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ASSUMING there is no significant second spike in Covid-19 infections we may now be entering the even more complex world of the rebound. Against the background of a potential economic meltdown it seems inevitable, as we regain perspectives in a post-pandemic era, that calls for societal readjustment, as well as the settling of political scores, will be increasingly strident, and also unpredictable in their reach.

One theme – one which particularly involves academics – will probably be the ascription of blame: was it the expert scientific advice or the governmental policy-making that was to blame for the disastrous handling of the pandemic in the United Kingdom, when compared to the examples of Hong Kong, South Korea and selected European countries? Doubtless the answer will turn out to be complicated, but it might well be the quality of the arguments and particularly the conduct of the deliberative process involved in ascribing blame that will be of most significance in the longer term. If lessons are to be learned the scientific evidence must be properly understood and the deliberative process must aim at a con-

Rebound

sensual conclusion: this would be in a context in which we, as a country, have real and increasing problems in achieving rational and evidence-based policy change by democratic means.

As several articles in this issue imply, we face undreamt-of technology-driven prospects of new forms of societal action, often captured in the promises supposedly offered by ‘Artificial Intelligence’. It is not just a matter of the dehumanising effects of, for example, distance learning,

Zoom conferencing, home working, Alexa's eavesdropping, digital elections, facial recognition and surveillance policing; at a more fundamental level government policy-making may increasingly be taken over by big data computations and algorithms, spurred on by the awesome instant ability of digital/social media to drive movements in public opinion.

What would be increasingly under threat in this brave new world would be the unimpeded debate and the means of thorough consideration of complex and contradictory positions that are necessary in a true democracy. These features typify scientific discourse at its best.

Oxford Magazine publication arrangements

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Moreover, accurate historical analysis and contextualisation are inevitably part of the requirements of well-informed policy-making. But the most essential ingredient is time and perspective; complex and trustworthy decision-making and the achievement of consensus cannot be hurried.

* * *

Is it possible that we are seeing an aspect of the rebound in the current response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis three weeks ago? There have been many similar incidents of police brutality against African-Americans in the USA but the way this single example has triggered massive reactions around the world must have something to do with the pent-up frustrations, resentments and confusions arising out of the consequences of Covid-19.

These reactions have had immediate consequences in Oxford. There have been regular Black Lives Matter demonstrations – despite government quarantine guidelines and the associated risk in terms of a second spike – but also a resurgence of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign. The Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor and heads of colleges collectively have responded publicly in considerable haste with carefully phrased position statements. In a BBC interview on 11th June Professor Richardson said: “We need to confront our past, we need to learn from it... My own view on this is that hiding our history is not the route to enlightenment...” When looking at the attitudes and actions of the past, she asked “Do we use the ethics of today or do we use the morals and ethics of the time in which they lived?” On the newly-announced ‘Reuben College’ – originally intended to focus on AI – she said it will be “more problem-focused, more entrepreneurial”... “The idea is to find solutions to global problems that transcend national borders”. The college would have a more “egalitarian” approach than the “traditional formal set-up”.

As we noted five years ago at the start of the editorial:

“The issues raised by the “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign could hardly be more complex or more challenging to the purposes of a university. On such a matter no one person can claim to comprehend all the ramifications; hasty judgements make no sense. But what follows is an attempt to define some of the questions that our students – and indeed all in the University – might ask themselves as they progress through their time in Oxford. Questioning orthodoxy and authority has always been part of student life: as always, today’s students anticipate the next stages of societal change” (*‘Rhodes and proportionality’*, Oxford Magazine, No. 368, 2nd Week, HT 2016)

* * *

For obvious reasons, the Vice-Chancellors’s all-staff email circulars have focussed on Covid-19, and contain mostly reassuring and positive messages about the University’s situation and efforts. But the latest communiqué on the 8th June quickly turned to other headline news, the brutal killing of George Floyd, and the massive protests that have ensued worldwide in response:

“I have to acknowledge too the devastating impact on all of us of watching a defenceless man being murdered before our

eyes on television, while the perpetrator’s colleagues looked on with depraved indifference. This has understandably led to protests against police brutality and racism across the globe. Here in Oxford it has also led to protests about our past and a legitimate insistence that we take practical steps to accelerate the pace of change and to ensure that every member of our community is treated fairly and equally. I will be addressing these issues jointly with the conference of colleges in a separate communication.”

These are eloquent words, and the phrase “depraved indifference” strongly captures the attitude of those who permit such acts of violence. Although guarded, references to “our past” and “the pace of change” will resonate with anyone who has followed recent events in the University, not least the Rhodes Must Fall campaign.¹ Oxford has not taken some of the steps that Cambridge has on the legacy of slavery and colonialism; and Rhodes still overlooks the High Street in Oxford – although efforts have stepped up recently, and there is growing support among staff and students for action.²

There are very real problems to address. The UCU has documented the ‘race gap’ in HE pay, and the barriers to promotion that Black and minority ethnicity staff face.³ If an institution does not reflect the wider population, by simple law of averages it is missing out on talent. *Oxford Magazine* contributors have written recently about racism in higher education and discriminatory government measures such as the PREVENT strategy and the so-called ‘Hostile Environment’ in immigration, as well as questions of outreach and access.

But there are risks from this sort of announcement by the Vice-Chancellor. One is that no real change occurs. The other is that we see a top-down push for action. While very many of us, realising that Oxford still has some way to go on matters of equality, might welcome that, a question remains: how to ensure sufficient thought is dedicated to practicalities and take-up on the ground, in colleges and departments? Much prejudice is unthought or unconscious, so simply telling someone not to discriminate is unlikely to resolve an entrenched problem.

A number of faculties have already started conversations with students and teaching staff – a response to the need, as a recent open letter to the Vice-Chancellor put it, to “engage with Black and minority ethnic staff, students and community members to set the terms for change”⁴. Heel dragging and prevarication are not options, but this is too important to get wrong.

B.B, T.J.H

¹ See <https://rmfoxford.wordpress.com/> and for wider context <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/16/the-real-meaning-of-rhodes-must-fall>; see also <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

² See the open letter, “Oxford must tackle systemic racism”, at <https://medium.com/@OxfordAntiRacismLetter/open-letter-oxford-university-must-tackle-systemic-racism-db09f3b0b1a3>

³ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9805/Unacceptable-26-ethnic-minority-pay-gap-at-Russell-Group-universities-must-be-tackled> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/education-46473269>

⁴ <https://medium.com/@OxfordAntiRacismLetter/open-letter-oxford-university-must-tackle-systemic-racism-db09f3b0b1a3>

Propinquity and Serendipity in the Time of Coronavirus

HUBERT MURRAY

In January this year I attended a conference at MIT, organized by *Scientists for Palestine*¹. Over three days a number of papers were presented demonstrating a wide range of high-level theoretical work from entomology to high energy physics, cancer research, genomic research, and emergency medicine as practiced in Gaza in the days of the Great March of Return. A recurring theme in discussion sessions was the essential nature of freedom of movement and freedom of association to scientific endeavour with one speaker after another insisting that most scientific research is a result of international collaborative teamwork. One has only to look at the list of authors of scientific papers to understand the truth of this. As things stood at the MIT conference, attended by about 200 scientists, only nine Palestinians from West Bank universities and research institutes had been allowed to travel to the United States, none of them from Gaza. One of the organizers of the conference, Ubai Aboudi, Director of the Bisan Center for Research and Development in Ramallah, had been arrested in December and was being held in detention.

In February and early March I participated as an outside critic in reviewing the work of architectural students at Wentworth University. Reviews take place in seminar rooms in the middle of architectural studios, a hubbub of activity with students working shoulder-to-shoulder at their workstations. Propinquity is an architectural concept to describe the relationship of players and audience in building types ranging from cockpit theatres to football stadiums, an essential spatial consideration to support the intimacy of a performance. It is one of the qualities of the House of Commons that Churchill valued most highly to underwrite the immediacy of democratic debate. So it is in an architectural 'crit'.

In mid-March therefore, imagine the consternation when, in response to the coronavirus pandemic, universities scattered students and faculty to the four winds while at the same time mandating teaching and examining as closely to the curriculum as circumstances would allow. The immediacy of architectural crits was transposed into a matrix of faces on a screen, overlaid with images of projects under discussion. The curation of these sessions and the moderation of discussion put a new and exacting burden on the faculty, while students quickly adapted to new, collectively self-generated protocols for productive discussion. By the end of the semester, the chairman of the department and participating faculty declared that paradoxically, in the face of this centrifugal spatial discipline that had been imposed from outside, the quality of the work was generally of a higher standard than in previous years. And the students expressed themselves generally happy with their 'learning experience'. The lingering question was whether this outcome would have been the same if the

students had not met each other and their teachers in the first half of the semester.

Now, in mid-June, the focus in Massachusetts² and beyond, is on whether, and if so, how, universities should resume in the Fall. Administrators are facing a specific instance of the dialectic confronting politicians weighing public health and safety against the imperatives of business.

The crisis of the coronavirus pandemic as it affects higher education comes at the confluence of three tributaries that have been coursing their way through the plains for some years, finally gaining resonance at this juncture: what is the value of a good education; what constitutes good and effective teaching; and what is the cost of it all? The question here is whether to redesign campuses and college buildings or to redesign the educational model – or maybe a bit of both.

I talked with Dr. Samia Botmeh, Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics at Birzeit University³ in the West Bank to ask her how the coronavirus had affected their teaching. The university has an enrollment of 14,000 students, 5,000 of whom live in the adjacent village of Birzeit, the rest commuting from other West Bank cities and towns. Her immediate response was "this is not so very hard, we are used to confinement". During the first intifada (1987-1991) "we lost four years of education". In the second intifada (2000-2005) there was a lockdown for 18 months. The solution then was for students to study on their own or in groups based in their home neighborhoods. During the Covid-19 crisis this model has been reinforced and expanded with the internet and online teaching. Palestinian society places a very high value on education so for the most part students are highly motivated to apply themselves and work hard even under the most arduous circumstances with family and community to reinforce that commitment during the enforced dispersal. Women, students and teachers, have nevertheless felt the burden of not being free to go to work as they are responsible for domestic labour at home as well as having to perform academically. A positive experience has been tech-savvy students instructing their older generation teachers in the ways of cyber-communication thus cementing a relationship of mutual assistance. Nevertheless, in this distributed university community there is a yearning for place, a desire to get back face-to-face with teachers and colleagues, to resume classes as before, for which the administration is doing detailed logistical planning to reduce the risk of infection.

In the United States meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic has hit at a time of impending economic crisis for many universities. For some years many leading universities have been experimenting with online or distance learning, not only as a way of increasing revenue through expanded enrollment but also to reduce

instructional costs for in-house student populations. While MOOCs⁴ have chiefly focused on an external constituency, institutions such as *The Learning Incubator*⁵ and the *Right Question Institute*⁶ at Harvard, have concentrated on transforming traditional pedagogy to make learning more “efficient”. “Small learning communities”, “active learning labs” and “backward design” are all pedagogical techniques designed to engage students, to focus on mutually agreed “outcomes”, all capable of being practiced online. That these terms have something of a technocratic flavor is not surprising since many of the courses on offer, using these techniques, tend to be in science and technology.

Although external to the software itself, there are two major concerns attendant on the growing dependence on IT in university education: the first is unequal access to broadband⁷. In the United States 25% of the population does not have such access and that is largely in poor areas. The second concern is the potential domination of university curricula by the major technology companies only too eager to expand into this profitable territory⁸.

Software such as Perusall⁹ and free coursework available through the Khan Academy¹⁰, both pioneers in online learning, interestingly show something of the structure of an Oxford tutorial. The student is given material to study (think of the reading list); a question to answer (an essay topic); and the opportunity to ask questions and sort out confusions (the tutorial). All of this is performed online however, presumably at a fraction of the cost of a live one-on-one discussion with one’s tutor but with no chance of viral transmission.

Colleges and universities in the United States are in the midst of trying to resolve this critical concatenation of public health, value for money and social and intellectual purpose¹¹. Social distancing enabled by online learning software does have its prophylactic value, while having some pedagogical benefits and possibly reducing costs. As an architect I look back on my own experience as a Balliol undergraduate to find clues to physical solutions that can sustain a place of learning while keeping infection and costs at bay. The 12-room staircase with a tutor / mentor on each stair makes an excellent cell, a bubble-biome for controlled isolation. The JCR, the quadrangle and the dining hall, are social condensers, controlled spaces which, with testing and monitoring can sustain and protect the community of learning. With careful planning, scheduling, and sequencing of events, such physical relationships can be made to work, supplemented by online instruction. To avoid large crowds, lecture halls and examination

rooms can be transformed into ethereal avatars, at least for their allotted purpose.

It is at this notion of allotted purpose, implying an ordered intentionality, that I get stuck for a solution to overcome the enforced segregation we are imposing upon ourselves. With all due respect to my learned tutors in the mid-60’s, I know now as I sensed then, that the greatest value I gained from Oxford (and later from my architectural education in London) was the serendipitous meetings and events that punctured the cognitive bubble of my short life up to that point. In the Africa Society I made friends with members from Botswana and Jamaica and helped host leaders from African liberation movements, even finding myself sitting next to Uganda’s King Freddie weeping as we discussed the fate of his country. These are friendships and experiences that changed my life, that cannot be created online, and nor for the most part were they made with much intentionality. Much the same could be said for one’s stumbling efforts at romantic relationships. No youth can persuade me that these pathetic assays can be substituted by the banality of online dating.

To answer the question then of what forms the basis of a good education I take my cue from the Palestinian scientists’ desire for freedom of movement and association, to which I will add the thrill of propinquity and the surprises of serendipity. All the rest is mere technology.

¹ <http://www.scientists4palestine.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Tentative-program-MIT-1.pdf>

² <https://www.wbur.org/edify/2020/06/05/college-plan-contagious-students>

³ <https://www.birzeit.edu>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_open_online_course

⁵ <https://linc.seas.harvard.edu>

⁶ <https://rightquestion.org>

⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

⁸ <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/05/scott-galloway-future-of-college.html>

⁹ <https://perusall.com>

¹⁰ <https://www.khanacademy.org>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/magazine/covid-college-fall.html?searchResultPosition=1>

NOTICE

Jane Griffiths, 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 jane.griffiths@ell.ox.ac.uk together with a two-sentence bio.

No back row, no corridor

– metaphors for online teaching and learning

DOMINIK LUKES

The state of digital dislocation

The current state of digital dislocation is forcing us to reevaluate what is the essence of teaching and learning. The “grammar of schooling”¹ has been taken away from us and we are forced to learn a new dialect by immersion with just a few phrasebooks, hastily pulled off the shelf, to guide us. Digital teaching is still teaching but it is teaching with an accent, one where we’re still trying to acquire enough fluency and idiomaticity to feel completely at home. When we add to it the culture shock of being in a new situation without any of the familiar cues, sights, sounds and smells of our native environment, it is not surprising that many people are feeling stressed and long for a swift return to “normal”. But it is also no surprise that many others are examining the current situation and finding the new land to be one of endless opportunity and thinking of establishing a permanent residence – or at least buying a holiday home.

At one extreme, we are hearing voices calling online learning “clearly inferior,” lacking the essential personal contact that defines the university experience and asking whether the cost, expressed in fees, is too high. At the other pole, we hear “online teaching is clearly better,” doing away with all the distractions and dead weight of spaces, commutes and providing the focus so essential to learning. The same person can find themselves taking either position depending on the stage of culture shock they are living through at the moment. Both of these perspectives were reflected in an eloquent summary by Ray Williamson from the Oxford Student Union in a recent issue of the *Oxford Magazine* (No. 421, 5th week, TT 2020).² Here, I’d like to elaborate on what is at stake and look at ways of conceptualising the different perspectives.

Making sense of digital with affordance metaphors

I suggest that the two divergent views can best be reconciled when we contrast the affordances of the physical and virtual environments in which teaching and learning take place. By affordances I mean those features of the environment that present themselves to us for direct action and interaction and thus make the world around us meaningful and define what it means to live in the space we’re in. Affordance is a concept fundamental to design thinking and interaction, and ignoring them is the most frequent cause of failure both in digital and physical products.³

The best way I found to bring the contrast between the physical and the virtual into focus are two metaphors that can be summarised as “No back row” and “No corridor”.

“No back row”

“No back row” expresses mostly the positives of the online experience: the digital space is the great equaliser, no student is left hiding in the dark corner of the room, everybody’s contribution is coming from the front. This leads to higher engagement with the study material, and better learning. It is so powerful that the American online course provider 2U trademarked the slogan as part of their corporate philosophy.⁴

“No corridor”

“No corridor” reflects the largely negative aspects of the virtual when contrasted with face to face. It reflects the lack of physical and social space connecting the learning situations. There are no natural landmarks to guide us, no flow of the crowd to follow. Everything has to be scheduled, bookmarked or emailed. There is little serendipity and no feeling of just “being there”. This makes it easy for a student to disappear and find themselves in “no row” at all.

Affordances of the physical vs virtual

Luckily, we can mitigate the downsides of the virtual and amplify its benefits, if we pay careful attention to the affordances of the physical. There are successful ways of making up for the lack of the corridor’s hidden contribution to the learning process but we must avoid taking the normal environment in which learning takes place for granted. We rightly focus on personal relationships as essential to learning but it is easy to underestimate the power of the spaces in which they are situated.

In the physical space, it is much easier to just follow the flow of the environment and learn, without realising it, by reflecting others’ reactions to it. There are spaces laid out so obviously that our use of them passes completely beneath any level of conscious notice. We do not need to deliberate on how to open doors, sit facing the speaker, not to sit in a seat already occupied. And where there are issues, we have established scripts for coping and frames for interpreting them.

None of these features are present in the virtual environment. Every action (at least initially), requires the effort of directed attention. We need to learn the “interfaces” of Zoom, establish routines of where to ‘find the link to join’, keep track of bookmarks for the learning materials, and manage actual time for virtual events and assignment deadlines. All of this virtual effort is taking place in an actual physical environment where we are the only person engaging in the activity. When we study or teach virtually, we do not appear to the world

around us any different from when we idly browse the web or are binge-watching a TV show.

It's no wonder many are finding themselves more stressed, tired and downright disoriented. But equally, to no one's surprise, there are many who are thriving without the extra burden of the physical space which they may have found too overwhelming, full of distractions and uncertainties. We know that not all students cherish the demands of the physical spaces into which attending a university thrusts them; those who only feel comfortable huddled in the back row or for whom passage through the corridor is an exercise fraught with anxiety. Universities have ample built-in support structures and processes (even if imperfect) for the latter but none for the former.

For a successful online learning experience

Yet, we know that it is possible to build a sense of "being there" in fully virtual environments and it is also possible to establish durable personal support relationships. This was possible even before the rise of Zoom or Teams as the success of Open University can attest but now it is even more within reach. Perhaps the most powerful indications of this are coming from the successes of telemedicine and even online psychotherapy. Many patients are finding that their one-on-one experience with a therapist is enhanced without the stressful overhead of travel, sitting in waiting rooms, walking through crowds, etc.⁶

Telemedicine also shows the way when we think about the heterogeneity of needs and inclinations. It is clearly not always appropriate to conduct therapeutic interventions over Skype but it is sufficient or even superior in more instances than may have been thought before the current situation made them a necessity. Do we think that education is radically different, here?

What does a university have to do to make the most of the benefits of 'no back row' and minimise the downsides of 'no corridor'? What does the individual educator? The solutions are surprisingly simple and non-technical. Above all, we need to realise how much we can leave unsaid because the physical environment says it for us and then make it explicit in the virtual setting. We need to communicate more clearly and more frequently. We need to design the virtual learning spaces to minimize unnecessary cognitive load, structure information better, pay attention to navigation and consistency. We need to constantly fine-tune the balance between information overload and not enough information. We need to build structures that support the students who are struggling with the technological as well as personal aspects of learning.

New roles for the relationship business

But ultimately and most importantly, we need to realise that educational institutions are not in the information business, they are in the relationship business⁵. It is easy to deploy an army of learning technologists and media production specialists, and think we've done virtual teaching justice. But online teaching requires other support roles and activities than just those leading to

the deployment of "tech".

There need to be roles whose main job it is to make sure students are opening the right virtual doors and sitting facing the right way in the virtual learning spaces. There need to be roles that pay attention to the real physical spaces and social situations on the other side of the Zoom call. When students are on campus, so much of this is done for us by the affordances of the space built up over centuries. When all we have is emails, forum posts, webcams and the screen, we need to put in additional work to make up for this. Over time, it will come to seem as natural as what we have now but not without the initial effort. For instance, it is not anyone's job to explicitly make sure students socialise with others in the physical environment. We don't ask students if they "went out for a drink" with others, but perhaps, it needs to be somebody's job in the virtual situation.⁷

Sources of learning

Luckily, we have ample models of successful practice to draw on. The Open University is one such, Oxford's own Continuing Education department is another. Private online education providers such as our partner GetSmarter / 2U are others. As far back as 2009 before Zoom or video conferencing, I taught a module on language and education in a physical setting followed a year later by a similar module in a fully online course for teachers. I was struck, when reading the final essays, how much more the online students seem to have engaged with the subject. This anecdote is supported by research evidence and by experiences of educators the world over⁸. We do not need to provide inferior experiences to students just because they are not in the same room as us.

Eventually the world of university teaching and learning will return to "normal" but we should be mindful that culture shock happens on returning home, as well.⁹ We can take advantage of what we learned during this forced sojourn in digital lands to develop a more robust bi-cultural approach to teaching by blending the best of both worlds.

¹ Tyack, D.B. and Cuban, L., 1995. *Tinkering toward utopia: a century of public school reform*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass; London.

² Williams, R. 2020. "Students and remote learning", *Oxford Magazine*, No.421, 5th Week, TT 2020.

³ Norman, D.A., 2013. *The design of everyday things*. Basic books, New York, N.Y.

⁴ No Back Row | 2U [WWW Document], n.d. URL <https://cdn2.2u.com/about/no-back-row/> (accessed 6.8.20).

⁵ Jarvis, J., 2012. "What the media can learn from Facebook". *The Guardian*, 15 February 2012, sec. Media Network. <https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2012/feb/15/what-media-learn-facebook>.

⁶ These two recent pieces summarise the pros and cons of mental and physical health interventions and point to relevant research.

Joyce, N., 2020. Online therapy having its moment, bringing insights on how to expand mental health services going forward [WWW Document]. *The Conversation*. URL <http://theconversation.com/online-therapy-having-its-moment-bringing-insights-on-how-to-expand-mental-health-services-going-forward-136374> (accessed 6.8.20).

Novella, S. 2020. It's Time for Telehealth. *NeuroLogica Blog*. URL

<https://theness.com/neurologicablog/index.php/its-time-for-tele-health/> (accessed 6.8.20).

⁷ Redmond, P., Heffernan, A., Abawi, L., Brown, A., Henderson, R., 2018. An Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education. *Online Learning* 22. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1175>

⁸ The following systematic reviews show that online higher education is at least as effective as offline education when it comes to learning outcomes.

Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., Jones, K., 2009. Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies, US Department of Educa-

tion. US Department of Education.

Nguyen, T., 2015. The Effectiveness of Online Learning: Beyond No Significant Difference and Future Horizons 11, 11.

Pei, L., Wu, H., 2019. Does online learning work better than offline learning in undergraduate medical education? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Med Educ Online* 24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0872981.2019.1666538>

⁹ Gaw, K.F., 2000. Reverse culture shock in students returning from overseas. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24, 83–104. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(99\)00024-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(99)00024-3)

Higher Education Reform - not easy

KEN MAYHEW

LAST year the Augar Post-18 Review¹ recommended that the home undergraduate fee should be cut to £7,500 – UUK’s estimate of the average cost of providing an arts or humanities degree. Many university leaders voiced their dismay at this prospect. Therefore, those who read his recent article in *THE* (4 June 2020) may have been relieved to see that Phillip Augar is now suggesting that, in present circumstances, “such a fee cut would be too destabilising in the short term”. However, he has not abandoned the central thrust of the arguments made by his Review.

The massive expansion of higher education together with a major reduction in funding for FE has exacerbated long-standing problems caused by the lack of sufficient alternative pathways from compulsory schooling into the world of work. Augar argues that HE and FE should be seen “as an integrated solution” to the problem. He advocates increased funding for FE colleges. For HE a number of alternative possibilities are floated, all based on the belief that “higher education should be realigned with the country’s social and economic needs”. For Augar this involves making funding, in one way or another, dependent on the subjects offered. He writes: “The Exchequer loses money on a third of all subjects studied by women and a quarter by men. The state writes off more on social studies subjects than on maths, computer science or engineering; more on communications and media studies than on agriculture and veterinary science; and more on the creative arts than any other subject.”

Such suggestions should not be dismissed as simply yet another reflection of the instrumentalism which those in power tend to exhibit towards higher education policy. Rather they should be taken as signalling that something is wrong in the state of the sector. Chris Brink, reflecting on his time as Vice-Chancellor of Newcastle University, concluded that those who ran universities worried incessantly about what their institutions were “good at” but much less about “what they were good for”². By this he meant that institutions needed to reflect harder on the contribution they should be making to society.

Higher education has expanded very rapidly, particularly since the beginning of the 1990s. Even as re-

cently as 1989 the age participation rate was only about 19%, having been about 7% in the mid 1960s. This expansion occurred in a country where there were relatively few options for young people leaving compulsory schooling. Even in its heyday, the apprenticeship system absorbed only a small proportion of school leavers. Most people entered jobs with little or no substantive training. And things got worse. The apprenticeship system suffered for a variety of reasons, not least the decline of its heartland (manufacturing) and government policies in the 1980s. Further education colleges were progressively starved of funding. As a consequence, in contrast to most other developed countries, the UK was bereft of alternative pathways. It was almost university or nothing.

At the same time, universities all faced similar incentive structures as far as public funding was concerned and therefore became less differentiated than might otherwise have been the case. Meanwhile the labour market failed to absorb new graduates in what had been traditional graduate jobs – a phenomenon known as occupational filtering down. This meant that many graduates obtained little or no economic return for their years at university. Although, on average, the graduate wage premium remained positive, this still meant that many (possibly up to a third of graduates) were doing the self-same jobs as were once done by their non-graduate parents. They were earning more than non-graduates largely because they had paid to acquire an expensive signal of prior ability. At the same time there was a dearth of effective provision for level 4 and level 5 (i.e. sub-degree) qualifications.

In other words, we have seen what David Goodhart has recently dubbed qualifications inflation accompanied by grade inflation³. HE ill serves a significant proportion of its graduates. Arguably, parts of the sector have been engaged in two forms of mis-selling – mis-selling the prospects that graduates from their institutions face and mis-selling in terms of the quality of some of their courses. Meanwhile the 50 per cent who don’t go to university face limited educational and training opportunities. This long-standing problem has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The labour market prospects of young people are being, and

will continue to be, harmed disproportionately by the current crisis. Recovery from the economic downturn will be slow and unemployment levels will be high. The experiences of previous, far less severe, recessions tell us that those attempting to enter the labour market, or who have recently joined it, will find it difficult to find jobs. Many of the 'lucky' ones will obtain jobs far beneath their aspirations and capabilities. We know that such current deprivations can have long-lasting implications for the individuals concerned – the phenomenon known as scarring. The post-18 sector has a potentially important role to play in mitigating these problems. If the need to construct viable alternative pathways was important before COVID-19 struck, it is now even more so.

FE and HE cannot do it on their own. The Government needs to set up a more robust labour market intelligence system which establishes which occupations are in demand and the training needed to obtain entry into these occupations. For some it will be relatively short courses, for others much longer ones. If this can be achieved, young people will make much more informed education and training decisions. We then need a fresh look at the provision of this training. Other countries with robust alternative pathways have the institutions ready and waiting. The UK, with the partial exception of Scotland, does not. To create entirely new institutions, such as exist in, for instance, the Germanic countries, would take too long. We need to work with what we have. As Augar argues, this involves revitalising the FE sector.

But HE has an essential role to play. It is seeking ma-

ior bail out money and this gives the government significant leverage. Augar is surely correct that funding needs to be made conditional on what individual institutions offer. But this is not just a matter of simply providing more vocational courses. As Goodhart argues, they need to be in subjects identified by labour market intelligence and critically they need not be, and should not be, all at bachelors level (level 6). Some institutions should be incentivised to offer many more (shorter) courses at levels 4 and 5.

Clearly there are difficulties involved in adopting this approach. Not only does a comprehensive labour market intelligence system have to be in place, individual institutions would have to find the staff to teach new courses and possibly make difficult and painful decisions about which courses to drop. But if one accepts that the sector has not been serving many of its students well, then even before the COVID-19 crisis change was needed. Now it is essential. If, as we suspect, Brink is correct and the sector itself has been poor in defining its social purpose, the government now needs to do so. If it succeeds, it will not only help the country recover from the economic ravages of COVID-19, it will produce a healthier tertiary sector in the longer run.

¹ Department of Education (2019) Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Review of Education and Funding, London, HMSO.

² Brink, C. (2018) *The Soul of a University*, Bristol, Bristol University Press.

³ Goodhart, D. (2020) *A Training Opportunity in the Crisis*, London, Policy Exchange.

A Fable

When their sweet wine
became a bitter cup

they drank it
nevertheless,

sharing the pain
the change had brought

then, passed around,
the bitterness changed back

this time to water,
pure, original

and offering the sweetness
of a second chance.

So

Electric bells peal
Holy Holy Holy
from a locked cathedral.

Songbirds land
on branches
from an open sky.

Hope arrives
at first light
every morning.

Time thereafter
hesitates
and holds its breath.

Three poems

A Morning Song

Walking across the world and back
down avenues of sleep
our footsteps print a dewy track
that earth forgets to keep.

Fresh grass flattened by our tread
starts rising with the sun
like consciousness revisited
to finish what's begun

while waiting for us at first light
where dreams still hang around
are promises made overnight
and not yet gone to ground.

Distancing

I walk alone
in familiar company

stepping aside
abruptly from myself,

from who I was
to who I am,

our distance kept
for health and safety's sake.

...

A long gaze meets
in the space between us,

becomes the ghost
of pale necessity

but promises
a swift reunion

when we walk together
as we surely shall.

Early Evening Light

Never more briefly beautiful
than when it falls
honeyed and suddenly
on old brick walls,

when everything in its path
becomes a silhouette
as what we take for granted
surprises us, and yet

before it disappears
is so familiar
that its gift seems nothing less
than all we are.

JOHN MOLE

John Mole lives in St Albans and was for many years a teacher there. He has compiled and presented poetry programmes for BBC Radios 3 and 4, was poetry reviewer for *Encounter* and, with Peter Scupham, ran the Mandeville Press.

His poetry for both adults and children can be found on the Poetry Archive and his most recent collection is *Gold to Gold* (Shoestring Press, 2020)

Divestment and brainwashing

THOMAS SINCLAIR

The 5th week edition of *The Oxford Magazine* (No. 421, TT 2020) included a contribution from Peter Edwards, Peter Dobson, and Gari Owen (henceforth ‘EDO’) entitled ‘Why we should not have divested Oxford’s endowment from fossil fuels’. Their article was written in response to the University’s recently adopted policy on divestment (*Gazette*, 26th March, 2020, No.5272, Vol 150), a student-driven initiative, which I supported. EDO enumerate five arguments against divestment, but they are too modest: by my count, they offer eleven. But if EDO underestimate the number of arguments they make, it would seem that they vastly overestimate their force.

EDO’s arguments can be divided into three groups. Two of the groups reflect little but confusion, misreadings, and uncharitable assumptions on EDO’s part. Only the third group, accounting for just four of the eleven arguments, raises any serious concerns about divestment at all. But even here the arguments are exceptionally weak. It is striking that a piece alleging a depressing lack of critical analysis in the thinking of the youth of today should offer quite so little critical analysis itself.

Let me substantiate these claims. I said that the arguments can be divided into three groups. Those in the first group suggest that EDO are confused about what divestment amounts to. Here they are:

- (1) Divestment will offshore or outsource carbon emissions so that they are less well monitored and regulated.
- (2) Divestment is industrial suicide, costing thousands of jobs and much of our manufacturing industry.

It is easy to see what is wrong with these arguments. Divestment is simply a matter of selling investments. Oxford’s divestment from fossil fuel companies might reduce the share price of these companies and help to build pressure, as part of a wider movement, for stricter regulation of their activities. The motion’s supporters certainly hope so. But even the most ambitious of them do not think it will have the effect of banning fossil fuel use in the UK. This is what seems to be the target of arguments 1 and 2. So these arguments can be dismissed.

The arguments in the second group are not much better. They rely on misreadings of the Congregation motion or unsupported assumptions about the views of the signatories to it. The arguments in this group are as follows.

- (3) Removing fossil fuels from our energy and manufacturing systems, on the assumption that renewables will be able to meet demand in their place, is an “oversimplification” and “completely fanciful”.
- (4) Divestment won’t deliver genuine global decarbonisation.
- (5) Our modern civilization depends on fossil fu-

els—even to manufacture the means of producing renewable energy.

(6) Blaming global warming on the oil industry alone is a “gross oversimplification”—everyone bears responsibility, including society at large.

(7) Regarding the University’s divestment decision as a victory over evil energy companies will only exacerbate the “infectious and depressing illness” that afflicts the youth of today. As a result of this illness, “there is no critical analysis” of the repercussions of divestment, and “there has been no open discussion at any rational level in Oxford University”; young people have, instead, been “brainwashed” into “rage and fury”, “‘die-in’ climate change protests”, and the mistaken belief that the only solution to save the planet is “a wholesale cessation of using fossil fuels.”

Arguments 3, 4, and 5 here are obviously misguided. Divestment from fossil fuels is not intended to remove fossil fuels either immediately or altogether from our energy and manufacturing systems. Nor is it intended to deliver genuine, global decarbonisation or an immediate end to all fossil fuel use. We are talking about a divestment motion, not a government prohibition or a magic bullet.

Nor do the motion or its signatories blame global warming on the oil industry alone, as argument 6 suggests. The motion highlights the fossil fuel industry’s “key role” in precipitating the climate crisis and calls for an end to direct investment in fossil fuels and certain funds, coupled with active engagement with the managers of other funds. The stated aim is of “calling on fossil fuel companies to take responsibility for their damage [and] act in line with [the] science of the IPCC and the goals of the Paris Agreement”. There is no suggestion that global warming is to be blamed solely on these companies.

As for the signatories themselves: I can assure EDO that I myself don’t blame global warming on the oil industry alone or regard divestment as “a victory over the evil energy companies” (contrary to argument 7). And nor do other supporters take so simplistic a position. This was perfectly clear from the Oxford Climate Justice Campaign (OCJC) website.¹ It was also evident at the many occasions at which this divestment motion and related questions were openly and rationally discussed within the University, at length and in detail, by intelligent, thoughtful, well-informed individuals, including but not limited to members of the Youth of Today.

Had EDO checked the OCJC website or participated in these discussions themselves, they would have learned that signatories and sympathisers have in fact carefully considered the repercussions of divestment. They might also have discovered that the only four serious points against divestment that they manage to formulate in their article are a great deal weaker than they seem to

think. These points, which constitute the third and final group of arguments, are as follows.

(8) Engaging with fossil fuel companies will be more effective than ostracising them in bringing about progress.

(9) Many oil companies are “fully engaged in trying to resolve this problem [of climate change]” and “have moved back significantly into advancing renewable energy technologies.”

(10) Divestment may be hypocritical.

(11) Divestment will be seen as “climate hypocrisy from a liberal intelligentsia who think that they are entitled to instruct other people who, they believe, would otherwise not be intelligent enough to understand” and will as such alienate much of the wider population of the UK.

Let me begin with argument 8. A large investment portfolio affords a good deal of influence. Identifying the most effective use of this influence to bring about positive action on climate change is not a simple matter. It is a hard question of politics, economics, and sociology, requiring analysis, judgment, and argument somewhat more substantial than a simple expression of confidence that “surely it is better to remain invested”.

On the one hand, active engagement by large institutional shareholders may push fossil fuel companies to sign up to emissions reductions targets, formulate net zero transition plans, and (as EDO suppose) invest more in sustainable technologies. The Oxford Martin investment principles are predicated on this idea², and indeed the motion explicitly calls for the University’s endowment managers to engage with fund managers on the basis of those principles.

On the other hand, divestment by the University may contribute, as part of a growing divestment movement and alongside the work of charities and activists, to the delegitimisation of fossil fuel companies’ ongoing prioritisation of climate-damaging activities. Such delegitimisation can embolden politicians to resist lobbying and force changes that companies are reluctant to make voluntarily.

Moreover, there are grounds to doubt the effectiveness of a pure engagement strategy.³ EDO’s appeal, in argument 9, to the “many oil companies” that are “fully engaged in trying to resolve this problem [of climate change]” and have “moved back significantly into advancing renewables” evinces a touching faith in the industry. But it should not be forgotten that this same industry sought for decades to discredit the science of global warming even after industry scientists affirmed it, and has spent more than a billion dollars on misleading climate-related branding and lobbying since the 2015 Paris Agreement alone.⁴ Even relatively progressive fossil fuel companies intend to pump nine times more capital investment into their legacy fossil fuel segments than into renewables.⁵ These are reasons to regard the fossil fuel companies’ professions of conversion to the environmentalist cause with somewhat more scepticism than EDO appear to do.

In short, it’s just not straightforward whether engagement or divestment is the right approach. There are considerations on both sides, and the drafters and sup-

porters of the motion thought carefully about them.⁶ The only thing beyond sheer assertion that EDO offer to substantiate the claim that engagement will be more effective than divestment is the rhetorical question ‘why should any Board listen to people who have taken themselves off the shareholder register?’ Well, here is one answer: because “it could have a material adverse effect on the price of [fossil fuel company] securities and [their] ability to access equity capital markets.” That’s a quote from Shell’s 2018 *Annual Report*.⁷ The fact is that they do listen – and so do the governments that regulate them.

That leaves arguments 10 and 11. EDO raise the question whether divestment is hypocritical. The answer is that it is not. It would be hypocritical for the University to condemn others for failing to divest and yet remain invested itself. It would also be hypocritical for the University to divest and at the same time condemn or mock others for doing likewise. But it is doing neither of those things. And there is nothing hypocritical about taking actions aimed at trying to improve a social system that one cannot help being dependent on. (Though it is worth noting that the University has made efforts to reduce its dependence on fossil fuel energy all the same.)⁸

Still, the University’s actions might nevertheless be seen as hypocritical. Perhaps the alienating effect of this might be thought enough to outweigh any desirable effects of divestment so as to make it the wrong policy all told. This is really one for opinion pollsters (EDO supply no evidence themselves). I must say, though, I find it hard to see why Oxford’s merely divesting should be expected to have so alienating an effect. Divesting is not telling anyone else what to do, and in itself it makes precisely no difference to what members of the wider population may do or be or have. Indeed, what seems to me more likely to be regarded as hypocritical is to profess sustainability and leadership in the fight against climate change while continuing to seek profit from companies whose activities and plans pave the way to a +3°C world⁹ – companies that continue, as I said, to fund disinformation campaigns and fight regulation and policy designed to keep global temperature increases below such catastrophic levels.

* * *

Divestment is no simplistic piece of wishful thinking or virtue signalling, then, though there is room for disagreement about its chances of making a difference. The same goes for the University divestment motion. Some declined to support it because they felt that the motion’s emphasis on engagement with fund managers undermines the core strategy of delegitimisation. Others declined to support it because they shared EDO’s view that engagement is likely to be more effective. Its signatories took these considerations into account, but judged that the positive effects of adding Oxford’s weight to the divestment movement – alongside the moral imperative not to seek profit in climate-damaging activity – justified their support. As I said, these are hard questions. But on all sides there was a great deal more critical analysis of the repercussions of divestment than anything offered by EDO.

Let me end with a comment on EDO’s ill-informed handwringing about the Youth of Today. The students

we serve now and aspire to serve in the next decades are the ones who will have to deal with the effects of ever-increasing fossil fuel emissions. Even the Paris Agreement limit of +2°C of warming allows terrible damage,¹⁰ and our current trajectory looks set to breach the 2°C limit by a long way. These students had no say in the choices that set that trajectory. Given that we have known about the danger for several decades now, I am not surprised that they are angry. Generations preceding them have acted as if addressing the problem was not worth any real sacrifice.

On current trends, all the world's coral reefs are likely to be dead by 2100. The West Antarctic Ice Sheet is going to collapse. There will be more droughts and wildfires and floods, more destructive cyclones and storms, and reduced crop yields, putting millions of people in danger. The Earth's sixth mass extinction is under way. Already global warming is doing enormous harm around the world.¹¹ They are not brainwashed, these members of generations whose future is being betrayed. The facts justify rage and fury. And yet young climate activists have shown extraordinary composure and restraint in the face of hostile media and governments (not to mention patronising opinion pieces from senior academics), building a peaceful global movement that has forced policymakers and the powerful to face up to the climate emergency in a way that they have never done before.

Perhaps EDO have not noticed that it was only as a result of die-ins and other disruptive climate change protests that the UK government bothered to enshrine in law the target of net zero emissions by 2050, for example. That target is too weak, of course. It is too weak because it assumes we can safely bet on unproven technologies,¹² because even then it gives us only a 50-50 chance of achieving its intended effect of limiting temperature increases to 1.5°C,¹³ and because every fraction of a degree matters, not just those above that limit. But although the target is too weak, and although the UK is not on track to meet it,¹⁴ it is better than what we had before. We owe that in large part to the efforts of young climate activists. If it weren't for them, I doubt that climate change (or indeed the circular economy and research into associated technologies whose necessity EDO rightly highlight) would have anything like the political traction they have today. They deserve not insults and condescension, but our gratitude and support.

¹ See Oxford Climate Justice Campaign, 'What is Divestment?'. <https://oxfordunifossilfree.wordpress.com/about/what-is-divestment/> (accessed 2 June 2020).

² See Oxford Martin School, 'Oxford Martin Principles for Climate-Conscious Investment', Oxford Martin School Briefing, February 2018. https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/briefings/Principles_For_Climate_Conscious_Investment_Feb2018.pdf.

³ For an overview, see Fossil Free UK, 'Divestment vs. Engagement – Combatting the Greenwash', 25 November 2016. <https://gofossilfree.org/uk/divestment-vs-engagement-combatting-the-greenwash/> (accessed 2 June 2020).

⁴ See Bannerjee, Song, and Hasemyer, 'Exxon's Own Research Confirmed Fossil Fuels' Role in Global Warming Decades Ago', *Inside Climate News* 16 September 2015. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/15092015/Exxons-own-research-confirmed-fossil-fuels-role-in-global-warming> (accessed 29 May 2020); Influence Map, 'Big Oil's

Real Agenda on Climate Change', March 2019. <https://influencemap.org/report/How-Big-Oil-Continues-to-Oppose-the-Paris-Agreement-38212275958aa21196dae3b76220bdbc> (accessed 29 May 2020). EDO acknowledge that oil companies have lobbied against emissions reductions, but do not appear to think this raises any doubts about the sincerity of their efforts in sustainability.

⁵ See e.g. Royal Dutch Shell, Delivering a World-Class Investment Case, Management Day Presentation, June 4–5 2019, Slide 11, <https://tinyurl.com/ygkg9mfb> (accessed 29 May 2020); CDP, 'European oil majors spending up to 7% on low carbon but wider industry needs to step up', 12 November 2018, <https://www.cdp.net/en/articles/investor/european-oil-majors-spending-up-to-7-on-low-carbon-but-wider-industry-needs-to-step-up> (accessed 29 May 2020).

⁶ See the account given at Oxford Climate Justice Campaign, 'Oxford Divestment & Net Zero Engagement Explained', 29 April 2020. <https://oxfordunifossilfree.wordpress.com/2020/04/29/oxford-divestment-net-zero-engagement-explained/> (accessed 2 June 2020).

⁷ Royal Dutch Shell plc, Providing Energy for a Changing World: Annual Report and Form 20-F for the year ended December 31, 2018, p. 16, https://reports.shell.com/annual-report/2018/servicepages/downloads/files/shell_annual_report_2018.pdf (accessed 29 May 2020).

⁸ See The University of Oxford, 'Sustainability: What We Do', <https://sustainability.admin.ox.ac.uk/programmes/activities> (accessed 29 May 2020).

⁹ See Climate Action Tracker, 'Temperatures: Addressing Global Warming', <https://climateactiontracker.org/global/temperatures/> (accessed 29 May 2020). For a summary of doubts about the capacity of carbon capture technologies to avert catastrophic climate change, see Benji Jones, '4 disappointing facts about carbon capture tech that explain why it's not about to save us from climate change', *Business Insider* 7 February 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/carbon-capture-explainer-technology-limitations?r=US&IR=T> (accessed 29 May 2020). The IPCC says that "No proposed technology is close to deployment at scale" and that carbon dioxide removal technology "deployed at scale is unproven, and reliance on such technology is a major risk in the ability to limit warming to 1.5°C." See Rogelj, Shindell, Jiang, et al, 'Mitigation Pathways Compatible with 1.5°C in the Context of Sustainable Development', in Masson-Delmotte et al (eds), *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Meteorological Organization, 2018), pp. 96, 158.

¹⁰ See Hoegh-Guldberg et al, 'Impacts of 1.5°C Global Warming on Natural and Human Systems', in Masson-Delmotte et al (eds), *Global Warming of 1.5°C*.

¹¹ See Hoegh-Guldberg et al, 'Impacts'; Hoegh-Guldberg et al, 'The human imperative of stabilizing global climate change at 1.5°C', *Science* 365 (2019); Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Desertification Synthesis* (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 2005), p. 1; Ning and Jinho, 'Expansion of the world's deserts due to vegetation-albedo feedback under global warming', *Geophysical Research Letters* 36 (2009); IPBES, The IPBES assessment report on land degradation and restoration, Montanarella et al (eds). Bonn, Germany: Secretariat of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2018); Union of Concerned Scientists, 'Fact sheet: The Science Connecting Extreme Weather to Climate Change', June 2018, <https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2018/06/The-Science-Connecting-Extreme-Weather-to-Climate-Change.pdf> (accessed 26 February 2020); Joughin et al, 'Marine Ice Sheet Collapse Potentially Under Way for the Thwaites Glacier Basin, West Antarctica', *Science* 344 (2014), pp. 735–738; Ceballos, Erlich, and Raven, 'Vertebrates on the brink as indicators of biological annihilation and the sixth mass extinction', *PNAS* June 1, 2020.

¹² See note 9 above.

¹³ See Rogelj, Shindell, Jiang, et al, 'Mitigation Pathways', p. 96 ("This assessment suggests a remaining budget of about 420 GtCO₂ for a

two thirds chance of limiting warming to 1.5°C, and of about 580 GtCO₂ for an even chance...Staying within a remaining carbon budget of 580 GtCO₂ implies that CO₂ emissions reach carbon neutrality in about 30 years [i.e. around 2048], reduced to 20 years [i.e. around 2038] for a 420 GtCO₂ remaining carbon budget.”).

¹⁴ See Committee on Climate Change, ‘Reducing UK Emissions: Report to Parliament’, June 2018. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/CCC-2018-Progress-Report-to-Parliament.pdf>

pdf; Committee for Climate Change, ‘Net Zero: The UK’s contribution to stopping global warming’, May 2019. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Net-Zero-The-UKs-contribution-to-stopping-global-warming.pdf>. See also Caroline Lucas, Theresa May’s net-zero emissions target is a lot less impressive than it looks’, *The Guardian* 12 June 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/12/theresa-may-net-zero-emissions-target-climate-change> (accessed 29 May 2020).

Science and politics

JOHN KREBS

SCIENCE and politics are often uncomfortable bedfellows.

Scientists live off uncertainty – you’d never get a research grant to study a problem to which you already know the answer – while politicians thrive by making confident assertions. This tension has been starkly exposed in the current Covid-19 crisis.

On March 19, when 137 people had died of Covid-19 in the UK, Boris Johnson announced: “*I’m absolutely confident we can send the virus packing in this country within 12 weeks.*” More than 12 weeks and 42,000 confirmed deaths later, the virus still hasn’t packed its suitcases and left.

I can imagine how Government Chief Scientist Patrick Vallance and Chief Medical Officer for England Chris Whitty curled their toes and clenched their fists as they stood next to the Prime Minister making his confident but totally implausible assertion. The Government has claimed over and over again to have been “led by the science”. But the truth is that the science of the epidemic has always included more unknowns than knowns. “The science” was, and is, more a list of questions and possibilities than a list of concrete facts.

Lord May of Oxford (Bob to his friends and col-

leagues) who died on April 28th, was Government Chief Scientist between 1995 and 2000. He had three characteristics that made him uniquely suited to this role. He was extraordinarily quick and clever, he was fearless in speaking truth to power, and he was a brilliant expositor of complex ideas in simple terms.

As it happens, the basis of current mathematical modelling of infectious diseases stems from the seminal work of Bob and Roy Anderson: the R number, or reproduction rate, now in news bulletins around the world, was largely their discovery. But Bob also set out the ground rules for how science should be used to inform policy, in his Chief Scientific Adviser’s Guidelines. He emphasised three principles for presenting “the science”: complete openness, full acknowledgement of uncertainty, and recognition that in the scientific community there will always be a range of views.

This is not the time to start raking over the short-comings of the way our Government and its advisors have handled the Covid-19 crisis. But in the enquiry that will follow, the scientists should be measured against Bob’s Guidelines, and by their willingness to speak out courageously when the politicians make unsubstantiated claims “led by the science”.



Reminders



The Use of Scientific Advice in Policy Making

A Note by the Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Robert May

Science is playing an increasingly influential role in contributing to formulation both of UK and international (including European Community) policy and regulatory decisions, particularly on sensitive issues involving people’s health and safety, animal and plant protection and the environment.

This note sets out some key principles applying to the use and presentation of scientific advice in policy making. It is for individual departments and agencies to determine how these should apply in detail. However, they will typically be relevant to cases where:

- i. there is significant scientific uncertainty;*
- ii. there is a range of scientific opinion;*
- iii. there are potentially significant implications for sensitive areas of public policy such as those listed above.*

The note covers advice and research in science, engineering and technology, although aspects may usefully be applied to a broader range of issues involving other disciplines. It is intended to complement more extensive guidance already available on risk assessment and policy evaluation. A list of references to related guidance and publications is given in the Annex.

Office of Science and Technology
March 1997

Identifying Issues

1. Individual departments and agencies should ensure that their procedures can anticipate as early as possible those issues for which scientific advice or research will be needed, particularly those which are potentially sensitive. Early identification of issues should always be the aim.

2. No single approach is likely to be adequate. Instead, information should be drawn from a variety of sources and monitored by those responsible for the department or agency function as an intelligent customer for science, engineering and technology.

3. Sources may include:

i. departments' own programmes of research. It is important that departments maintain adequate support for broadly-based longer term research to help them identify and/or respond to new and unexpected findings;

ii. research from non-departmental sources, including international bodies (eg the European Commission);

iii. departments' existing expert advisory systems, where members of committees may be specifically asked to draw attention to new areas in the scientific literature. Membership should be kept under review to ensure an appropriate range of scientific opinion is represented;

iv. discussions with those in the Research Councils, industry, academia and elsewhere, including through the network of Foresight panels. These are likely to be most fruitful when held against the basis of long-standing relationships developed with departments;

v. issues brought to the attention of Government by the interests directly concerned (eg individuals, companies, scientists or lobby groups) or by reports in the media.

4. Nonetheless, some issues will inevitably arise with little or no prior warning. Departments should ensure that they have the capacity to recognise the implications and to react quickly and efficiently to such crises.

5. It is important that there should be mechanisms for early identification of issues which affect more than one department/agency, or may have an international dimension, and for early provision and exchange of information. The Office of Science and Technology has responsibility for ensuring that SET issues which cross departmental boundaries are effectively handled. It will keep emerging transdepartmental issues under regular review, in liaison with departmental Chief Scientists.

Building Science into Policy

6. Once a potentially sensitive issue has been identified, departments should consider how to access the best available scientific advice. They should ensure that

they draw on a sufficiently wide range of the best expert sources, both within and outside Government. They should seek wherever possible:

i. to take independent advice of the highest calibre (whether provided by eminent individuals, learned societies, advisory committees, or consultants). Efforts should be made to avoid or document potential conflicts of interest, so that the impartiality of advice is not called into question;

ii. to ensure that Research Councils are invited, where appropriate, to provide scientific input and contribute to interdepartmental discussions;

iii. to involve experts from outside the UK, for example those from European or international advisory mechanisms, particularly in cases where other countries have experience of, or are likely to be affected by, the issue under consideration;

iv. to involve at least some experts from other, not necessarily scientific, disciplines, to ensure that the evidence is subjected to a sufficiently questioning review from a wide ranging set of viewpoints;

v. to ensure that data relating to the issue are made available as early as possible to the scientific community to enable a wide range of research groups to tackle the issue. Scientific advance thrives on openness and competition of ideas.

7. Where the policy issue falls within European Community competence, or is likely to affect intra-Community trade, particular attention should be paid to encouraging a sound scientific basis for Community decision-making. This may involve contributing to Community-level scientific committees, briefing the Commission on developing scientific opinion, and exchange visits by scientific experts from other Member States.

8. Drawing particularly on the principles set out in paragraph 6, departments should involve the scientists whose advice is being sought in helping them frame and assess policy options. This will help maintain the integrity of the scientific advice throughout the policy formation process.

9. In practice, deliberations frequently involve a risk assessment of one type or another. Separate guidance on risk assessment is listed in the Annex. Recent public debate, to which the Minister for Science and Technology and the Chief Medical Officer for England have contributed, has focused in particular on the presentation and communication of risk. The Interdepartmental Liaison Group on Risk Assessment (ILGRA), chaired by HSE, provides a forum for taking forward cross-Government dialogue on these issues.

10. Departments should systematically review priorities to see whether funding needs to be directed to programmes of further research to illuminate outstanding areas of uncertainty identified. Departments' R&D programmes should conform to competitive tendering rules and be subject to robust quality assurance systems involving peer review.

11. Scientific advice will often involve an aggregation of a range of scientific opinion and judgement as distinct from statements of assured certainty. Departments should ensure that the process leading to a balanced view is transparent and consistent across different policy areas, in the light of the guidance above.

Presenting Policy

12. In line with the Government's Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, there should be a presumption towards openness in explaining the interpretation of scientific advice. Departments should aim to publish all the scientific evidence and analysis underlying policy decisions on the sensitive issues covered by these guidelines and show how the analysis has been taken into account in policy formulation. Scientists should be encouraged to publish their own associated research findings.

13. Openness will stimulate greater critical discussion of the scientific basis of policy proposals and bring to bear any conflicting scientific evidence which may have been overlooked. These are good reasons for releasing information, an action which could in itself avoid greater controversy in the longer run. Departments must ensure appropriate procedures are agreed with the academic community and industry for handling intellectual property rights when information is released.

14. It is important that sufficient early thought is given to presenting the issues, uncertainties and policy options to the public so that departments are perceived as open, well prepared and consistent with one another and with the scientific advice. The difficulties associated with presenting uncertain or conflicting conclusions should not be underestimated.

15. In public presentation, departments should whenever possible consider giving scientists a leading role in explaining their advice on the science, with Ministers or policy officials describing how the Government's policies have been framed in the light of the advice received. Further advice is available in the Government's Code of Practice on Access to Government Information: Guidance on Interpretation.

16. Early communication with key interest groups may be appropriate. Consideration should also be given to providing early warning of significant policy announcements to other governments and international organisations, where there are likely to be implications for other countries. Where possible, scientists from such countries or organisations should be involved in the process of consultation and advice.

Review

17. Issues coming to Ministers for collective consideration should make clear to what extent it has been practicable to follow the advice in this note.

18. The Government's official committee on science and technology, EDS(O), will keep under review departments' and agencies' procedures for early anticipation and identification of issues for which scientific research or advice will be needed. OST will keep emerging transdepartmental issues under review. OST will also monitor implementation of the principles across departments, and include a report in the annual Forward Look of Government-funded Science, Engineering and Technology.

The following are extracts - those relating to pandemics - from the Cabinet Office's 'National Risk Register' (2008) - eds.

1.1 The National Risk Register sets out 'our assessment of the likelihood and potential impact of a range of different risks that may directly affect the UK' as promised in the National Security Strategy, published earlier this year. The publication of information on these risks, previously held confidentially within government, is intended to encourage public debate on security and help organisations, individuals, families and communities, who want to do so, to prepare for emergencies.

1.2 The Register provides an assessment of the most significant emergencies which the United Kingdom and its citizens could face over the next five years summarised into three categories: accidents, natural events (collectively known as hazards) and malicious attacks (known as threats).

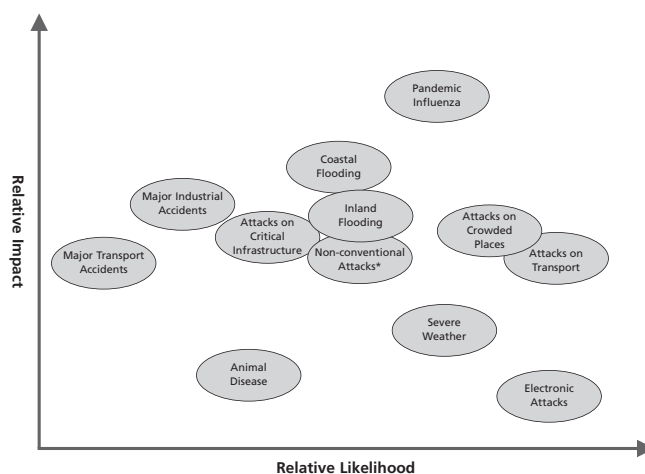
4.14 People can adopt simple and basic hygiene measures to protect themselves against disease and to reduce the risk of spreading viruses. Measures may include:

- Staying at home when ill provided there is no need to go to hospital or visit a doctor. You may wish to contact NHS Direct or NHS 24 for further advice on what to do.
- Covering the nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully.
- Washing hands frequently with soap and warm water to reduce the spread of the virus from the hands to the face, or to other people, particularly after blowing the nose or disposing of tissues or coming in from outside.
- Regularly cleaning frequently touched hard surfaces, such as kitchen worktops and door handles.

4.15 In the event of a pandemic, the Government will provide clear and considered messages to the public to advise them on other required action.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61934/national_risk_register.pdf

Figure 1: An illustration of the high consequence risks facing the United Kingdom



The leaving: three poems

(i) **The good brig *Credo***

One hundred and seventy years
almost to the day
since she set sail
carrying John Humphreys, master
a small crew
and *those parties desirous*
of emigrating to America
she's bound for Quebec direct

imagine, closing the door
for the last time,
April light on the hills,
a bundle of things in your arms
a sycamore bowl, your winter shawl
provisions for the journey
the word for homesickness
hiraeth, already on your tongue

(ii) **The crossing**

I lost count of the hours
at first I measured them
in rations of speckled bread, cheese
and the small wrinkled apples
I'd saved all winter
but when they ran out and we had nothing
save water, oatmeal, dry biscuit,
there was only light, dark
calm, storm

sometimes though I'd go up
into the bright air
watch seabirds, cloud-shadows
the crisp white edge of a wave
once they lowered a woman
into the sea
we were three days
from the New Colonies,
I wondered what would become of me

(iii) **Settling**

To the tune of a hymn
sung in chapel
a pattern for stockings
known by heart
a root of tansy
(a stay against miscarriage)

I add
a recipe for cornbread
new names for quilts
Shoo Fly,
Hole in the Barn Door,
a hickory tree

SUE LEIGH

Sue Leigh's collection of poems, *Chosen Hill*, is published by Two Rivers Press (2018). The *TLS* described it as 'an intelligent and considered collection that pays homage to the act of paying attention'. Her work has been published in magazines and journals including *Areté*, *The Spectator* and the *TLS*. She lives in the Windrush valley and spends much time walking.

Manifestos for the Gullible

PETER OPPENHEIMER

“As we emerge from another May bank holiday weekend and enter half term...” Regrettably, the opening words of the Vice-Chancellor’s Message of 27th May 2020 are an expression of social distancing on the part of the administration from Oxford’s calendar and pattern of activity, whose academic work schedule recognises neither bank holidays nor half term. And while the Message includes ample hand-wringing at the miscellaneous impacts of COVID-19, this is not accompanied by academic wisdom or leadership. Rather readers are exhorted to contribute to “the hardship funds that have been established to help the worst-affected students and staff”.

Coming from a central management structure that for much of the past two decades has been mispending the University’s resources at a rate of tens of millions of pounds per annum, such an appeal to individual generosity or even sacrifice shows a distressing lack of self-awareness. All the more so for two additional reasons. First, it represents, particularly in the case of students, another piece of opportunistic meddling by central bureaucracy in college responsibilities and autonomy. One may observe in this context the civilised and thoughtful approach of a college like Wolfson, which has launched a Hardship Auction for student support, featuring items such as quality wines from the college cellars, a signed copy of Poet Laureate Simon Armitage’s recent volume and a limited-edition screen print by Bridget Riley.

Secondly, even while soliciting contributions, the selfsame Message blandly declares, after more than two months of lockdown, that actual information about University finances will be kept under wraps until the middle of the long vacation – when the academic community will have minimum opportunity to comment or criticise. “[It] will be several months before we understand the full financial impact [of COVID-19] but we know now that we will respond by a combination of protecting our income, containing our costs, and drawing on our reserves to see us through the crisis.” A neatly tautologous catalogue. Fanciful hopes for “protecting income” are let slip a couple of paragraphs later: “we have not yet managed to persuade the Government to underwrite our lost income.” “Drawing on our reserves” is a somewhat arch reference to expendable endowments or disposable cash balances (such as the proceeds of the recent 100-year bond issues).

And one waits with interest to see precisely whose “cost” the central authorities will set about “containing” – particularly when the immediate effects of COVID-19 have been to reinforce Wellington Square’s latter-day habits of secretive, top-down policy-making. Five-Year Strategic Plans, Research-Excellence Frameworks and Environmental Sustainability Strategies have lost their effectiveness, at least for the time being, as instruments of central overlordship. In their place Wellington Square is now organising “a large number of committees at University, college, division and depart-

ment level to draw as many people into the planning as possible and to ensure our integration with the usual governance structures.” In other words, to put a lid on decentralised initiatives and to ensure that, as far as possible, nothing happens without the participation or at least approval of central administrative personnel. Further patronising missive appeared on 8th June (Seventh Week). One of them did employ the epithet ‘relentless’ with reference to the activity of the central administration.

Underneath it all is the silent hope that no “containment” of central administrative costs will after all be necessary. How so? Well, you see, “there is.... a growing realisation that our universities will be critical to the regeneration of the nation’s economy.” Hang on. There is zero foundation for such a belief. The relationship, if anything, will be the other way round. Try again. “Our academics are regularly referenced at Government press briefings. They are constantly interviewed and cited in the media, and their crucial contribution to the national effort to respond to the pandemic is well recognised...”

After that the peroration really takes off. “Our research profile has never been higher than it is at present. This means that in the aftermath of the crisis we will be able to recruit the best academics and the best students, all attracted by the prospect of working with others of their calibre in an institution committed to creating an environment in which they can do their best work. That has been the secret of our success in the past and will be the key to our success in the future.” One certainly hopes that the average Oxford undergraduate, to-day as in the past, would have no difficulty demolishing this bundle of half-truths, non-sequiturs and untestable assertions. (One could almost set it as an exercise in Oxford entrance interviews.)

Let me, however, not be misunderstood. Good science and productive medical research are, of course, things to be proud of. But they are only a subordinate slice, or substratum, of the University’s “mission”. And they cannot remotely guarantee the future of Oxford as a leading institution of higher study across the board. When the hierarchy assume the role of spokesman for the University, they should know better than to indulge in such unseemly flag-waving. There are important neglected tasks for them to address. They should rather seek to preserve proper recognition of student achievement in all areas and at all levels of study, and not close their eyes to the degradation of Oxford degree standards as false recompense for either student indebtedness or social disadvantage (or any other factor). In the same spirit, they should cease to acquiesce in ignorant jibes from politicians (or anyone else) about Oxford’s “elitism”. And in general, they should bring themselves to acknowledge that Oxford cannot afford to continue with its present mechanism of University governance, either financially or intellectually.

The return to democratic self-governance

G. R. EVANS

*'The University and colleges will be open to welcome new and returning students; prepared to adapt operations at short notice; and able to respond nimbly to increased/loosened restrictions during course of academic year, including a return to full lock-down conditions with students on-site.'*¹

So read the FAQs on the website of Oxford's Michaelmas Coordination Group at the end of Sixth Week.

*'Like every other institution around the world, the University of Cambridge will need to adapt. The process will not be easy, and will certainly need to be fine-tuned as we learn from our experience. I am convinced, though, that we will collectively emerge from this crisis as a more robust and resilient community.'*²

That was the Cambridge Vice-Chancellor's *Update* at the end of the same week, followed by some of his reflections on 'new ways of working'.

This suggests a significant contrast of approach. Will that continue into the new academic year, with Oxford seeking to return to normal, subject to the unpredictable behaviour of the virus, and Cambridge actively seeking to change or be changed by recent events, whatever happens? Back to normal for one, forward to 'new normal' for the other? And will that decision be taken by their respective democratic self-governance?

A key question will be how far each university allows the changes it has made to the way in which it runs itself to become permanent. With startling speed both Oxford and Cambridge cast their constitutions aside under 'Crisis' (Oxford) and 'Emergency' (Cambridge) Management Frameworks. Congregation, Oxford's sovereign body, was not asked. Cambridge's statutory governing body, the Regent House, was not asked either. The special arrangements designed for an 'incident' will soon have been in force for half a year and those running Oxford and Cambridge show no signs of handing their powers back to their constitutional governing bodies.

Cambridge published its Emergency Management Plan online.³ Oxford's Crisis Management Framework (CMF), prepared by the Security Subcommittee on 22 October 2018, was disclosed on 10th June, but only in response to a Freedom of Information request. Perhaps it too can now be put online so that members of Congregation may read it and take a view of it and the way it is being operated. A rather sketchy account of some changes made to it under the 'general delegation by Council' to the Vice-Chancellor was published in March.⁴ However this relied not on the delegation to be found in the Statutes but on the provision found in Council's Standing Orders.⁵ The constitutional authority of this document in either form is surely open to question. Nowhere does it refer to Congregation, the Statutes or publication in the *Gazette*.

Oxford's CMF - like Cambridge's counterpart - adopts the standard Major Incident Planning scheme,

appointing Gold, Silver and Bronze teams. The expected Silver and Bronze team memberships are set out in the CMF in terms of offices and positions held, though Oxford seems to have combined Gold-and-Silver teams into its Silver Team. The CMF does not call team members 'senior',⁶ though that adjective has regularly been attached to members of Silver and Bronze who have recently published personal 'senior' Blogs emailed to staff through PAD's *Blueprint Bulletin*. In Oxford the first bare mention, just of the Silver 'team' 'of senior colleagues', came in an email from the Vice-Chancellor on 3 March. That was added to early in May,⁷ which said that the CMF had been 'triggered early in the year as the coronavirus outbreak started affecting our students and staff in China', though it is not easy to align that with the CMF's 'level 3' requirements for such triggering.

It has not ended with Gold, Silver and Bronze. The *Blueprint Bulletin* allows the enquirer to see in diagrammatic form the organisational structure of hierarchical reporting which works in principle within the University's constitution⁸ and the diagram of the inter-relationship of University committees.⁹ Congregation, if it is keeping up with *Blueprint* blogs and circular emails, may there begin to glimpse the formation of a parallel universe of committees and sub-committees unknown to the Statutes and Regulations or the *Gazette*. The still-new Michaelmas Coordination Group has nearly two dozen members, representing the colleges as well as the University, but with no indication how they were appointed. FAQs¹⁰ are offered, which mention under 'governance' only that it is a sub-group reporting to the Silver and Bronze Groups. It also 'commissions, coordinates or delegates work to the steering and sub-groups' which 'have been formed to cover education, research, finance, planning and personnel that issues'. Dismissing all these bodies and returning to democratic self-governance is not going to be easy.

Cambridge has perhaps been the more frank in admitting its abandonment of its democratic governance. In the course of its response to the 'governance change' proposals which followed the CAPSA crisis nearly two decades ago, Cambridge rejected a proposal to make its Vice-Chancellor its Chief Executive in a decisive ballot. Yet on 16 March 2020 its Council 'delegated its authority to the Vice-Chancellor should significant, rapid and unexpected changes relating to the coronavirus crisis require urgent decisions concerning the University's business'.¹¹ The Regent House was informed of this handover of authority only in an emergency *Reporter* published a month later on 16 April. The same issue announced the indefinite suspension of the *Reporter*. The speed of abandonment of constitutional requirements to obtain the consent of the Regent House as the University's statutory governing body required at the least that justification of 'urgency', and the conditionality that 'decisions' taken should re-

quire it. But the *Reporter* is not only Cambridge's organ of record. It is also the medium through which the Regent House is kept informed. There has been no retraction of the statement in the 16 April *Reporter* that 'normal operations' had been 'suspended' on 20 March' and that it was not 'currently possible to pursue the University's usual governance processes'.¹²

Have there been communication failures?

What communications should reasonably have been expected? The CMF takes its reader to a *Crisis Communications Guidance Document*, undated and with no indication of its authorship.¹³ It sees 'crisis communications' as 'a key element in effective crisis management'. But it too seems to ignore Congregation, the Statutes or the *Gazette*. It puts its emphasis elsewhere:

*'it is essential that incidents are communicated upwards within the University quickly and to the correct point of contact for each of the [CMF] teams.'*¹⁴

When there is an 'incident', the Public Affairs Directorate 'will lead the communications response' with all 'key audiences, such as the University community, the news media, the general public, and important community and political stakeholders'. PAD is to 'maintain a "single source of the truth" – a document containing key facts and messages'.

The CMF document has a heading for 'Internal communications', with boxes to tick:

- Who knows so far?
- Who needs to know?
- What is the message currently being provided to the University?

The Vice-Chancellor has duties, to 'ensure that effective lines of communication are in place both internally and externally'.

Members of Congregation will form their own view as to whether those emails have done that job at all adequately. A record is expected to be kept. The Support Officer to the Silver Team (Private Secretary to the Registrar) is to 'draft papers, statements and reports under the guidance of the Silver Team during the incident' and 'maintain a record of Silver discussions, decisions and actions'. Little of this has been shared with Congregation. Indeed FOI requests for some of this record have been refused under Freedom of Information Act exemptions in sections 36(2)(b)(i) and (ii) which:

'are engaged because, in the reasonable opinion of the University's qualified person, the Vice-Chancellor, disclosure of the information requested: (i) would be likely to prejudice the free and frank provision of advice; and (ii) would be likely to prejudice the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation.'

Disclosed, however, are Minutes of the Education Committee on 7 May, concerning numerous 'dispensations, mitigating actions and temporary changes to policy and guidance have been granted by either the PVC Education, as chair of Education Committee, and/or the

Proctors in response to the Covid-19 pandemic', including the arrangements about examinations, the suspension of the residence requirement and the requirement to wear sub-fusc during examinations. Also disclosed are extracts from the Minutes of the Personal Committee on the same date, concerning various employment matters.

Publication of an explanation of what has been 'decided', and why, has been promised in June in Cambridge in the form of a stand-alone Notice to appear between emergency issues of the *Reporter*.¹⁵

Returning to normal?

History suggests that it is not easy to wrest powers away from those who acquire them in 'emergencies'. William Pitt the Younger famously introduced Income Tax in late 1798 as 'just' such a temporary measure. What provision is there in either Oxford or Cambridge to insist that the 'Crisis' or 'Emergency' powers under which it is currently being run are handed back? CMF lists as one of its purposes to 'return the University to normal business operations as soon as possible'. The Vice-Chancellor has a personal duty 'to ensure the earliest possible resumption of core activities of the University'.

The actual process of 'return' remains in the hands of these 'emergency governments' of Oxford and Cambridge. In Oxford there is a Return to On-Site Working Programme (RTOSW)¹⁶ which is being designed and implemented 'under the University's crisis management framework' by 'a sub-group of Bronze' which 'reports through Bronze to the University's Silver Group which is chaired by the Vice-Chancellor':

*'Silver has approved the initiation of the pilot programme, and the principles and responsibilities for a subsequent gradual return to on-site working (the 'framework'), which will be published following Trade Union consultation and once the pilot is complete.'*¹⁷

These are its stated 'governance arrangements'. This may be important, since such information as has appeared puts the emphasis not on academic considerations but on consultation on Health and Safety and Trade Union interests and the requirement for Estates Services approval before there can be a return to buildings.¹⁸

On 10 June the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research sent a 'message to all University staff' also 'sent to our college colleagues for information' updating his earlier message of 15 May about planned pilot projects to test ways of returning to work in University buildings. What had been learned from these was now 'being incorporated into protocols and processes' with a limited programme of return 'only to support work that cannot be performed remotely'. 'Further university buildings' would 'begin to reopen' only in 'the later part of the summer'. There had been 'consultation' but not with Congregation as a whole, still only with the Consultative Committee for Health and Safety and trade union representatives. The stated 'governance arrangements' for all this were still operating under CMF. A diagram outlined 'processes and responsibilities at building level'.¹⁹

Cambridge published a second emergency *Reporter* on 27 May to say that 'planning has now progressed from a period of activity centred on business-critical matters to one with an emphasis on preparation for recovery'. It

adds that ‘committee-work has resumed’ with ‘exploration of opportunities for the University’s future’, but ‘committees have been advised to defer items that require discussion but are not urgent and to receive straightforward items by circular’.²⁰ There has been no escape from the fact that certain ‘business- and time-critical items require the approval of the Regent House by Grace, some after the publication of a Report and a Discussion’. However, ‘the Council and the General Board will be reviewing those matters in the coming weeks, to ensure that only those requiring approval before 1 October 2020 are put forward’. A Timetable was added, with postal voting on ballots to take place in late August and early September, outside even Cambridge’s Long Vacation Term.

Meanwhile, in Cambridge the Council had ‘agreed to some adjustments to the University’s normal governance processes’, though these had not been put to the Regent House for its approval. One had been the abandonment of live Discussions, with a change to sending in emails instead:

‘Until further notice, members of the University will be invited to submit their remarks on Reports by email.

Yet Council had no such powers. This required a Report and Discussion and Grace of the Regent House to change the Ordinance, just as Congregation’s consent would be required to make a change to the Congregation Regulations governing the conduct of Congregation Business. Parliament’s less-than successful attempts to adapt itself to the current difficulties at least sought to respect its constitutional imperatives.

Review or Inquiry?

Cambridge has the benefit of an elected Board of Scrutiny which is known to be concerned about the risk that decision-making of the present sort may become permanent and has certain powers to do something about it.²¹ In Oxford there is CMF provision for a review of all this emergency governance. It requires ‘a review’ to be undertaken. It is the Silver Group Support Officer’s duty to ‘arrange a de-brief of the incident and the University response to it and draft a report to inform future planning and responses to incidents’ so that ‘lessons learnt during the incident are captured in revised process and procedures’. But this seems to be conceived as involving the CMF ‘teams’ gazing at their own navels.

Congregation must call for an independent inquiry, so as either to approve or to reject the ‘decisions’ which had been made on its behalf ‘by the University’ during the last few months. For it seems clear that decisions are being made about the very future of Oxford and Cambridge.

¹ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus/michaelmas-2020>, accessed June 7th.

² Vice-Chancellor’s Update, 4 June, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/coronavirus/news/update-from-the-vice-chancellor-20>

³ <https://www.governanceandcompliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/audit-regulatory-compliance/emergency-planning/university-emergency-management-plan>

⁴ <https://staff.web.ox.ac.uk/article/oxfords-crisis-management-framework-explained#collapse1973531>

⁵ <https://governance.web.ox.ac.uk/council/2019-20councilstandingorderspdf.pdf>

⁶ The only constitutional mention of ‘senior University Officers’ seems to occur in Council Regulations 15 of 2002, which concern the operation of the ‘Committee to Review the Salaries of Senior University Officers’, listed there as the Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Registrar:

‘The committee shall consider whether there have been any significant changes in the duties of, or any significant developments associated with, the offices concerned since the salaries of the holders of the offices were last determined’, <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/part-28-committee-to-review-the-salaries-of-senior-university-officers>

⁷ <https://staff.web.ox.ac.uk/article/oxfords-crisis-management-framework-explained#collapse1973531>

⁸ https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/staff/documents/media/vcs_direct_reports.pdf

⁹ https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/staff/documents/media/university_committees.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus/michaelmas-2020>

¹¹ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2019-20/weekly/6583/section1.shtml#heading2-3>

¹² <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2019-20/weekly/6583/section1.shtml#heading2-3>

¹³ https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/media_wysiwyg/Crisis%20Communications%20principles%20%28March%202016%29.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/media_wysiwyg/Crisis%20Communications%20principles%20%28March%202016%29.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2019-20/weekly/6584/section1.shtml#heading2-4>

¹⁶ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus/return-to-workplace>

¹⁷ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus/return-to-workplace>

¹⁸ <https://estates.admin.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus>

¹⁹ http://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/media_wysiwyg/RTOSW-processes-2.png

²⁰ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2019-20/weekly/6584/section1.shtml#heading2-3>

²¹ Under Statute A, VII, 5. The Board of Scrutiny shall have power (a) to consult any official documents or accounts (other than those of the University Press) which may be relevant to any enquiry; (b) to consult such official documents or accounts of the University Press as may be specified by Ordinance; (c) to make enquiry, whether in person or in writing, of the officers of any authority on matters pertaining to a subject of enquiry; (d) to request that a matter be put down for discussion by the Regent House, which request the Council shall not unreasonably refuse.

Idle thoughts

DAVID PALFREYMAN

It is 1895 and Holmes & Watson are ‘in one of our great University towns’ where Holmes is ‘pursuing some laborious researches in early English charters’ – ‘The Three Students’ in ‘The Return of Sherlock Holmes’ (Doyle, 1905). The Oxford Modern History School kicked off in 1872 – might Holmes have read that subject some twenty years before, putting him now at around 40?

If so, surely he would have been introduced to the delights of ‘Stubbs Select Charters’ (1870) – as still used to torture undergraduates, albeit mercifully by then in translation, even when I tackled English History 1 in 1972/73 at Queen’s, ‘reading’ it with the wonderful J.O. Prestwich. So, although we are never told which university/college Holmes had attended, let us guess Oxford – and that he read Modern History as a good intellectual training for a life in detection.

While in Oxford undertaking this ‘laborious’ activity, he is approached by a Mr Hilton Soames, ‘tutor and lecturer at the College of St Lukes, who is in ‘a state of uncontrollable agitation’: the Greek unseen translation set for ‘The Fortescue Scholarship’ the next day has been copied while left in the Tutor’s room as he went for tea with a chum – the loyal Scout having accidentally left the key in the sported ‘heavy’ outer oak when he had

gone to see if Mr Soames needed tea, as tutors do.

The suspects are the Scout and the three undergraduates all living on the same staircase and encapsulating Oxford’s then student community – the ‘fine scholar and athlete’ who is ‘a fine manly fellow’ and ‘hard-working and industrious’ but ‘very poor’; the ‘quiet inscrutable’ Indian student whose Greek is ‘his weak subject’; and ‘a brilliant fellow when he chooses to work’ but otherwise ‘wayward, dissipated, and unprincipled’ having been ‘nearly expelled over a card scandal’.

Holmes, of course, solves the mystery – the Scout is innocent, and the guilty undergraduate does the honourable thing in withdrawing from the Scholarship (no embarrassment for Soames and St Luke’s in having to admit to a breach of security) and off he goes to ‘a bright future’ in the Rhodesian Police. And Watson indicates that the ‘laborious’ work on the Charters ‘led to results so striking that they may be the subject of one of my future narratives’. Sadly, they seem not to have been.

Readers will by now have detected how I am filling in the time locked away at home as a vulnerable Old Codger – rereading the Holmes stories last encountered 55 years ago at 11. It will be the ‘Billy Bunter’ and ‘Just William’ tales next...

The next issue of
Oxford Magazine
will appear in
noughth week

The editors invite and welcome contributions from all our readers. The content of *Oxford Magazine* relies largely on what arrives spontaneously on the editors’ desk and is usually published as received.

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Will machines be like me?

BERNARD RICHARDS

I HAVE long thought that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate a human as a thinking being. It depends on what constitutes thought and intelligence. The epigraph to this article could be a quotation from Henry James's Preface to *Roderick Hudson*: 'Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.' (1907)

I offer here a brief sequence of what might be called thought. It could be called stream of consciousness. It's evening. I glance from the window at a sycamore tree, registering its beauty in the evening sunlight. I recall that as a child there were sycamore trees along the Birmingham to Wolverhampton New Road, and in the autumn we threw the seeds about like little helicopters. In the infant class we were told about Zacchaeus hiding in a sycamore tree, and the sycamore tree in which he hid was, in my mind, just like those on that main road. The gate unlocked in 'There is a green hill far away' was the school gate in Gate Street, Tividale. Dante Gabriel Rossetti had a sharp and responsive eye:

Still the leaves come new

Yet never rose-sheathed as those which drew

Those spiral tongues from spring-buds heretofore.

And then I think of other buds in poetry, Tennyson's, for instance: 'a million emeralds break from the ruby-budded lime.' (*Maud*). I went out and photographed some lime trees a few days back – in banal surroundings next to Lidl and the BMW motor-works, and a few hundred yards from where Paul Nash did his famous painting *Totes Mer*, looking towards Shotover Hill. Unipart now occupies the site.



Lime-tree bud.



Paul Nash. Totes Mer (Tate Gallery) 1941. With Shotover Hill in the background.

There is a more routine version of this scene by Frances Macdonald (1914-2002). It has a less evocative title too. For a time she taught at the Ruskin School of Drawing.



Frances Macdonald, Graveyard: No. 1. Metal and Produce Recovery Depot, Morris Works, Cowley (1940). With Shotover Hill in the background.

Could a machine make all these transitions as rapidly and sensibly as the human memory? With the contexts fully in place? And producing some sort of discriminated shape? I just don't think so. This sequence is not very strenuous, but it constitutes what I would call thought. The key thing about it, in this instance, is that I am aware of decades of passing time, and am aware that I was in various places, and the times and places are essential elements in the thought. It is this, I think, that a machine could not replicate, because although you could programme a machine with rich pickings for 'sycamore' or 'lime' it wouldn't have been in those places, and those places and the awareness of them are essential for the particular sequence of ideas here.

I recall when I was about seven, a few hundred yards from the sycamores, in Regent Road, Tividale, there was a kink in the pavement forming a semi-circle. Checking on a Google map reveals that it is still there. It was at this point, on the east side of the road, that I realised that utterly ordinary and unremarkable as this moment was, I was experiencing it, and no one else was, and an aggregation of such moments constituted a built-up identity, in the context of times and places. I was unique.

I now see that this would be a tall order for a machine to absorb. And to what end? What would be the point, and it would be enormously expensive to achieve. And how would the machine process the memories? Surely not on so selective basis as the human mind. The machine's range, in certain directions, could be enormous, but it would lack discrimination constituted by overall and individual senses of value. The efficiency, and inefficiency, of human thought is helped by the fact that it is dealing with a relatively small repertoire. That is, when the thought is not supplemented with books, computers and other records. It is possible, given the availability of these retrievable devices, that less unaided thought is taking place.

In 1961, or was it 1962, I said to my Brasenose tutor Alastair Fowler that computers could do literary criticism. He retorted, rather brusquely, 'But we've got brains laddie!' Machines can perform useful tasks, but would we relegate decisions to them? In our present crisis they could probably have made some key decisions about policies, especially in the early stages, but would we have surrendered the decisions to them *carte blanche*? After all, the politicians seem not to have listened to the scientists in all cases.

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019) presents an image of a human-like machine called Adam, but I did not find it convincing, because to operate like a human being the machine has to have the sort of lived background in time that constitutes human identity and the capacity for human thought. In the novel there was an idea that Adam could be given a phantom childhood and a set of invented memories, but this was rejected. McEwan is quite amusing at the beginning on the standard fictional view of androids: 'walking with a certain glazed look, phony head movement, some stiffness in the lower back.' Adam is somewhat more advanced than this; as he is 'dying' he comes up with a pastiche of Larkin poem, a haiku (admittedly machines have more chance of producing haikus than *Paradise Lost*, say):

*Our leaves are falling,
Come spring we will renew,
But you, alas, fall once.*

This is the original Larkin (which a fair number of literate readers will be able to remember, and which McEwan and Adam have in mind).

*The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.*

*Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too,
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.*

*Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.*

Google does not help here particularly. If you type in 'Larkin leaves falling' you get 'And now the leaves sud-

denly lose strength', which is certainly related, but probably not the poem Adam has precisely in mind. How has Adam acquired his knowledge of Larkin? By reading during the course of his short life with the Narrator (Charlie)? Or was he pre-programmed? So was he programmed with the sum-total of human knowledge?

Which strikes me as a bit improbable. It is possible that we are not so very off the time when a brain-implant will give us access to the sum total of human knowledge. That doesn't mean that this sum-total will be permanently available within the small implant; it will have to be downloaded, rather as we now download information from computers, not all of it even being registered or closely scanned by the brain. Will this make us all wise? Possibly not – the knowledge will still have to be processed, and the brains we were born with might collapse under an over-load.

McEwan's android has conversations with Charlie, but a number of commentators have pointed out that machines are not very good at conversation, because there is more to it than the straightforward imparting of information. At one comic point in *Salisbury*, Adam manages to convince Miranda's father that he is human, in a conversation about 'the eruption of a secular self in early modern times' involving Shakespeare, Montaigne and Sir William Cornwallis (who he?). Many of us are finding that conversations on the internet, even with other human beings, are less than satisfactory. Is there something disconcerting about a Zoom seminar, with isolated heads trapped in what looks like a rack of battery hens?

Could a machine replicate the process whereby I snatched the Rossetti and Tennyson quotations out of the ether a few minutes ago, with the vast penumbra of association which can be intelligently selected? Beyond the sycamore I was looking at is a meadow edged with hawthorn and Queen Anne's lace. I segued in my mind, by a process of what Proust would have called 'voluntary memory', to a couple of years back when I took photos of it to illustrate Rossetti's poem *Silent Noon*, and also took photos of the dragon-fly in the 'sun-searched growths', 'like a blue thread loosened from the sky'. I did not take the text to the meadow when I took my camera; it was in my head. Or, at least, most of it was. Pace Proust, a good deal of what is labelled 'voluntary memory' has elements of the involuntary alongside it. They can't easily be separated.



Rossetti: 'fields with silver edge / Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge.' Not far from Grenoble Road; not far, would you believe it, from the Kassam Stadium.

*Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass, -
 The finger-points look through like rosy blooms:
 Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and glooms
 'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass.
 All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,
 Are golden kingcup fields with silver edge
 Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge.
 'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass.*

*Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly
 Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky: -
 So this wing'd hour is dropt to us from above.
 Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,
 This close-companioned inarticulate hour
 When twofold silence was the song of love. (Silent
 Noon)*

It's not directly relevant here, but these photographs are an attempt to register, *pace* some of outer reaches of 'Theory', that poetry can be about something in the visitable world, and is not merely solipsistic expression, wrapped up in the cocoon of its own discourse. The data visible here is stored in the computer I am typing on, but that's not the full story is it? And there's more. I have in the mind's ear a beautiful musical setting of *Silent Noon* by Vaughan Williams. Presumably with an implant you could actually hear it in the head, and you'd have the choice of a male singer, or a female, such as the gifted soprano Miranda Colchester.

Processing the song while listening one has to understand the paradox of 'silence' constituting a 'song'. This is a paradox only human beings can understand, and indeed only certain types of human beings, who are poetically literate. These days their numbers are dwindling. In addition there is such a thing as the language of music, which has to be learnt. Deryck Cooke wrote about this years ago, in 1959. My brain retrieved this quicker than the computer just this instant. The Vaughan Williams is intensely English, as English as his 'The Lark Ascending'. As English as Delius's 'On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring' - which the brain-boxes from Imperial College, the winning team in this year's *University Challenge*, failed to identify in the semi-final. You can see it on the internet. And then out of the corner of my ear (if the ear can have a corner like the eye) I could hear the rare Debussy setting of Rossetti's poem 'The Blessed Damozel' ('La Damoiselle Éluë'). It's the piano version I hear rather than the full orchestral version.

With all memories supplemented by a photograph you have to be careful that you are not remembering the photograph rather than the original scene. This phenomenon is growing now that more and more people take photographs without really looking. I also took photos a few days back to illustrate the beautiful Hopkins poem 'Ash Boughs'. I wanted to get something which corresponded as exactly as possible to the inner images generated by the lines: 'May / Mell's blue with snowwhite through their fringe and fray.' That counts as thought, doesn't it?



Ash boughs, not from far from the BMW works. 'May/ Mell's blue with snowwhite through their fringe and fray.'

And when I'd done it I recalled that I had photographed Binsey Poplars almost forty years ago to do the same, to capture a scene in a Hopkins poem, of trees replacing those whose felling he mourned in 1879. That scene has gone now. Again, this rapid sequence is what I'd call thought. Human thought can be unbelievably rapid. Hamlet speaks of 'wings as swift as meditation'



Binsey Poplars. Circa 1984. 'a fresh and following folded rank'. They have since fallen victim to old age.

In the nineteenth century player pianos (pianolas) were built, so that performances could take place at home. Sometimes composer made their own reels, so that we can hear authentic (up to a point) performances of Debussy. But then, later on, composers started writing for the pianola, and their music was way beyond the scope of the human hand. I see an analogy with what I am about to propose. Reporting, especially on television, of the coronavirus crisis leads to certain considerations. A few grieving families are shown each day. But for my money this does not really cope with the scale of the disaster. These examples are what could be called 'anecdotal' - a word that is being used, more and more, to label random samples. A machine could face it differently, and process the details and grief of the whole 40,000 or so of the victims (on some estimates) and their families. And do this in a nano-second. But human consciousness could never replicate that process precisely. What happens in the human case is that we are supposed

to extrapolate from the representative examples. To a large extent the possibility adequately to cover the whole range is simply not on.

Intelligence and imagination can't cope. It's the same with First World War casualties. One way to approach the fact is to visit a cemetery, and see the rows of crosses. It's still difficult, though, to imagine the individual histories behind each and every cross. One would be overwhelmed if one could.

I've never much liked the phrase 'artificial intelligence' since a good deal of what the machines do does not strike me as 'intelligence' according to certain definitions. Having a body of knowledge does not always count as 'intelligence'. It's how you process it where the intelligence comes in. There is a very good survey of the field by Brian Cantwell Smith: *The Promise of Artificial Intelligence* (M.I.T. Press, 2019). He wants to distinguish between 'reckoning', which machines are good at, and 'judge-

ment', where they are less effective. He refers to devices which 'lack the ethical commitments, deep contextual awarenesses, and ontological sensitivity of judgement.' In some quarters it is hoped that 'artificial general intelligence' (AGI) will be able to replicate deep thought and undertake 'deep learning'. But many regard this as an impossible dream.

I realise that my brief picture of a sequence of thoughts, including sensations, is all very personal, anecdotal if you like, but how, otherwise, is one to oppose the diktats and the kudos of the machines? It's an ethical question as well as a phenomenological one. 'O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!' Keats said (letter of 22 November 1817), but I think that sensations and thoughts merge more than he thought.

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 *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.ox.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.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation.

Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk).

Jane Austen and *The Loiterer*

A. D. HARVEY

ONE does not usually think of Jane Austen, the unmarried daughter of a clergyman, as preoccupied with seduction and adultery but runaway sex provides a key element in three out of her six major novels. In *Pride and Prejudice* Wickham runs off with Lydia Bennet with very little idea of marrying her, and is only persuaded to do so by Darcy paying his debts, purchasing an ensigncy and settling a thousand pounds on Lydia. In *Sense and Sensibility* Marianne Dashwood's beloved Willoughby turns out to be the heartless seducer of Colonel Brandon's ward. In *Mansfield Park* Henry Crawford runs off with Maria Bertram soon after she has married Rushworth, and her sister Julia elopes with Yates. Even Harriet Smith in *Emma*, 'the natural daughter of somebody', would have appeared to many of Jane Austen's first readers as a somewhat dubious character, being fresh from a girls' boarding school, a type of institution which in those days was frequently thought of as accommodating the 'left-handed off-sets of chambermaids... the children of prostitutes by profligate sons.' (See Charles Dibdin, *Observations on a Tour* [1801-1802], letter XLI.)

The possibility that young ladies of Jane Austen's social class were expected to be well aware that such things happened is however suggested by a narrative that appeared in *The Loiterer*, a magazine put out in 1789 - 90 by two of her older brothers, James and Henry Austen (both later clergymen) while James was a fellow and Henry an undergraduate at St. John's. Modelled on Addison and Steele's *Spectator*, *The Loiterer* was Oxford's - Europe's? - second-ever university magazine, the first being *Olla Podrida*, put out by Magdalen undergraduates in 1787-8. Unlike the *Microcosm* (1786-7), the first-ever school magazine, produced at Eton and reprinted at least six times, *The Loiterer* was not a conspicuous commercial success, but one imagines it was proudly handed about amongst the authors' siblings. It has even been suggested that Jane Austen herself, then aged not quite fourteen, was the author of a letter signed Sophia Sentiment, complaining of the lack of sensational fiction in *The Loiterer*, published in the magazine's ninth number, 28 November 1789. (See Zachary Cope, 'Who Was Sophia Sentiment?', *Book Collector* XV (1966) p.143-51.) This lack was in due course supplied in *The Loiterer* no.LVII, 27 February 1790, which consisted of an account of attempted seduction somewhat along the lines of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, published fifty years previously, but with a different twist in its handling of the protagonists' eventual marriage. (See below.)

There are no documents, no textual clues, to indicate that Jane Austen was the author of this piece - nor any

proof that she was not, though bearing in mind the usual attitude of undergraduates to their kid sisters, and a certain solemnity in the whole project of *The Loiterer*, it has to be said that her authorship is unlikely: a reader's letter is one thing, an entire issue by a fourteen-year-old sister is quite another. What is interesting about this short story is what it suggests about the kind of thing well brought-up teenagers were supposed to know about and discuss. To what extent the children of country clergymen of the period were indoctrinated in the mechanics of human reproduction we cannot really say, though all children growing up in the countryside must have obtained some insight into what was involved. The ethical and social aspects, which are nowadays also part of sex education, were certainly issues with which children in enlightened middle-class families were expected to be familiar.

Evidence of this is to be found in a number of poems published by teenagers dealing with seduction and (what was then claimed to be its inevitable sequel) pregnancy and prostitution. James Templeton's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1801), allegedly 'entirely the production of childhood', included 'An Epistle to W.L. Esq. on Seduction'. Nicholas Stratton's *Poems on Various Subjects* (1824) included 'Poor Emily, or, the Child of Misfortune: a Poem, Occasioned by the Death of Emily Spencer, a Celebrated Fashionable Impure. Written at the Age of Sixteen.' Margaret Patrickson, author of *Miscellaneous Poems* (1806), claimed to be only fourteen when she wrote 'Louisa's Fate' on a similar subject. It may have been the same (but mythical?) Louisa who 'sought her babe's food at her ruiner's door' in a 'Song' beginning 'Cold, cold is the blast when December is howling', probably written by Percy Bysshe Shelley in his late teens but attributed by him to his sixteen-year-old sister Elizabeth, and published in *Original Poems by Victor and Cazire* (1810).

In this period the age of majority was twenty-one and parents normally kept their offspring under stricter control than is normal today: one can only assume that these publications were not only with the consent but also (except perhaps in Shelley's case) with the encouragement of fond parents. Clearly the young ladies in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* were not unusual in their awareness of what running away with a lover meant. No doubt there were some families in this period who believed that keeping youngsters in total ignorance was the best means of safeguarding their virtue: but it is evident that Jane Austen and her brothers did not belong to such a family.

No. 57.

OF THE LOITERER

“Speak of us as we are.”

HAVING long been a prey to secret Sorrow, and possessing among those who surround me no friend, to whom I could safely communicate the cause of it, I have (however reluctant to submit the detail of Domestic Inquietude to Public Disquisition) at length determined, through the medium of your Paper, to divulge the leading features of a life which may afford no useless lesson to those young Women who have not yet (as alas I have!) resigned every prospect of real Happiness, to contribute to the enjoyment and gratify the vanity for a Man, who neither seeks my esteem, or relishes my society.

My Father was a Yeoman, who, in addition to a small freehold of his own, rented a large tract of Land in the North of Devonshire. He was married early in life with a woman of his own rank, who joining to a sweet temper, and agreeable person, the utmost love and respect for her Husband, and requiring no luxuries beyond his love and affection, made him one of the happiest men in the country. Domestic satisfaction is generally accompanied by success abroad. My Father, easy in mind and circumstances, employed all his attention to make those circumstances better; and cheerfully underwent the labours of the Day, secure in a clean repast, and welcome reception in the Evening. His farms were daily improving, and at the end of eight years after his marriage, he found himself by no means impoverished, though each year had added to his family. — ’Tis with difficulty, Mr. Loiterer, that I leave the description of a time, whose pleasures are never to return. I must, however, pass over to more important events, — I was the eldest of my Father’s Children, and being reckoned exceedingly like my Mother, was with him no small favourite. This circumstance, added to the remoteness of our situation from any large town, and the little concern Which English Farmer, twenty-five years ago, felt for female education, determined my father never to send me to any school, but rather permit me to improve my health and complexion on my native Moors; of course, except in the articles of reading and writing, my accomplishments, at the age of seventeen, did not exceed those of the Dairy Maid or Kitchen Girl.

About this time, Mr. M. —, the owner of that part of our farm which was not freehold, came down from London to repair the ravages which twenty London winters had made in his Constitution, to inspect the condition of the estates which he knew nothing of, or had ever seen before; and lastly, to try his new double-barrelled gun upon the harmless Heathpots. — As soon as his arrival was announced, my Father, who was his principal Tenant, and in some degree his Steward, thought himself in duty bound to pay his immediate respects to him at the Manor-House; and that the compliment might be the greater, insisted on my Mother’s and my accompanying him thither. Putting on therefore our best red Cloaks, and clean white Aprons, we proceeded to the great House, which was only a short mile distant from our own. — Mr. M. — had once been very handsome; at the age of thirty-seven he was still a good looking man. His manner too had a certain attentive delicacy, which, I have since found out, can only be acquired by a long and intimate acquaintance with the truly fashionable World; and which perhaps can never be shewn to greater advantage than when directed towards our inferiors. My Father and Mother, who, with a prejudice common enough among country people, had annexed to the idea of a great Man from London, supercilious neglect, or mortifying

condescension, were quite charmed with the first appearance of their Landlord. My father offered to conduct him to the best Hide of Pheasants on the Manor, while my Mother expressed a hope that he would not leave the Country without calling at the farmhouse, and tasting her clouted cream. What my opinion of the Stranger was I do not at present recollect. Young and heedless, I looked on him with surprise and curiosity rather than attention, and joined in the common report, that he was the finest Gentleman I had ever set my eyes on. But it seems that my appearance had made a far deeper impression on him. Joining to fashionable manners fashionable morals, he thought the best return he could possibly make to the well meant civilities of his new country friends, would be to seduce their favourite Daughter. To the accomplishment of which task, he thought a few guineas spent in ribbons, gloves, and lace, a very adequate sum. For as to real Virtue, he could not suppose that a raw country girl, without education and experience, possessing high spirits and an unsuspecting heart, could possibly withstand the seducing charms of adulation, finery, and pleasure. For once he was deceived. I do not assert, Mr. Loiterer, that my obstinate refusal was the effect of intrinsic virtue. At that age I could not be supposed to be equal to great temptations. Had Mr. M. — secured my heart, instead of attacking my vanity, he would in all probability have succeeded. Luckily, however, for me, his person was totally indifferent to me; of course, that passion which acts most strongly on a female heart, lay dormant, The offers too which he made, were to a native of Devonshire almost unintelligible. What could I understand of the luxuries of a Metropolis where I had never been? What charms could I suppose to exist in amusements, the very names of which I was ignorant of? The uncertainty therefore of what I might gain from such a connection, and the certainty of what I must suffer in deserting the best of parents, would have been sufficient to have decided the question, without any virtuous principle of action. I wish not to praise myself yet some virtue I surely possessed. I not only refused him, but refused him with such marks of cool contempt, that they cut him to the quick, and were productive of a subsequent change in the nature of his proposals. Mr. — had in all probability been little used to such refusals. His figure, address, and fortune, must have made him no unsuccessful Lover among females of the highest rank. Stung therefore by unexpected disappointment, and inflamed by increased desire, though a professed Marriage-hater, he discarded the whole of his former system, and resolved to make me his at any rate. He accordingly made such proposals to my Father and Mother, as joined to their previous good opinion of him, secured them in his favour. With me, perhaps, the lustre of honourable rank, and the pleasure of raising my family to independence, had but too much weight. I easily forgave him his former mean attempts, and suffered the name of Husband to cancel the former offences of an insulting passion.

Though Mr. M. — had condescended to marry the daughter of his Tenant, yet he did not chuse to wed himself to the whole family; and accordingly soon after the ceremony, he hurried me off towards the gay Metropolis. — The nearer we approached the scene of his former gaities, the more ashamed did my husband seem of having married so precipitately a girl, whom even then perhaps he thought, a little patience might have made his own on easier terms. The possession of a few days had al-

ready cooled the ardour of his passion, and when we arrived in town, instead of conveying me to an handsome house, which he possessed in – Square, he placed me in private lodgings in Bond-street, and determined if he could not desert his wife, at least to conceal her. All this and much more I have since known from those, whom personal merit, and the neglect of a husband gave many opportunities of exciting my regard: Though, thank Heaven! hitherto without success. At the time ignorant of my husbands real fortune, or connections, one house was to me like another. Every thing was new, every thing was striking; I found myself mistress of my own time, person, and apartment; and though I had never felt anything like love for Mr. M. I was grateful to him for the rank which he had raised me to, and supported me in. I loved man no better than my husband, and thought it impossible so to do.

In a little time, Mr. M's visits became shorter, and less frequent, and when he did come, his thoughts seemed wandering, and his person was neglected. The most credulous will at last be undeceived: Such a behaviour, as Mr. M. soon assumed, but too well convinced me, that I had unintentionally lost his affections. I was mortified, but still endeavoured to account for it without casting any blame on him. I imagined that my total want of education, which every day convinced me of, made him disgusted with my person, and ashamed of my company. Scarce had the thought entered my head, when I determined, as far as lay in my power, to remedy the defect. Mr. M. had ever made me a very ample allowance: This I immediately employed in the selection of the best Masters in every department of female accomplishment. Though the loss of many years, which are never to be recovered, forbade my arriving at excellence, yet the necessity of the case, and a sense of duty enabled me to do much. At the end of two years I was conscious of my own progress. My manners and my taste were evidently improved. I could join in conversation with Mr. M. without hesitation, and support it without confusion. He was soon sensible of the change, and the conviction that my labours were merely to make myself worthy of him, produced for a little time the renewal of former caresses: But habitual infidelity is not easily corrected; and Mr. M. soon found that, the being virtuous, and consistent, was too great an effort for the shattered principles of a fashionable education.

At this time another circumstance was added to the sum of my misfortunes, and in comparison of which all I had hitherto suffered was nothing. – Mr. M. had introduced to me many fashionable young Men, though very few fashionable Women. Among the former was a nephew of his own, about my age; to whom Nature had been equally kind in the gifts of person and mind. His Uncle had procured him a Commission in the Guards, and had made him an allowance equal to that rank. Ennobled by birth and profession, he was still more so by manner and disposition. Brave to a degree of enthusiasm, yet strong in judgment beyond his years, at once fervid, and gentle: He had preserved the character of fashion without dissipation, and genius without pedantry. We were often alone; Mr. M.

seemed to wish we should be so. Our tastes were similar, our literary pursuits the same: Nor were our dispositions unlike, for we had both Conceived the image of a love, which neither was destined to enjoy. Our esteem was mutual; and from esteem to love the path is very short. – Why should I dwell on circumstances, which fifteen years of absence cannot make me indifferent to! How far our passions might have carried us, or what I might not have stopped at, I now dread to think, had not my Edward been more generous to me, than to himself. Without assigning to Mr. M. any cause except a dislike of indolence, and a thirst for military glory, he insisted on a change into the Regulars, and immediately joined a Regiment, which had embarked for the East Indies, leaving behind him a letter to me; in which he said, that being convinced he was not indifferent to me, he had joyfully preferred exile to the chance of thinking me less perfect, than he had ever done from the first moment of our acquaintance.

What my feelings were on so sudden a crisis is not to be described. Mr. M. still persevered in the same neglect of his honour and my own. It was evident I contributed not to his comfort, and I was probably a check to his pleasures. This idea induced me to embrace a plan, which I had long wished for. Accordingly one day after begging a serious attention to what I was going to say, I recapitulated every circumstance since our marriage, which could confirm me in the idea of his indifference to me; I presumed not to resent, I deigned not to complain; I only begged, that if I could not contribute to his pleasures, I might not clog them, and that he would consent to my leaving the circles of gaiety, where I found no amusement, and retire to the seat which he possessed in my native country. After a few well-bred remonstrances he consented to what I am sure He had long secretly wished; and in less than a week I had entered on my new retreat.

In this spot I have passed the last twelve years of my life, surrounded by those, whom the ties of blood and the disgusting recollection of a more splendid life have made doubly dear to me. Mr. M. rarely visits me; when he does I always meet him with a smile, and endeavour to make his stay as agreeable as I can; he quits me with apparent regret; but returns not in a hurry. Sincerely do I pity him as a melancholy instance of good intentions struggling ineffectually against vicious habits.

Of the man, whom I once loved too tenderly, I have since heard through the means of my husband. He is well, and advances rapidly in his profession; he talks not of returning. May he be happy!

Such is my history. I ask not advice, Mr. Loiterer; I have determined on my plan of life, and my heart tells me that I am right. I only wish you to caution those, who have not; that too much care cannot be paid, e'er they form lasting connections. Indifference is a frail foundation for marriage. Every human heart is formed for love: And the Woman, who loves not her husband, must love some one else. If her passion is restrained she will never be happy; if it is indulged, she will be always miserable.

Gross criticism

Sir – I have to say that I am very disturbed by your gross criticism in the editorial (*Oxford Magazine*, No.421, 5th Week, TT 2020) of the handling of the Covid-19 Pandemic by the government. I can see no evidence for your claims and have been following the situation quite closely in a number of ways.

The membership of SAGE is not secret. The data so far do not show that there was an easy case for the UK to have learnt early from others. We are on a par with all the other major European countries apart from Germany and I find their data most puzzling.

I think it is an extraordinary insult to say that the government has massaged the figures. There is no evidence for this and it seems to me to be a totally unwarranted attack on the scientists who have been doing their best to deal with the situation.

Yours sincerely
WALTER BODMER
Hertford College

Reuben College

Sir – The University has announced that Parks College is ‘set to become’ Reuben College. The Vice-Chancellor’s email of 11 June said she had ‘signed a gift agreement with the Reuben family’ that week. But why is the name change now so urgent that it is proposed that it be approved at a Meeting of Congregation on 30 June, way out of Full Term?

The relevant Congregation Regulation makes provision for a ‘meeting date’ which lies ‘outside Full Term’. In such a case ‘notice of opposition or the proposal of an amendment by at least two members shall automatically also be treated as a request for adjournment to be handled by the procedure under regulation 1.9’. If the Proctors decide not to grant an adjournment, there has to be a Meeting at which two members of Congregation may rise in their place etc.. But under the present Covid-19 restrictions, there surely could be no Meeting of Congregation for debate and voting in any case with the Sheldonian locked and such gatherings not yet permissible. (Was not Encaenia due to take place a week earlier cancelled for those reasons.)

The *Gazette* of 11 June reminds Congregation that in the Explanatory Note ‘to the legislative proposal’ approved by Congregation on 7 May 2019, ‘it was stated that the new Society was only initially to be known as Parks College’. It adds ‘that the society’s name might change on receipt of an endowment was anticipated’, though Congregation was not actually told that in the original Explanatory Note and the Council Regulations are framed throughout for a Society called ‘Parks College’.

There seems to be an awkward constitutional uncertainty as to whether changing the name of a Society is in the power

TO THE EDITOR

of Congregation at all under the present Statutes. The other two Societies have kept the names under which they were created. Statute V does not provide for changing the name of a Society after it is created under s.5. Congregation may only make new ones under Statute V, s. 6 by adding ‘further institutions’ to the list of Societies. Should this lack of a power to change the name not have been attended to with a legislative proposal in the year since Parks was created?

One hesitates to suggest that the Silver Group currently running the University has assumed the legislative proposal will be deemed to be approved without a Meeting of Congregation having to be held. The lodging of an objection by noon on 22 June would ensure that that could not happen. It is difficult to see why the legislative proposal was not held over until the Michaelmas Term in any case. But surely in circumstances where Congregation’s view could not be tested in the normal constitutional manner that is what must now happen.

Surely Congregation’s views and approval need to be tested in the proper constitutional manner by postponing the meeting until next term or Congregation needs to be given a cogent explanation for the urgency of the current situation.

Yours sincerely
G. R. EVANS
Cambridge

A day off

Sir – Trinity Term 2020 has on any measure been a testing term for the University. The Vice-Chancellor has been quick to recognise, most recently in her message of 8 June, the efforts of students and staff-members in mitigating the deleterious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the resulting lockdown. She has encouraged us to be optimistic and to plan for a resumption of normal activities, while warning of the challenges and difficult decisions to come.

The 8 June message incorporated a gesture of recognition and gratitude for these ongoing efforts: a day’s holiday for University employees on Friday of 9th Week or - for those with examining commitments on that day - on another day. Although the underlying intent to promote staff welfare and morale is laudable, one is left to wonder by whose authority the decision to release staff members from their employment obligations was taken? *Quo warranto?*

At a time when the University’s decision-making mechanisms are coming under

close scrutiny (G R Evans, *Oxford Magazine*, No 421, pp 21-23), this case illustrates the need for exercises of decision-making power to be firmly and openly rooted in the Statutes and Regulations. That is especially important when they affect individual contracts of employment.

The Vice-Chancellor uses the first person in her message (‘I would like to suggest ...’), but it does not appear that she has the authority to bind the University contractually without the express consent of Council by a resolution duly delivered and registered (Statute XVI.14-15). The general delegation by Council to the Vice-Chancellor under its Standing Orders is subject to that provision. Moreover, while Council might claim the necessary dispensing power (Statute XIV.6), it has delegated responsibility for the terms and conditions of employment to the Personnel Committee (Council Regulations 3/2004, para 2). It seems, on any view of the matter, wholly appropriate that decisions in employment matters should be taken collectively by a body with the requisite expertise, rather than by a single individual.

The Vice-Chancellor’s encouragement to ‘everyone’ to lay down tools also overlooks the fact that many University employees are also employees of the University’s constituent Colleges, which determine our terms and conditions of employment. Have the Colleges agreed to this measure? If so, by what mechanism?

Finally, welcome as the gesture is for the message that it affirms, its effectiveness may be doubted. One consequence of the pandemic has been that teaching and examining commitments, and the work of those supporting tutors and examiners, will continue into and beyond 9th Week. For many, a day’s holiday at this time will serve only to increase the workload in the following week or at the weekend. For sure, there will be a time to rest, and to reflect on what has been done, but we can choose that time for ourselves.

Yours sincerely
ANDREW DICKINSON
St Catherine’s College

This Dark Season

Dusk unwraps our familiar otherness:
a swung gate, a tip-tap at the window,
an old cat rummaging for sleep
in a greenhouse, that frail hutch of gleam.

Step out, pause where the tree-line anchors
a floating pasture of cloud-shreds:
a deer, a fold of moonstruck shade
waits as custodian of that silence

we knew when, adrift in our lost gardens,
we, too, moved as the air moved, lightly
picked up by time, dropped as dead leaves
pluck from their corner to lie down again.

In this dark season of gifts and strangers,
we balance the moment: rough grass
and star-peep. Eyes trap the solitude;
old bricks drowse and tremble in the cold,

your hand in mine goes whispering
as a wand of light conjures night adrift
over a presence step-changed into absence.
Stiff branches ease back into conversation.

The Shimmering Cat

For Bertie, the Snow-spotted Bengal

Legs far too long to reach the ground —
so, stepping high, he walks on air;
sand, cinnamon and rumpled lace
weave the coat this cat must wear,

whose dapples shift like water-rings
bounced from the path by summer rain,
or clouds which sail their sunlit cusps
down drying puddles. Dyed in grain,

that shimmering camouflage must hide
the secret cat beneath the skin,
mortality transfigured there:
an angel dancing on a pin.

With flick-flack tail and haunted stare,
with eager ears and lime-white throat,
he sings of life in the greening year,
the cat that wears the Joseph coat.

“Why, this is Sestina, Lady!” (Shakespeare in the Garden)

For Kevin and Linda Crossley-Holland

Are they then real, as real as this sestina,
the painted faces and the painted sky,
the pretty dolls unwinding skeins of words?
We are the gardeners with our nets and hands
to catch the syllables before they fall
and falter in the grass, until they die

to rise again, because we know to die
is consummation, union a sestina
perfects unless the schema rides to fall.
We’ve touched the roses up and scoured the sky,
juggled the sulking seasons. At our hands,
Nature and Art are both subsumed in words,

or, as the Prince would have it ‘words, words, words’
before his tragedy said ‘Time to die’,
in darkest consummation. Uncross those hands,
applaud the entrance of the fair Sestina
whose grace and gravity weds earth to sky,
whose strains and swains shall have no dying fall

unless her melancholia suits the fall
of all those touched-up leaves, autumnal words
that lend our comedies a lowering sky.
The tree-house rocks, the breezes rise and die,
tied canvas swells and bellies this sestina;
actors and audience play on, their hands

adrift on laps, or holding other hands.
Dancers weave by, counts mourn and rustics fall
to puzzling jest. Sestina? Who’s Sestina?
Enter a cat, stage-left, real fur, no words.
It knew no more that it was time to die,
that dead mouse trophied up against the sky,

than these, our dear *semblables*. Evening sky
crawls on to resurrection. By clapped hands
puppets and puppet-masters live or die,
but which is which? The starlit curtains fall;
we are the prisoners of ghosts made words,
their glad-rags coffined up in a sestina

where masks and masquers die to live, blue sky
brightens Sestina’s landscapes and our hands
let nothing fall; nothing is lost for words.

A Door

And, if you open a door,
what you have placed there comes to light
as the sky moves in from the window
to pause, notice the chest of drawers,
a cat’s pricked ears,
your carpet’s teased-out fringes,

but can you discover words
for the frisson, the trip-wires hung
from fear to love, both lost but hungry
to ghost you scents, a tune, a place
where the carpet
lies flecked with foam, the sand’s rim

runs out to the sunburnt grass;
a tartan rug, a biscuit-tin
flicker and vanish. The chest shadows
a girl whose face is patched with tears;
her gingham frock
blows to curtain in the wind,

the cat, in its garage box,
stiffens in its long sleep. Whose hand
gathers yours, as you cross to the bed,
shake yourself awake, but dreaming
of tumblers, matchsticks,
and, if you open a door . . .

PETER SCUPHAM

Peter Scupham was born three days before the Reichstag Fire in 1933 and has outlived many dictators. After being a toy soldier of the Queen for two years he was supposed to be educated by the English Faculty at Cambridge, but, after graduating, decided he could do it better himself. He has taught, lectured, run a Private Press and published a dozen books of poems with Oxford and Carcanet. He now sells secondhand books and meditates on first and last things – especially first things – in the old Tudor house he and his wife Margaret have brought back to a kind of life.

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