

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Gazette supplement



Oration by the Demitting Proctors and Assessor 2026

Congregation 18 March

Senior Proctor

Well, it has been quite a year. All proctorial teams start their orations with a list of thanks, but ours is no less heartfelt for conforming to tradition. In the office we were ably supported by Ellie, David, Ruth, Fraser, Theo, Andrea, Kym and Mandy. Away in the Clarendon, Paul policed events with vigour and fairness, reinforced by Graeme and Steve. The Bedels and Verger meticulously oversaw our ceremonies, and our thanks go to Gary, Caroline, Molly, Dave, Andy, and Alan. We are grateful to all the colleagues in the Degree Conferrals Office, EPS, LSO, PAD and elsewhere who have supported us in very varied ways. There are 3 more people we must thank for keeping the office together in difficult times. Ed Bispham has been a trusted sounding board as Chair of the Committee for the Proctors' Office. Gillian Hamnett became acting Head of the Office in October, and has worked miracles. We owe her a debt that can never be repaid. Esther Villiers put in long hours as Deputy Head of the Office, doing far more for the University than the University deserves. This is Esther's penultimate week before she escapes Oxford for Lancaster. She has been here for 15 years, with time off for good behaviour, and I think I speak not just for this team but for generations of Proctors and Assessors past, when I offer her our heartfelt thanks for her hard work, wise counsel, and good humour.

Each of us will now present a third of the demission speech. Though these were written separately, they each express our joint views.

Assessor

Over the past few weeks I was frequently asked how I found the arcane Assessor role, 'exciting', 'exhilarating', 'manic'? In his demission speech, my predecessor described it as 'simply the best job in the world'. Although this was meant as a joke, the experience of the last year afforded me the maturity to come to the very same conclusion. Perhaps I can attempt to explain why, though I suspect that true understanding will forever remain the preserve of former Proctors and assessors.

To state the obvious upfront: never before has there been a year in my life during which I was so well dressed. Other reasons are less obvious. I am now more convinced than ever that the governance and scrutiny function that an independent proctorial team can bring to bear is crucially important to a balanced functioning of the University. The fact that we got to know the inner workings of every part – colleges and private halls, departments, divisions, central services, the Press, the management of our endowment, libraries, gardens, museums, our technology transfer arm, buildings and IT projects, budgeting and strategic planning – enabled our small team to put discussions into a wider context, connect the dots and steer strategy and policy decisions to better outcomes, not through hard power, but through better arguments and by asking questions, sometimes uncomfortable ones. I must also admit that, in contrast to my own prejudice, the vast majority of time spent in committees was productive. Business was conducted with professionalism and purpose, and I felt privileged to work with such highly committed colleagues.

A few days ago a wise soul sent us on our most important mission yet, which is to demit, return to our usual jobs, and – equipped with a new super power – to start explaining how the University works to the University. This seems to be one of the great conundrums of our institution, administrators scratching their heads as to why everything has to be so federated, and academics developing conspiracies about what the administration is up to. Everyone is just trying to understand how the University works.

A few home truths can help dispel some common myths. Firstly, that most of the administrative growth is explained either by regulatory requirements or by non-scalable work processes due to outdated software. More on this later. Secondly, that our 2 core activities of research and research-led teaching are both loss making. Yes, in Wellington Square slang, such activities do not ‘wash their face’, or – for members of Congregation – ‘faciem non lavat’. Nonetheless, our recent annual report shows the University to be in sound financial health, a state of affairs we owe to our colleagues at Oxford University Press, our fund management team, our technology transfer arm, our development team, and most of all to our generous donors. But despite the impressive figures, serious challenges lie ahead and must be tackled.

The Proctors and the Assessor have now reached their planned obsolescence. More disconcertingly though, so have many of our University buildings. Our forebears also flagged this, and while huge progress has been made in some parts of the estate, notably with the opening of the fantastic new Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities and the Life and Mind Building, in other corners the situation has become acute and reached a point where serious problems are starting to accumulate. The painstaking prioritisation exercise that dominated this year’s negotiation of the new 3-year settlement between divisions and central services could only go so far to address this problem. To keep playing in the international top league of universities and match our huge ambition, vision and appetite for change, we urgently must find much more funding for investment.

This is also true for our digital estate. Our flagship Digital Transformation Programme, now underway for several years, has been unable to deliver new software tools as fast as new demand arises. Meanwhile, the cost of software licences grows well in excess of general inflation and cannibalises funding that should be used for strategic investment. This squeeze forces a focus on bare essentials, while the IT team work all hands on deck to ameliorate our services. In time, this effort will reveal whether the currently non-existent Wi-Fi coverage at the Proctors Office is a deliberate design feature or an oversight. One area of notable progress is in providing AI access in a mode that safeguards our confidential data, and this is starting to pervade all aspects of University

business. While we have all become accustomed to impressive coding and text-editing capabilities, the latest AI models have made remarkable inroads into reasoning itself. For many of our colleagues this is starting to fundamentally change the way they conduct research and deliver research-led teaching. No doubt, in time this will also put immense pressure on our stretched IT budget.

While Proctors bear responsibility for student discipline, the Assessor’s remit covers welfare. This is the dance of yin and yang, the good cop versus bad cop routine of the Proctors’ Office. Much of the committee work mentioned earlier was dominated by compromise and trade-off that left only suboptimal options. The welfare side of my role offered a welcome sanctuary from such turmoil and brought me into contact with colleagues from the Student Welfare Support Services and the Equality and Diversity Unit. Their work improves our students’ experience in so many important ways and underpins everything else the University does. Incidence rates of poor mental health and disability have steadily increased since the COVID pandemic and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

After pointing out these challenges, let me finish on an unequivocally positive note: it was simply fantastic to work with the team at the Proctors’ Office with whom I had many a laugh, and with Nick and Grant in particular, the best colleagues I could wish for. Together we shared a drab breezeblock office, but its dinginess bore no significance when we had so much fun with office banter and whingefests about our nearly defunct laptops. And to my successor I wish nothing but good fortune and enjoyment. Jeff, if you have half as much fun as we had in our office, you truly do have the best job in the world!

Junior Proctor

Literally and figuratively, the high point of my time as Proctor was being on the roof of Magdalen Tower on May Morning. Standing beneath the flawless blue heavens, looking out across the dreaming spires, and seeing crowds of more than 15,000 people on the streets below us, was a sublime moment. When the choir burst into song at 6am tears came into the eyes of even this old cynic. I fell in love with Oxford all over again. What – I thought – could possibly go wrong in a university like this?

Since I only have about 6 minutes, it is tempting to reduce the answer to that question to a matter of language, and what it connotes, following in the satirical footsteps of many of our proctorial predecessors on this occasion. Sitting in what one set of committee papers may or may not accidentally have called ‘Wellington Squat’, we have certainly felt the ‘pain points’, worried about ‘drop-dead dates’, and winced at efforts ‘to drill down’ and avoid ‘bleeding stumps’. We have applauded

efforts ‘to surface the wiring’, looked eagerly for ‘maturity uplifts’, and mulled the need ‘to set better mousetraps round the corner’. ‘Upstream external dependencies’ have not daunted us, not least as we have come to expect ‘course corrections’ to be offered by ‘change champions’ and ‘scrum masters’. ‘Agile delivery’ has frequently been promised. Dashboards and risk registers have become ever more elaborately detailed.

Beneath the endless tedious layers of incontinent verbal nonsense lie serious issues. I would like to pause and reflect on some educational matters that are at the heart of this university’s purpose. I think it is particularly worth contrasting 2 key changes over our period in office.

In September, the startling news broke across an unsuspecting University that all staff and students were being given free access to ChatGPT as part of our developing relationship with OpenAI. This was publicly couched in terms of innovation and opportunity for those within the Oxford system, but a significant driver was also the desire to improve cyber-security. Too many documents risked being fed into insecure systems, and potentially leaking into the vast reaches of uncontrollable LLMs. Better, then, to have a secure ‘walled garden’ within which all could work and study. One can see the argument, but Oxford – like the rest of the world – is left floundering in the wake of rapid technological change, trying to adapt its activities and governance to what many of us see as a fundamental threat to higher education (amongst other things). We share the disquiet of many colleagues that the rapid distribution of such licences by the University sent a powerful signal to our students that AI usage was being promoted in problematic ways.

Whilst the technology cannot be uninvented, the challenges posed to our admissions processes, teaching model, formative and summative assessment, and student wellbeing are all profound. True to the spirit of subsidiarity that pervades Oxford whenever hot potato issues are at stake, but there is no money available to address them, faculties are scrambling to develop protocols that suit their own disciplines. Centrally, various AI working groups are proliferating, and an AI Governance Group meets regularly. Sitting on the latter has emphatically not reassured me that the University has appropriately got its metaphorical arms around the challenge. There is too much emphasis on not stifling local initiatives; too little concern to concentrate appropriate coordinated oversight in a single responsible senior committee. In the meantime, we can report that 2 students have been successfully prosecuted for substantial unsanctioned use of AI in summative assessment before disciplinary panels, part of a wider re-energising of the machinery of academic discipline which the current Proctors are proud to have helped promote. We hope that exam boards will continue to

feel confident that the Proctors’ Office is committed to supporting them in cracking down on various forms of cheating.

A second key change evident over the course of our year in office is very different. Where all matters AI-related proceed ‘at pace’, the shift in our undergraduate admissions process has been more of a slow-motion road-crash. 2 unsatisfactory external providers of tests in recent years have been followed by a depressing move to no Oxford-specific admissions tests at all. Some subjects have – with greater or, usually, lesser enthusiasm – moved to join other UK universities in multi-institution tests. Others – including big faculties like English and History – have been left with no admissions test. This is a major failure of policy. Financial arguments have defeated academic needs. Yet a system without Oxford-specific tests has significant costs, even if they are not easily represented on a balance sheet. We urgently need to re-establish in-house tailored tests that command the confidence of our academic community, even though that will involve difficult discussions between the colleges and the central University, and hard trade-offs. This should go hand-in-hand with rapid and serious discussions about whether online admissions interviews can really continue in the emerging AI-influenced landscape.

The implications of financial constraints and competing priorities continue to feed through the committee structure that we have so extensively sampled this year. It has been disheartening to see some important areas of work rendered fundamentally impossible, or else severely delayed, due to lack of money. Many hours have been spent discussing a central panel of medically qualified experts to oversee student MCEs – a process longed for by many exam boards – which lacks any plausible budget. And crucial work to refurbish the Exam Schools – without which the rapidly rising demand for in-person exams will soon become unsustainable – seems unlikely during the next 3-year settlement without urgent reprioritising of resources. More broadly, we share the frustration of past proctorial and assessorial teams with arguments that Oxford should change in various ways to become more like other parts of the UK higher education sector when our own practices are actually better. I would not disagree with one discerning critic’s description of such arguments as being ‘thick as mince’.

We would like to pay tribute to the wisdom and dedication of numerous, but necessarily unnamed, colleagues on a host of committees for continuing to fight the good fight. I would particularly like to thank my wonderful Pro-Proctors this year, Nicholas Cole and Sophie Nicholls, who have maintained my morale and made me laugh at the folly of it all, whilst also undertaking much appreciated ceremonial and student casework. Finally, I hope that our successors will enjoy

working with each other as much as I have with Nick and Raphael – the best friendships can be fostered in adversity.

Senior Proctor

In the demission speech lottery, I drew people, and it is in people we find the third of the structural weaknesses that face the University. Buildings and digital infrastructure are the other 2, and, in all 3, we can detect a pattern. It is one of slow decay, masked by the wearisome efforts of those affected to find mitigations and accommodations. But this masking allows the decay to be left unchecked. When we are finally forced to act, when the mask cannot be maintained, the remedies are costly, and the harms to the University serious, and unavoidable. If you want a parable, metaphor, or example, I am not quite sure which of the 3 it is, take a walk down Parks Road and gaze upon the Thom Building. As a building, it cannot be considered a success. It fails to keep the rain off those inside and bits of it are shaking loose. For many years, the decay within the building has been metaphorically masked, as damp academics did their best to keep things functioning. My understanding, though I may be mistaken in the technical details, is that the masking has now taken a literal form, with the building being wrapped up with cellophane and sticky tape. People, I suggest, is our next Thom Building. It is the Thom Building of 10 years ago. The water is coming in, the walls are not looking as firm as they did, but the problem is masked, we still seem to be muddling through.

When we started our proctorship, the Academic Career and Reward Framework project was in full flow. The framework sought to address 3 issues: pay, workload, and career structure. Although these are issues that affect all academics in Oxford, it was recognised that the associate professor role was especially challenging. The Proctors and Assessor are members of this unhappy category, a role which is, we might say, a predicament rather than a position. Indeed, most of those on the academic side who take on administrative duties, who drive forward research, and who undertake the bulk of the teaching, are on associate professor contracts. Sadly, but rightly, the ambitious ACRF has been paused, and it is likely to prove a good long pause, too. Why this project stalled, and what it now leaves unaddressed, goes to the heart of the University's relationship with its academics.

The question of academic pay is a long-term problem. There have been many years of below-inflation pay rises, and, given the exceptional rise in the cost of living in Oxford, these have hit those working in this city especially hard. Where our ancestors lived in the leafy luxury of Park Town, the modern scholar considers themselves lucky to get a mortgage on a new build in Bicester. This is a problem that has been recognised by both the Vice-Chancellor and Council. Having sat through far too many meetings, I can promise you that

there is a real and genuine desire, at the very top of the University, to address the problem. But there has been little progress made, and there is little progress in sight. What has gone wrong?

The first reason is that this is a long-term problem, and our governance structures struggle to deal with these. As with the failure to invest in the maintenance and replacement of our buildings, the problem persists because it is important, but not urgent. We can muddle through for now. Those who make the hard decisions about the allocation of resources – who, of course, are often only in post for 4 or 5 years – understandably prioritise other issues, leaving pay to the wisdom of their successors. Although there is a desire to address questions of pay at the top of the University, that desire evaporates as you descend the ranks. Like the Thom Building 10 years ago, the problem can be detected, but its remedy can be delayed to another day.

The second reason is lack of ambition. Although we present ourselves as an international institution, we think of ourselves in national terms, and when we compare ourselves to other UK universities the salaries do not seem all that bad. For those at the start of their academic careers in Oxford, pay is competitive with other institutions. That includes those in the associate professor band. It is only once progression is made within this band, with the award of title and merit awards, that Oxford falls behind. So, perhaps this is a fuss over nothing? Well, the setting of academic pay is a curious thing. Oxford is part of a national pay negotiating scheme, overseen by the government, and, for now, increases in pay are agreed at a national level. So, asking whether Oxford pay aligns with other UK universities is almost redundant: of course it is, as the employers have, with a little help from the unions, decided what their employees deserve to be paid. But the consequence of this is that pay in Oxford has fallen far short of our international equivalents, and, you might think, for a university that sees itself as a world-class institution, these should be our comparators. As pay continues to slide, even if we remain competitive nationally, we will cease to be so internationally. Once more, the Thom Building looms to mind. We may already be losing people to other universities, we may already have talented people deciding they cannot afford to embark on an academic career; but, from the outside, all looks well. These are problems that will take time to work through the system. The building seems fine from a distance, the decay is masked.

What should be done about all of this? How do we avoid our academic community following the fate of the Thom Building, and ending up kept together with sticky tape and hope? One thing the Proctors have learned over the last year is that there are not simple answers. Just about everyone we have met in senior leadership roles in the University has been committed to the institution and its

people. If there were easy solutions, these would already have been adopted. But we would urge the University, at all levels, to take this issue seriously. To consider if national pay bargaining really does make sense for an international institution, to examine ways of enabling meaningful career progression for its staff. And, parenthetically, if it is serious about reducing workload, to do its best to fend off second exam sittings.

That is almost it, but I would like to end with some thanks. I'm very grateful to my Pro-Proctors, Chris Morton and Cosima Gillhammer, who have done far more than their fair share of degree days and sermons. And I am also exceptionally grateful to my colleagues, now my friends, Grant and Raphael. I could not have asked for better: their support and kindness got me through the year.

Statistics for the Proctorial Year 2025–26

Student academic misconduct

PROCTORS' DISCIPLINARY REGULATIONS FOR
CANDIDATES IN EXAMINATIONS/STATUTE XI:
UNIVERSITY CODE OF DISCIPLINE

	2024–25				2025–26			
	Total resolved	Upheld	Not upheld	SDP referral	Total resolved	Upheld	Not upheld	SDP referral
Plagiarism	92	74	18	0	41	27	10	4
Other	15	4	11	0	8	0	8	0

Student non-academic misconduct

STATUTE XI: UNIVERSITY CODE OF DISCIPLINE

	Total resolved	
	2024–25	2025–26
Occupation of/damage to University property	2	3
Obstruction of staff	0	1
Engaging in dishonest behaviour in relation to the University	0	5
Threatening/violent behaviour	0	5
Criminal conviction	0	2
Harassment (non-sexual)	26	22
Sexual misconduct/harassment	9	7