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UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Resolution concerning the University of Oxford Strategic Plan 2018–23

Congregation 30 October

The following is the text of the meeting of Congregation at 2pm on 30 October. For further information please see *Gazette* No 5217, 11 October 2018, pp74–5, and Supplement (2) to *Gazette* No 5216, 10 October 2018, for the full text of the Strategic Plan.

The Vice-Chancellor: There are two items of business before Congregation today: the first, a resolution concerning a space allocation, and the second, a resolution concerning the University's Strategic Plan 2018–23. Would you please be seated.

Both resolutions were placed on the agenda of this meeting, first published in the 11 October issue of the *Gazette*, and no notice of opposition or amendment has been received in respect of either resolution. I therefore declare the first resolution concerning the allocation of space in the Alden Press Annexe to the University Museums carried. As set out in the *Gazette* of 11 October, this meeting is being held formally to put the resolution concerning the University's Strategic Plan 2018–23 to Congregation.

The procedure for today's meeting will be as follows. I shall begin by reading the resolution concerning the Strategic Plan 2018–23. I shall then invite Dr David Prout to move the resolution, and Professor Matthew Freeman to second it. There will then be further speeches on the resolution. I shall give Dr Prout a right of reply to the debate before putting the resolution to Congregation. If, having taken into account the speeches, I consider that a consensus may have been reached, I will announce that in my opinion the resolution is accepted or rejected as the case may be. If, however, six members of Congregation rise in their places, a vote will be taken by paper ballot.

If a vote is called, members of Congregation will be required to identify themselves on their voting papers by name and signature, and by college, department or faculty, and invited to deposit their own voting paper in a ballot box at one of the voting stations at the exits to the theatre. A member may not leave a completed voting paper with another member. Only a member's own personal voting paper will be accepted for each vote. Any member who cannot stay until I call the vote will not be able to vote. The members of Congregation should have received a voting paper as they entered the theatre. Any members who have not will have an opportunity to collect them at the exits. The Proctors will be responsible for counting the votes, and the result will be announced as soon as possible after the vote has been taken.

Speakers, when called, please could you come forward and speak into the microphone, first giving your name and college or department. The anti-loquitor device will indicate your final minute with an amber light and then turn red at the end of the minute, at which point you will disappear in a puff of smoke. You are asked to confine your remarks to themes relevant to the discussion. The following is the text of the resolution: 'That the Strategic Plan for 2018–23, published as Supplement (2) to *Gazette* No 5216, 10 October 2018 (also available online), is approved.' I call on Dr David Prout to move the resolution.

Dr Prout: Thank you, Vice-Chancellor. I am David Prout, Queen's College and Pro-Vice-Chancellor. Dear colleagues, thank you all for attending this afternoon. Thank you also to the 450 colleagues who contributed to the online consultation on our draft Strategic Plan, to the 400 colleagues who attended open meetings to discuss the plan, to the various governing bodies and divisional boards who sent in comments, to the 40 or so University committees who discussed and debated the plan – some on numerous occasions – and to colleagues in the administrative service who helped with the process and the drafting of the plan.

By any measure, Oxford is one of the most successful universities in the world. It makes a huge contribution to national life and the local area. Its success is illustrated by its turnover, which has doubled since 2006. It is at the leading edge of research, education, creative thinking and scientific progress in many fields of endeavour. The aim of the Strategic Plan is to help it stay that way.

In a devolved institution, planning – like decision-making – has to take place at the right level. Sometimes that is the individual academic, sometimes the department or division, sometimes the University. The Strategic Plan is a University document. Take note, it is not a college document. The colleges have made an important contribution to it and will play an important part in implementation, but the colleges are independent, self-governing institutions. The plan has been compiled in a bottom-up way, with the biggest contribution coming from the various committees, whose membership is drawn from Congregation, the colleges and across the University.

The priorities set out in the plan deal with issues that will be done better when the University as a whole pulls together. They include: strategic growth in undergraduate and postgraduate numbers; subsidised housing for staff; development of the science parks; outreach, access and attainment; staff and student wellbeing; staff development; the provision of academic facilities; the more effective and efficient operation of the University as a whole; and establishing at least one more graduate college.

Our aim is to achieve this in the context of Brexit and other global challenges, which will make all aspects of our University life more difficult and less benign than in the last five years. We will also do it against a background of tighter resources in the University, with less flexibility in terms of our internal resources, frozen or reduced student fees and a more difficult research funding environment.

By planning together, we can ensure that we make the best use of the funding that we have

available. By setting priorities, we can establish targets that we can work together to achieve. And by being clear about our priorities, we can work more effectively with the local community, local authorities, industry, other academic institutions, funders and donors and the private sector and government. Overall the plan will help to drive a One Oxford approach to our endeavour.

Implementation of the plan is a job of the various PVCs and their committees. All the priorities have been allocated to named individuals. Agreement on how the priorities will be delivered will be an iterative process involving many colleagues from across the University. We will not be able to deliver all the priorities at once. We may need to be more ruthless in our prioritisation in the light of resource constraints and the availability of external help and funding. Some priorities will bring funding into the University; others will require additional funding to be found. We are working on the money flows that sit behind the plan. Progress will be tracked by a programme board chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, which will report to PRAC and Council in accordance with the requirements of the regulations.

The plan touches on many aspects of the University. Its aim is that in five years' time the University will be as successful as it is today. It will be bigger, but it will have grown in a planned way. It will be more diverse in terms of staff and students. Our staff will feel more valued. We will have better academic facilities. Our economic impact will have increased. Our standards will be as high as ever.

But the University will also have changed in all manner of ways that are not touched on by the plan. Our academics will have made breakthroughs that we can't imagine. We will have formed new academic, commercial and local partnerships. New institutions will have grown up. The colleges will have built new buildings. We will have numerous new colleagues who will bring in new thinking and new energy. We will continue to respond to changes in the world around us.

Some say we don't need a plan. We have done brilliantly in the past; we will do brilliantly in the future. I say yes, but I believe we can do even better. That is the aim behind the plan. It has been the work of many colleagues to put it together. It will require the hard work and good will of many colleagues to deliver the priorities, and I am certain that by working together, step by step, we will make the plan a success. Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chancellor: Thank you, Dr Prout. I call on Professor Matthew Freeman to second the resolution.

Professor Freeman: I am Matthew Freeman, Head of the Dunn School of Pathology, Fellow of Lincoln and a member of Council elected by Congregation. I have spent most of my career in other places, but I have now been in Oxford long enough to understand the importance of the relative autonomy that derives from our constitutional arrangements. It may be that some members of Congregation see the Strategic Plan as challenging these decentralised values that underpin so much of what we do. Is it actually a Soviet-style five-year plan, the Centre's final assault on the sunlit uplands of managerialism? Having been a head of an Oxford department for five years now, and a member of Council for three, I actually believe the opposite is true. As David Prout has described, the plan is genuinely the product of extensive consultation. Honestly, those of us who sit on multiple committees would be forgiven for feeling a bit sick of seeing it at so many of them. But of course the alternative – too little consultation – would have been much worse.

The themes from the plan emerged from the divisions and the whole collegiate University. They aim to address the concerns of those of us who do the teaching and the research. They aim to tackle the challenges faced by Oxford in a changing external environment. And they aim to ensure that Wellington Square understands our position.

So what are the most important issues that have been highlighted? I know I am not alone in believing that our top priority must be recruiting, retaining and developing outstanding colleagues, and providing an environment in which they can flourish. I know this because it was the near universal theme that emerged from all parts of the consultation.

To put people first we need to work hard in many areas: we must provide an attractive career structure and commitment to professional and personal development; we must become part of the solution to the need for high-quality, appropriate and affordable accommodation; and we must be able to provide sufficient childcare facilities needed to support those with parental responsibilities. These are all addressed in the Strategic Plan. But if we are to continue to attract and retain the very best researchers in the world, our facilities also need to be outstanding. Accordingly, the Strategic Plan includes a commitment to renewing our estate, to make sure that our academic buildings remain fit for research in the 21st century.

And if we strive to be the best, we must capitalise on all available talent. It is of course right that our Strategic Plan seeks to tackle issues of undergraduate access, and staff and student diversity. We also need to make sure that success at any level in Oxford is not skewed by gender, race or social background. Access and diversity isn't a matter of mere compliance with external regulators; it is something that must be in our DNA. We care about it because it is right, but also because our success depends on the widest possible range of perspectives and experience.

Colleagues, it took me a long time to understand what, in an Oxford context, the words 'size and shape' mean, and even longer to appreciate the amount of historical and emotional baggage they come with. I am convinced that in a competitive academic world, Oxford does need to evolve and grow. I don't think it is wise to assume that what has worked until now will always continue to be effective. For example, in the Medical Sciences division we do not recruit enough postgraduate students to allow our group leaders to carry out their research as efficiently as they should be. MPLS, Social Sciences and Humanities have also identified strong academic needs for additional students. But growth must be controlled in an agreed framework to ensure that we maintain what's special about being a student in Oxford. The Strategic Plan gives priority to new student housing, at least one more postgraduate college and a campaign to attract additional scholarship funding.

Our extraordinary research is daily applied to real-world problems. We seek not only to analyse how the world works, but also to improve it. I head the department that gave antibiotics to humanity, and I feel that privilege and responsibility every working day. Breakthroughs come from the brilliant ideas of individuals and teams but, as the penicillin story tells us, to have impact, the infrastructure for their development is also essential. The Strategic Plan includes the commitment to expand our capacity to exploit our research by growing the innovation centres at Begbroke, Osney and in other places around Oxford.

In seconding the Strategic Plan today, I believe that we need a framework agreed by all, by which we academics can guide the University's management; to ensure that the energies of Wellington Square are focused on what we think is important; to allow Oxford to remain at the forefront of world universities in inspiring teaching and outstanding research; and to understand that at the heart of this is people. Our students, staff and academic faculty are fundamentally what make Oxford special, and they are deeply embedded throughout the plan.

The Vice-Chancellor: Thank you very much, Professor Freeman. I now call on Dr Peter Thonemann to speak on the resolution.

Dr Thonemann: Peter Thonemann, Wadham College and Faculty of Classics. Rebuilding public confidence in Oxford undergraduate admissions is the most important and urgent priority facing us over the next five years. As Wadham's Tutor for Access, I am delighted and proud that fair access has been placed front and centre in the document before us today. Our first commitment in the draft Strategic Plan is 'to attract and admit students from all

backgrounds', by strengthening and expanding our outreach activities. Our first education priority in the draft Strategic Plan is to set ambitious targets to substantially increase the number of undergraduates from under-represented groups.

Vice-Chancellor, strengthening, expanding and target-setting are simply no longer enough. Public confidence in Oxford undergraduate admissions is at its lowest ebb in my professional lifetime. Worse, even, than in the dark days of the Laura Spence PR car crash, which led some 15 years ago to the introduction of the Common Framework for Admissions. The MP for Tottenham is not the only person to see us as, in his words, 'a bastion of entrenched, wealthy, upper-class, white, southern privilege'.

Perhaps most toxic of all is the perception of Oxford as a racist institution. We in this room do not believe that our admitting tutors are racist, and our admissions numbers largely bear that out. But the ongoing collapse of public confidence in Oxford admissions is in danger of creating a self-reinforcing downwards spiral. Clever young people from low-income backgrounds from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, from Tyneside or South Wales, are becoming ever less likely to apply to us because of the widespread perception, right or wrong, that we are not serious about opening our doors to people like them.

Like admissions, much of our access work is currently devolved to the colleges on a regional basis. And in very many ways this has been a success; a hundred flowers have indeed bloomed. Colleges have developed imaginative and ambitious regional schemes: Corpus and Pembroke colleges' visionary OxNet initiative, Univ's Opportunity Programme, LMH's Foundation Year, Wadham's own Pre-16 Luton Project. But colleges are very small institutions, and coordination between colleges has been thus far minimal. All of these admirable initiatives work on a small scale, but their fragmentation has led to staggering inefficiency. To take only one example, LMH's Foundation Year works on its own terms. But as long as it remains an 'LMH Foundation Year', 12 students per year is the ceiling; it is not scalable. A putative threefold increase in funding for the Foundation Year would lead to a sixfold increase in numbers and impact, but LMH does not have the bedrooms or the money to do that alone. The same is of course true of Univ's Opportunity Programme and others.

Right now we are at a crunch point. Cambridge has just announced a game-changing £500 million transition programme. At Oxford are we now only to continue on the path of slow and steady incremental change: strengthening, expanding and target-setting? I know that closer faculty and college cooperation in admissions is currently on the table, perhaps combined with new bridging programmes, and I welcome that. This may mitigate some marginal injustices in the current admission system, though frankly I doubt that the public will either notice or care. I have the greatest admiration for Samina Khan and her team, but their resources are finite, and their ability to shape initiatives across colleges is limited. 'One Oxford' is the keynote of this Strategic Plan; in this most crucial field of access we are still 30 Oxfords. The need for ambitious and radical central leadership could not be more pressing. Thank you.

The Vice-Chancellor: Thank you, Dr Thonemann. I now call on Allison D'Ambrosia to speak on the resolution.

Ms D'Ambrosia: Hello, I am Allison D'Ambrosia and I am the Oxford SU graduate representative. Yesterday Philip Hammond announced the government is going to spend £2 billion on mental health. Now, whilst I would love for the University to match that for student mental health services here, spending over one-third of the University endowment on mental health may be just a teeny bit extreme, but only a tiny bit. If I had been up here speaking to you one year ago, I would have been speaking as a welfare practitioner at Oxford. I would have been beginning my second year as a Junior Dean, where, from my first week to my last week on call, I worked as the first port of call for students in crisis. As a welfare practitioner, responding to students, I am here to tell you we are experiencing a mental health crisis.

You will be hard-pressed to find any welfare practitioner at the University, especially those in direct contact with the students, who would disagree that Oxford is experiencing a student mental health crisis. Thus this is refreshing to see such an emphasis and understanding put on student wellbeing from an institution as a whole on the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan uses the term 'wellbeing' seven times but only says 'welfare' once and never once mentions 'mental health'. We must avoid the trap that other universities have fallen into, namely using the term 'wellbeing' to avoid acknowledging structural problems that are causing welfare and mental health problems that we see manifesting in our student population.

Wellbeing and developing healthy habits are vital to any student's maturity in higher education. However, in implementing the Strategic Plan we must be aware that although a focus on wellbeing is a first step towards improving the quality of an academic experience in Oxford, it cannot be the end. Out of the Strategic Plan, we need to ensure that there is a proactive welfare strategy for combating and discovering the cause of the mental health crisis we experience. With this in mind we must be aware of what awaits us in the future, with a rapidly diversifying student body, propelled by growing student numbers, we must be prepared to grapple with the range of challenges that future students will pose.

The Strategic Plan asserts its vision in equality of opportunity and inclusivity – 'the very best students and staff can flourish in our community' – and affirms the promise that in Oxford students can thrive, not just survive. However, when many students arrive they feel out of place and like an imposter because they come from a non-Oxford or even non-university background. In many cases this leads to not only their self-esteem suffering, but their attainment.

This is a reality that was recognised in the VC's Oration, when our own research was cited as showing that only 20% of the population believes we are accessible to students of all backgrounds and fair in how we choose our students. As Peter just mentioned, it is because of the widespread perception, right or wrong, that we are not serious about opening our doors to people like them, that they inherently enter this institution with welfare needs, which if not supported could develop into more intense mental health cases. This will not change by tweaking at the edges. Substantial change is needed to convince future students that there is a place for them here.

The wellbeing strategy is crucial to achieve an atmosphere where students can flourish, and this can only be achieved by acknowledging that a diverse body of students needs a range of well-resourced treatments and increasing funding per head. We should also take note that the Strategic Plan's emphasis 'to build a stronger and more constructive relationship with our local and regional community' and to endeavour to set up meaningful partnerships with local mental health charities such as Restore and Rethink that are easily accessible services that operate in areas where students live.

The most exciting part of the Strategic Plan is the possibility of a joined-up approach finally being realised in regards of wellbeing: that Education Commitment 2 recognises that work needs to be done to 'strengthen the partnership between colleges, academic departments and faculties, and central services to provide the welfare support that our students need to flourish'. The decentralised nature of the collegiate system is one of the most effective shields in ensuring that a tragic situation like Bristol does not happen here.

However, we must make sure that the strategy does not exist in rhetoric and instead follow the example of departments like Computer Science, who are actively promoting healthy mental health habits and talking about difficult topics around mental health. There needs to be a dialogue begun around implementing the

Strategic Plan that makes taking care of our mental health a cornerstone of each academic work for students.

The fact that Oxford is the Times Higher Education top university in the world will be a fact that you will have heard ten times over by now, yet there seems to be a stark contrast between this accolade and my experience as a Junior Dean. If we are a world leader in academia then why are we not also leading in how we tackle our students' mental health?

While the Strategic Plan, whose mission includes wellbeing, offers us an opportunity to promote a more holistic approach to supporting all of our students, it gives us an even greater chance to recognise that there may be ways we could support students even more. This should not replace what we are already doing, but rather work in parallel with a well-resourced welfare framework. Let us use the Strategic Plan as a first step in claiming responsibility and confronting the student wellbeing and student mental health crisis at Oxford. Thank you.

The Vice-Chancellor: Now, that concludes the list of people who indicated that they would like to speak on this resolution. Given that we are all here, I am happy to entertain if anybody else would like to speak, so please step forward and identify yourself.

Please come forward. If you wouldn't mind identifying yourself, you have five minutes.

Professor Timpson: Vice-Chancellor, colleagues. Chris Timpson, Chair of Faculty Board in Philosophy and Tutorial Fellow at Brasenose, and I speak in the latter capacity. I have ummed and ahed about whether to speak on the plan, and I err on the side of ahing in order to say something, and that which I shall say will be no surprise to anybody who has been in any meeting with me recently when we have been discussing these kinds of matters.

First, I want to say some positive things. I think the plan should be commended on its brevity and relative clarity. It is rare that we have strategic plans which are so cleanly and plainly put. And also, I think the effort behind the plan in terms of the extensive consultation should be respected. Surely there has been no strategic plan which has been more consulted on, and all these things are good things.

But I have a sense amongst many colleagues whom I have spoken to of a certain air of disengagement with the plan, even so largely for the reason that it doesn't seem obvious that though each of the particular propositions that are put seem reasonable and desirable in their own terms, it doesn't seem obvious that they are all co-satisfiable, namely that it is possible to do them together. And I think that is one way of unifying two of the previous speakers' comments, that can we really do all the things that we should like to do under these headings? So the devil, as always, is in the details. I was encouraged by Dr Prout's observations that the entertaining of the implementation of the plan via the Strategic Implementation Plan would involve reassessing and redoing things, but I do think we need to face up as a University to the fact that, as written, we are seeking to subscribe to a number of prima facie inconsistent desiderata. It is not at all obvious that we can do all these things, and I think that leads to many colleagues thinking that while we can say these nice propositions, maybe it would be nice if it was achievable, but we don't generally have any reason to believe that they are all co-achievable.

Under that particular heading, 'size and shape', indeed a problematic concept in the Oxford setting, we have set ourselves on a path to become bigger. It is not obvious that that is the right thing to do. For all that we can see that there are many calls to become bigger in various parts of the University, we might well wish to consider that our natural shape and size in order to deliver that which we wish to in terms of really leading research, really caring for our students, the ordinary tutorial teaching and undergraduate and graduate teaching that we do – it may be better suited to an environment which isn't getting bigger but which remains the same or gets smaller. That may mean that we should have to face up to the proposition that if we want to increase in some areas, as there will always properly be calls that we should do so, that we face up to the thought that we need to then decrease in other areas.

It is not obvious to me that we should get bigger in order to increase numbers in strategically important areas. (Who is deciding what is strategically important?) I think this ought at least to be on the table. It is not obvious we can do everything we want to do here with the growth agenda. In the Vice-Chancellor's own splendid Oration at the beginning of term, she noted the fact that as our income overall has doubled since 2006, our profitability, if you put it in these terms, has gone negative. The larger we have got, the worse our financial position has become. Maybe this is fixable. Maybe there are ways of tweaking things so we can get this to come out right. But also I think, as a University, we should seriously consider that we are already as large as, or possibly larger than, our natural size for the kind of endeavour that we wish to undertake. And I haven't been anti-locquated.

The Vice-Chancellor: Thank you very much. Is there anybody else who would like to speak? If not, I'll turn to Dr Prout as the mover of the resolution to ask him whether he would like to respond to the debate.

Dr Prout: Well, thank you very much, Vice-Chancellor, and thank you, colleagues, for your comments. The various speeches make me think it would have been nice to have more speeches because they have put down some really interesting challenges and raised issues which I think deserve wide debate and discussion within the University. A lot of those have been debated and discussed in the fora where we have been talking about the Strategic Plan. But I was particularly struck by a common theme that there are benefits in working together where it makes sense to work together. And I think if we hold that as a primary moving principle of the work we do as we go forward, we will be well placed.

I noted the challenge of leadership in terms of access. I noted the shocking testimony of our graduate student rep, and speaking as the father of a daughter who has suffered from mental health problems, I absolutely appreciate what you are talking about. I am not only the father of a daughter with mental health problems, but I am the colleague of many fathers and mothers with children with mental health problems, and the friend of many fathers and mothers with children with mental health problems. I do think that we need to do all we can on that.

Congratulations to Professor Timpson for raising the question of shrinking as well as growing, which is an obvious question. Thank you very much for putting it forward. And again, Matthew, thank you very much for your testimony. I was particularly struck by the responsibility that you feel as head of department to take forward the tradition of what has been achieved in your department. I think that everybody at Oxford, whether they're in the administrative service or on the academic side, feels the same sense of responsibility to take our great institution forward.

The Vice-Chancellor: Thank you very much. Well, in light of the various speeches that have been made, I haven't detected anybody saying that they oppose this resolution. I have certainly heard arguments that it is unachievable and that there are points like access and mental health that need to be stressed further. Unless I am misreading the room, I think the sentiment of the room is to support the resolution. I am going to proceed on that basis, unless there are six people in the room who think I have got it wrong or would like us to have a vote on whether or not to approve the resolution. If six people would like to stand and call for a vote, we shall have a vote. If they don't stand, I am going to declare the resolution carried.

As I see nobody standing, I trust the Proctors are comfortable with this? Thank you. I therefore declare the resolution concerning the University's Strategic Plan 2018–23 carried. That concludes the business before Congregation, thank you.