danish by Prof. Bent Sørensen of Aalborg University.

Not the Gazette and not again now till Noughth Week

NB The Oxford Magazine is not an official publication of the University. It is a forum for the free expression of opinion within the University.

The next number of the Magazine will appear in the Noughtth week of term.
Greek is great
splinters, Simpkins Lee Theatre

The world of the undergradu-
teate dramatic society has,
understandably, changed a
bit since your reviewer first
hit upon it six decades ago.
My guess is that it remains
distrusted, at best, by col-
lege tutors, who fear—often with good
cause—that their pupils will devote too
much time and energy to these frivolous
pursuits. More than one of my contempo-
raries profited from mis-spent years on the
undergraduate stage, going on to consider-
able achievement in theatre and television.
Perhaps to save the undergraduates
having to waste their time selling tickets,
one notable recent innovation is the use of
professional web-based sales companies,
resulting,—unless it’s my imagination—in
rather steeper prices than formerly? Plain-
lly, today’s potential theatre-goer is not ex-
pected to scour the columns of Cherwell or
Isis (still less Oxford Mail), but surf the net
while seated in a Turl Street coffee house.
One other change has been the growth
in the number and improvement in the
facilities of venues available to student
productions. Apart from college gardens,
the choice for any 1950s college dramatic
society was, I think, restricted to Marston
Hall (a bracing bike ride away from any
college), Walton Street Press Institute, or
the Newman Room in St. Aldates. Today,
it seems, any self-respecting college aims
to have its own theatre, equipped with all
electrical and electronic mod cons and
serving also as a stylish lecture hall, its
seating comfortable enough for the con-
ference trade. Such theatres are commonly
financed by generous donors, whose name
or names then grace the building.

While the origins of theatres’ names
may, if you’re interested enough, be de-
duced, those of today’s production compa-
nies offer no clue. Responsibility for a re-
cent production of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House,
at the Michael Pilk Studio, seemingly lay
with ‘Sour Peach Productions’. The venue I
eventually tracked down to a quiet cor-
nor of Jowett Walk, part of what I believe
to be Balliol’s graduate centre? The site, to-
tally enclosed with protective fencing, was
giving no clues. Rescued, eventually, by a
member of ‘Sour Peach’s’ stage crew, I was
told the production was sold out—not sur-
prising if, as one press report alleged, the
Studio offers no more than three rows of
seating.

With splinters, which was to have been
the second leg of a double review, I was
lucky. For this, the venue was LMI’s Lee
Simpkins Theatre (two generous alum-
nae?), which provides rather more lavish
theatre-style seating on three sides of a
modest acting area and a plain back wall
on which English surtitles could be pro-
jected (a kindly FOH volunteer informed
me that sitting in the fourth row of seats
would provide the best sight-line to these).
For this was a Greek language production
by PRAXIS, the Oxford University Greek
Society drama company; its title, the pro-
grame note explains, refers to ‘fragments
of relationships.’

The author, Nina Rapi, a short-story
specialist, had scripted seven brief, mostly
two-handed, episodes, each involving ele-
ments of antagonism, anger, frustration,
reconciliation and so on. Dialogue was
batted to and fro at a commendably brisk
pace, accompanied by pulsating music;
the subtitles, so far as I could tell, keeping
close to the action. In each mini-scene, two
actors would circle, clinch, fight, embrace,
dance, laugh or cry, all the time probing
each other’s existence and meaning. If
this makes it sound like high-falutin’ exis-
tentialist tosh, you could forgive it for the
sheer physicality and attack which the cast
of ten (8 female, 2 male) offered.

Bad points? The play started a good
20 minutes late while the cast audibly
warmed up, but on a sunny afternoon on
LMH’s lawns, the time passed pleasantly
enough. Worth looking out for PRAXIS’
ext offering, I would say.

CHRIS SLADEN

Bullshitization

David Graeber, Bullshit Jobs: a Theory
(Allen Lane–Penguin Random House,

David Graeber’s book is a much expanded version
(323 pages including notes
and bibliography, but no index) of his 2013 article
in Strike! magazine. One
must not be misled by his facetious title or
light-hearted and repetitious mode of pre-
sentation. He writes as a serious anthropol-
ogist (and self-described anarchist), and it
is an intriguing task to summarise in more
strictly economic terms the thesis which he
seeks to develop.

His argument has three components.
First, to-day’s developed (and some not-so-
developed) economies have witnessed an
explosion of “service” jobs way beyond
the point at which they cease to add to the total
well-being of the population. One is talking
here not of well-defined traditional services
such as barbers, teachers or restaurant
waiters (whose numbers have not in fact
shot up), but of assorted “administrators,
consultants, clerical and accounting staff,
IT professionals and the like” (p.139), often
with only vague or minimal functions. Why
has this happened? What does it mean?
The general answer, or part of it, is that the
phenomenon is founded on competitive
struggles over the inter-group and inter-
personal distribution of well-being—where
“well-being” includes not only earnings
but also status or authority.

Secondly, this state of affairs might still
be justifiable, at least as a second-best, if
the actual impact on distribution were
(generally agreed to be) favourable. That
is, if social justice, fairness, equality etc.
were enhanced. Such is typically the case
when redistribution is explicitly pursued
by government through progressive
taxation together with transfer payments
to the disadvantaged or needy. It is most
unlikely to result from particular groups
or individuals in the labour force ruthlessly
prioritising their own sectional interests.

Thirdly, as Graeber emphasises, the
situation gives rise to other negative effects
as well: job satisfaction suffers and social
resentments increase. People in empty (“bullshit”) positions are aware of the
emptiness, and tend to envy those with
purposeful employments. The latter groups
for their part may feel exploited, especially
when told that having a worthwhile job
is itself a privilege and they should not
expect to be properly paid in addition.
In sum, the growth in futile occupations is not
only failing to add to society’s well-being.
It is, where human perceptions of fairness
and self-worth are concerned, positively
malign.

Graeber inclines to the view
that the biggest—and certainly a
paradigm—accumulation of bullshit jobs is
to be found in the FIRE sector (”finance,
insurance, real estate”). Persuasive, and
worth pondering in particular by those
who fear damage to the British economy
from any Brexit-induced shrinkage of the
City of London. University administration
is also well up in the rankings. Besides his
own vantage point at the London School
of Economics, Graeber rightly dwells on
the insights of Benjamin Ginsberg,
The Fall of the Faculty: the Rise of the All-
Administrative University and what it
Matters (OUP, New York, 2013). These
insights include the observation that the
drainage of content (“bullshitization” in

REVIEWS

22 Eightieth Week, Trinity Term, 2018

OXFORD MAGAZINE
Graeber terminology) from university administrative positions is not confined to the lower ranks. It goes all the way to the top.

Readers of the Oxford Magazine were provided with a vivid illustration of this in the immediate past issue (No.397, Fifth Week Trinity Term, 2018, pp.5-6.) Oxford’s demitting Registrar Ewan McKendrick and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Resources and Information Systems) Anne Trefethen, in a joint article entitled “In Focus: simplifying the University’s support services”, held forth about the unveiling of a three-to-five-year project for streamlining central administration. Its achievement to date is an automated system for claiming expenses (“e-expenses”), intended to replace current manual arrangements. The latter, you see, involve a delay of “three or four weeks” before claimants are reimbursed. Moreover, as claims are numerous (70,600 per annum), they cost £1.2 million a year to process. Will this cost be any lower under the new system? The authors do not actually tell us. Will pointless and unnecessary posts be removed—or will new ones be invented? Strikingly absent from the stated aims of the entire project is any intention to challenge the absolute number of administrative posts. Yet not £1.2 million but £40 (four-zero) million a year could be saved by straightforward slimming down of central administrative staff. The authors themselves put it so well: “It is now time to step back and reconsider our processes and policies from end to end.” If only they would.

PETER OPPENHEIMER

University accountability

As the newly-created OfS ponders its regulatory role for English HEIs/HEPs, a neat overview of US ‘Higher Education Accountability’ is the 2018 book of that title from Robert Kelchen (The Johns Hopkins UP). He dissects the regulatory triad of the federal government, of state governments, and of the accrediting bodies. The chapters on the US voluntary ‘Accreditation’ arrangements (akin to our evolution of the QAA to ward off a threatened HMI invasion of HE) and on ‘Private-Sector Accountability’ are especially informative.

The concluding chapter tries to be upbeat in terms of trying to assert that ‘accountability efforts can at least marginally improve the behaviour of some of these [‘America’s worst’] colleges’ (not exactly an inspiring aspirational target for regulators!)—but notes ever-increasing pressure for greater HE productivity and accountability, the ‘incredibly difficult task’ of closing a University or college ‘on the verge of financial insolvency’, and calls for task-forces to be sent in to overhaul failing institutions and/or voluntary combined efforts (noting a collective of about 100 liberal arts colleges that have pledged... a sort of money-back guarantee' for any low-earning Grads!).

So, ‘I see accountability pressures continuing to rise at the expense of the autonomy of many colleges and universities... [external stakeholders] are unlikely to trust colleges to the extent that they did several decades ago’. And ‘the next generation of accountability metrics will be substantial improvements over the ones present today’.

DAVID PALFREYMAN

NOTICE

The Editors of the Oxford Magazine regret that they cannot publish any material submitted to them anonymously. If the author requests publication on the basis that the author’s name and university address be withheld from the readership, the Editors will consider the reasons given and in their discretion may publish on that basis; otherwise the material will be returned to the author.

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