



Oxford University Student Union

# Academic Affairs Handbook

2009-10

## Introduction

Being your JCR Academic Affairs Officer is an important role and one which can – at times – be a challenging one. There are a range of issues which you could focus on, including academic discipline, feedback and study skills. This Handbook is not intended to be a guide as to how you should do your job - rather it is hoped that it will be a useful resource that you can turn to for information, help and ideas. It covers common academic welfare issues, exams, campaigning ideas and useful contacts should you need more information.

As a JCR Officer, you're likely to be able to define the role towards whatever areas most interest you. Some of you will focus on the welfare aspect; looking at helping students under pressure, in the run up to exams, or when they are going through the academic disciplinary process. Others may see it as more of a proactive campaigning role, seeking to extend library opening hours or bring in new study skills sessions. Although it's ultimately up to you and your Common Room as to how you approach the job, what may work best for you is trying to combine these two aspects of your role along with the general committee work which may come your way.

At times OUSU hasn't focused enough on supporting Common Room academic representatives. This year we will be holding regular sessions where we can get together, share best practice and have discussions on specific topics which may occur in your colleges. Just as importantly, we welcome your feedback and input. OUSU largely exists to support Common Rooms in their work and we do that most effectively when elected representatives are giving us ideas and suggesting what the student union should be doing.

There is a great deal that you can do in your own college. In the past, Academic Affairs Officers have successfully campaigned to improve feedback structures, introduce fairer disciplinary procedures and bring in better welfare provision. Campaigning for change is an excellent way of making a real difference for students in the long term. JCR and Student Union Officers are often very busy tackling the day-to-day events, which is crucial. However, we sometimes fail to tackle the underlying issues, and in campaigning for change, we can make the lives of all students better.

With Freshers arriving soon you may wish to consider publicising your role. Michaelmas term is the most important time for this, when Freshers are in greatest need of support. You could organise an introductory talk to ensure that students understand your role and know how you can help them. The most important thing is to ensure that everyone knows your face and thinks that you are approachable should any problems arise.

If you've got any questions about anything in here or about academic affairs in general, please don't hesitate to get in touch. My e-mail is [access@ousu.org](mailto:access@ousu.org), office number is 01865 288464 and if you need to contact me urgently my mobile is 07748 653870.

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## Common Academic Affairs Welfare Problems

### Changing College (Migration)

Most students are very happy in a college, though there are a few occasions every year when individuals wish to switch colleges. This is known as migration.

The formal position for college migration is set out in the Statutes, Decrees and Regulations ([http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/examregs/07-00\\_REGULATIONS\\_FOR\\_READMISSION\\_AND\\_MIGRATION.shtml](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/examregs/07-00_REGULATIONS_FOR_READMISSION_AND_MIGRATION.shtml)).

A student wishing to change college will need:

- Written permission from their college.
- A certificate from the Proctors saying that they have seen these documents and know of no reason why the student should not be allowed to change college.

The Proctors also ask for a letter from a senior officer (e.g. the Senior Tutor) of the receiving or 'new' college confirming that they are willing to accept the student. Once these two sets of documents have been supplied, the Proctors will issue the certificate of migration: they typically exercise very little discretion in cases involving migration.

It is often difficult both to persuade your college to release the student and to get another college to accept the student if your application does not show evidence of a compelling need to migrate for academic reasons - although there may be exceptions (for example, welfare reasons which are impacting on academic performance). There are also underlying issues that may influence a college. Admissions decisions are made by colleges, so they tend to have faith in the choices that they have made, rather than those made by another college. There may also be an underlying assumption that a student who didn't fit in to one college won't fit easily into another.

If someone has found a new college willing to accept them, there are still a few potential complications:

- Colleges may be unwilling to lose any funding attached to a student.
- As a rule, colleges avoid allowing migration because they feel it could mean that students gain a place at a relatively unpopular college and then change to a perceived richer/more popular/more prestigious college.
- The college may feel they have "confidential reasons" which would change another college's view of a student but which they cannot disclose.
- Finally, if an undergraduate who has done a BA at Oxford wants to change college for graduate study they are likely to find it difficult unless they want to move to a graduate college.

To organise migration, there are two potential routes. The first is to approach the Senior Tutor of your college and seek their advice and assistance. The second is to find a college willing to accept you, before going to the Senior Tutor at the original college. The latter is risky because it goes behind the back of the colleges, and any acceptance will only be informal. This option may be appropriate when the student has been taught by a friendly tutor at another college and resistance is expected at the original college. By sounding out

other potential colleges before meeting the Senior Tutor at the original tutor, it may ease this resistance. Again, to reiterate, this is a risky strategy. Senior Tutors meet regularly and seek to cooperate, so will be wary in operating in this way. The Proctors (or any other university official) cannot compel colleges to let students migrate – if your college is unwilling to let a student go or if another college is unwilling to take them, there is little which can be done.

### **Changing Tutor**

One of the most common problems that Academic Affairs Officers have to deal with is students wishing to change tutor. It is worth checking your college handbook because some colleges specify in their regulations that students have the right to demand a different tutor. If this right exists in your college you should advise the students to simply follow the college procedure.

Students may wish to change tutors for different reasons. There may be a personality clash with the tutor or the student may feel that they are not being fully supported. Often students facing this problem will feel upset and frustrated and will simply need someone to listen to them. They may also need some reassurance especially if they have lost confidence in their academic ability. It is worth giving the student time to talk thoroughly about their feelings.

The procedure for changing tutors will vary considerably between colleges. At the start of the year it is worth asking the Senior Tutor for information about how the procedure operates in your college. It is important to realise that the student may be concerned about the reaction of their tutor and they may ask you to accompany them or to speak to the Senior Tutor on their behalf.

### **Changing Course for Undergraduates**

In theory this is possible, but there are potential difficulties in practice. Chiefly, colleges need to match the numbers of undergraduates to the teaching resources available. Often the numbers will be large enough to allow a degree of flexibility, but this is not always the case. Another question that must be considered is whether a student has covered enough of the new subject by the time of the change to avoid having to start from the very beginning, thus losing a year. A change of subject can mean an extra year as an undergraduate, which has financial and other implications. Admission to study is competitive, based on academic potential and commitment. Undergraduates are expected to demonstrate flair at interview and also commitment to the course they wish to pursue for three or four years; a wish to change course is sometimes read (rightly or wrongly) as a lack of commitment. Finally, it is to be expected that someone entering a new course must be good enough to have been admitted for that subject in open competition. The new course may also have admission requirements, for example certain subjects studied at school, which the student wishing to swap is likely to need to meet.

Regulations and procedures vary between colleges, and what follows is a general guide. A student wanting to change subject will need the approval both of the tutors in the subject they are leaving and those in the subject that they wish to take up. They can if they wish talk to both sets of tutors and then, if they all agree, their current tutor will write to the

Senior Tutor, informing him/her of the situation and saying that they approve of the change. Alternatively, a student may prefer not to tell their current tutors until they have an approval from the tutors in the subject to which they wish to move. In this case, they can approach the Senior Tutor first, who will arrange meetings with the tutors in the proposed new subject. Whatever the approach taken, the Senior Tutor must finally submit the proposed change to a college committee for approval, usually the Academic Committee or its equivalent. This committee may be able to turn the proposal down, even if both sets of tutors agree. If the student in question wishes to switch to a course not offered in their college then they will also need to combine this process with that of migration (see page 4) which can further complicate the procedure.

### **Changing Course/Topic for Postgraduates**

The college will be less relevant in a course change than would be the case for undergraduates, although the graduate will probably need your Tutor for Graduates to sign a form. They may expect to have an interview in the Faculty that offers the course to which they wish to change. The most important issue will be funding. If funding comes from a Research Council it may involve a lot of paperwork. However if you are self-funded or are on a fairly easy-going scholarship scheme, transferring funding will be much easier. Other potential restrictions include absolute thresholds in some courses on the number of people that they can admit.

In some circumstances a graduate may be asked to change course because your work is not judged to be of a suitable standard (e.g. from an M.Phil to an M.St or a D.Phil to an M.Litt). It may be possible to appeal this decision. You or the affected graduate may ask for advice from the OUSU Vice-President (Graduates), whose contact details are at the end of this Guide. If you do receive queries from graduate students then it may be best to refer them either to an MCR Welfare Officer or to the Vice-President (Graduates) as graduate issues can be complex and it is likely that you will be unfamiliar with them.

### **Exam Welfare**

At one stage or another, many students feel stressed as a result of exam pressure. This pressure can come as the result of upcoming mods, prelims, finals, collections or penal collections. To an extent, exam pressure can be healthy, but IF it gets out of control it can leave students feeling desperate and very isolated. Many students experience stress before significant examinations such as mods/prelims and finals, where the outcome is of importance to their future. Generally, difficulties will fall into one of three main groups: poor organisation, lack of motivation or anxiety and panic.

How you deal with such difficulties often depends on when the student seeks help. If someone appears to be excessively stressed by exams the practical advice you can offer is a common sense rationalisation of their problems. Do they need extra tutorials? Could you speak to their tutor on their behalf? Could their tutor offer a concise reading list or suggest helpful lectures? If it is a matter of him or her managing their work load more effectively, they could consult the University Counselling Service's leaflet about study skills or the OUSU website (<http://www.ousu.org/academic-affairs/study-skills/>). Another thing you can do is help them to put their exams into perspective - failing an exam is not the end of the world and Oxford is not the be-all and end-all of life.

For some finalists, their final grade will affect the rest of their lives, especially if, for example, they want to go into postgraduate work. If this is the case, encourage them to talk about their fears and maybe get them to start looking at possible alternatives to their chosen life plan. It is important that they can see other positive futures for themselves even if the dreaded exams don't go well. Remember that for some students, any amount of dedication or management will not get them the grade that they want; they may simply expect too much of themselves.

If the student seeks your help with only a few days to go, all you can do is try to reassure them and encourage them to use the remaining time as sensibly and productively as possible. If someone seems desperate, or as though they need help beyond what you can offer, refer them to the University Counselling Service or to their doctor. The CR/SU should make its support network particularly high-profile during exam times. Offer coffee and biscuits or surgeries for people to come and talk. Or organise relaxation sessions in Trinity Term: massage or aromatherapy sessions have proved popular in some colleges. You can always get people in from outside to give seminars or workshops on managing stress or revision skills and tutors may help out with specific study or exam skills seminars. This may be an area where you wish to work with your JCR Welfare reps to seek to alleviate stress for students taking exams. On a wider scale, attempts have been made to ease the pressure on finalists by introducing an element of coursework into the degree course.

### **Failing Prelims**

It is impossible to go on to the second public examination until a student has passed the first public examination (called Mods or Prelims).

A student who has failed their first public examination will usually be given the opportunity to retake the examination before the beginning of the following academic year. In some colleges this is agreed in the college regulations as a right, though in other colleges there may be no right to retake and failure will lead to permanent expulsion. Check your college's code of practice is so that you can work from an informed position, and if there is no automatic right, you may want to consider starting a campaign to change this regulation.

If the student fails the resit there may be the possibility of them retaking the entire year, although this is generally only allowed in exceptional circumstances. The student may wish to re-apply to the same college to do a course for which they are better suited. If the student has failed their examinations, another college is unlikely to take them on unless the student can convince the potential new college of compelling reasons why they underperformed at their first college.

When providing advice, you should make sure that the student concerned is getting all the available options. The affected student should consider alternative options while they are preparing for resits or appealing to be allowed to take resits. The possibility of going elsewhere to do either the same or a different course must be considered as there can be no guarantee of success in a resit. Many other Higher Education institutions are happy to offer places to students on a provisional basis (i.e. only if they fail their resit), and having a

"back-up plan" can ease the stress. This could have repercussions for accommodation plans, particularly if the student is living out.

### **Failing Finals**

There is a pretty limited amount of help that can be given to students who fail, or do not do as well as they expect in Finals. Oxford does not allow appeals on academic judgements. However, if someone thinks that they have reason to believe that their result has been adversely affected by an administrative error, it is possible to make a complaint. This should be made through the Senior Tutor of your college to the Proctors. If special arrangements were made for the students' examination, or if the student offered mitigating circumstances (such as illness) prior to the exam which they do not believe were taken into account, they can also appeal to the Proctors. Again, this should go through their Senior Tutor. University regulations make very clear that all complaints or appeals regarding university examinations must be submitted via the Senior Tutor of a college for administrative reasons. Senior Tutors do not have the right to refuse to pass on appeals to the Proctors, although the Proctors have a broad remit to investigate and act as they see fit. If a student fails finals then they can re-enter the examination but will not be able to obtain an Honours degree unless they do so within a maximum number of terms specified in the Examination Regulations. Contact your Senior Tutor for more information on this.

### **Special Arrangements for Exams**

Some students will need special help with exams due to dyslexia or disability. The University 'Examination Decrees' contain some guidance on this, and the Proctors or your College Secretary should be able to help to make arrangements for those students affected. Special arrangements can be made for taking exams in colleges (eg if a student is disabled or severely ill), getting extra time for special circumstances (eg dyslexia) and submitting medical certificates: a student has to discuss these with their subject tutor or their college's senior tutor

There are many other possible reasons why special arrangements might be needed. For example:

- If the student is partially sighted or blind they may need a special venue and/or papers in Braille
- If the student has a physical disability that would make it difficult for them to take your exams in the Exam Schools a different venue might be arranged. This may include disabilities, such as a tendency towards migraines, which could make sitting an examination without distracting those around you impossible.
- If the student is dyslexic or suffers from other recognised learning difficulties they may be entitled to extra time
- If the student needs special facilities such as a computer
- If a student falls ill during exams but still want to sit the exams
- If the student cannot sit exams on certain days for religious reasons.
- If the student is suffering from severe stress, and would be unable to cope with the environment in Examination Schools, other venues may be possible.

If you or the student are unsure, it is best to approach the College Secretary or Senior Tutor who will be responsible for contacting the Proctors to request the arrangements. The University Disability Office (<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/disab/>) may also be able to advise.

### **Timetable problems**

Timetable clashes and exams on religious holidays are usually dealt with by “incarceration” - students are chaperoned until they take the paper that others have already taken. The Proctors make the definitive decisions but they only consider cases brought through colleges and the extent of their sympathy will depend on the support of your college.

If students have timetable clashes in their examination timetable, they should report it to their College Secretary so that it can be addressed, or so that arrangements can be made.

### **Rules on Exams**

Exam rules are in the big grey book called 'Examination Decrees and Regulations' and online. This is the official statement of the syllabus, possible combinations of papers, and matriculation and residence requirements to take University exams. Any separate Faculty handbook is simply advice and if they contradict each other, the grey book takes precedence. Faculties are responsible for covering the agreed syllabus, setting the paper and marking exam scripts and your JCC is the place to comment on these. The best time to discuss the marking scheme and raise any objections to questions that were outside the syllabus will be when the Examiners' Reports are considered by the JCC.

At the start of the big grey book there are sections of the regulations that apply to the conduct of examinations. These apply to all students, covering attendance at exams, special needs, illness, appeals, etc. These regulations also cover conduct with exams and plagiarism. Breaking these rules can result in an investigation and potential punishment from the Proctors. The University Examination Regulations can be found online at <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/examregs/>.

### **Marking**

Exams are marked by a team of faculty members with a chairperson. Finals papers are generally blind marked by two examiners. This means that neither examiner will see the comments of the other examiner when marking the papers. Arrangements on how marks are given, how borderline papers are treated and criteria for firsts, upper and lower seconds, thirds, passes etc differ between faculties. Examiners reports will include the chairperson of the examiners' general comments and detailed comments on how questions were answered by candidates. It will have statistics on performance and probably explain the marking scheme. Recent examiners' reports will have a breakdown of the statistics by gender. The Examiners' Report should also be available in the faculty library and online so students can look at past exam papers and see the mistakes last year's students made and what the examiners liked. You may wish to publicise the existence of these reports to other students in case they find them helpful as part of preparation for exams. Similar guidelines should be produced for Freshers facing Prelims or Mods. Ahead of university exams OUSU will be producing guidance on possible revision methods and useful

information for students, so if you have any ideas as to what should go in these packs then please get in touch.

Scripts are retained for six months following an examination, to allow for any possible appeals process to unfold. However, the University has been very reluctant to make available marked sample scripts for consultation by students. Students cannot get their scripts back, but they may attempt to get access to the examiners comments on the scripts, by filling in a Data Protection Form and paying a £10 fee. In many cases, the comments will be very brief or may have already been destroyed to prevent students reading these scripts. The motivation behind these actions is to avoid any potential questioning of academic judgement. OUSU has repeatedly campaigned for greater access to finals and prelims scripts after they have been marked, but the university has persistently refused to increase the availability of candidates' scripts. This has been the case for a range of reasons, including the university policy that marks cannot be appealed on the grounds of academic judgement, and for administrative reasons relating to the time it would take to process requests for scripts.

### **Syllabus**

Changes to a syllabus are proposed by faculties and considered by the relevant Divisional Board. Even in Oxford, changes do happen: old, low-demand papers get dropped, new papers get constructed, and the areas covered by existing papers change. Students' experiences can helpfully inform decisions like these and you can comment on proposals and make suggestions (which should be researched). The best way of feeding into specific courses is via the JCC for that course – students' views are listened to on these committees, so students who come to you with complaints about their course structure may find it helpful to contact their JCC reps (available via the department) or by showing up personally to a meeting of their JCC if they are permitted to do so.

### **Examiners' Reports**

Examiners' Reports can be a useful resource for students. You may wish to consider publicising their existence to other students in case they find them useful in preparing for exams.

Good Examiners' Reports might include some of the following:

- general remarks about the particular examination, and candidates' performance.
- specific comments on each question or section, and how it was answered.
- what typified 'the best essays'.
- which questions generally produced good or bad answers, and why.
- common gaps in candidates' knowledge.
- ways in which questions were misread or poorly interpreted, and why this was so.
- examples of common faults, aspects of questions omitted, or links between papers which could have been made.
- general faults in essays, such as waffle, question-spotting or lack of information.
- ways in which students could improve the style and presentation of their essays, conciseness of answers, nature of introductions or conclusions, selectivity etc.

## **Collections**

Collections are college-organised and the form that they take will depend on individual colleges and college tutors. The extent to which colleges take them seriously varies greatly, but your college academic regulations may well include policies on what marks students need to attain and how your college will treat poor performance. Colleges can change their attitudes towards collections over time (and different tutors can take different views), so it's worth making students aware of what the relevant guidelines are. Colleges are supposed to return all collections with feedback to students by the end of fourth week – if you hear that this isn't happening then you may want to raise the issue with your Senior Tutor.

## **Listening**

Many students may visit you with concerns and may just want you to listen. It is important that you allow them to find their own solutions in a non-directional way, but be on hand to offer any useful information they may request. For tips on listening please visit: <http://www.ousu.org/info/welfare-resources/listeners-guide>.

## **Representing Students at Disciplinary and Appeal Hearings**

In Oxford, students can be asked to leave for a variety of reasons. It may be felt that the student is not coping well with the academic work and may need a year off (rustication) or should think about joining another university (expulsion). It may also be thought that the welfare of the student is being adversely affected by attempting to manage a degree and balancing any personal difficulties they may face. In such situations it is usually concluded that it would be better for the student to leave the college for a period of time.

While you may disagree with what the college is doing it is important to remember to remain calm when representing or supporting a student. Getting angry or annoyed with senior members will merely antagonise them and will not help the student concerned. If a student in your college is faced with this situation they will turn to you, the JCR President or the Welfare Officer for help. It is good if you can all work as a team, as long as the student agrees, because this allows you to work out a coherent plan and strategy for helping them. If the student wishes to stay at the college there are a number of things that need to be done to convince the college. The first step must be for the student concerned to consult with their tutor. If they are unhelpful, then they could speak to the Dean, the Senior Tutor, the Head of House or Principal. When approaching these senior members it is a good idea for you or one of the other JCR Officers dealing with this matter to accompany the student. It would be easier if the JCR representative did not do the same subject as the student concerned and some colleges have explicit rules that stipulate this requirement. It is also a good idea to keep notes on any of these meetings and agree on what was discussed and what conclusions were drawn with the college – it is important that both students and the college are aware of what has been decided.

As a representative of the student you need to be aware of the structure of appeal in your college. If you do not have a copy of your College Handbook you should get one from the College Secretary or Senior Tutor immediately. The best way to ensure that the case is heard fairly and impartially is to ensure the college adheres to its own structures and procedures and does not attempt to by-pass any aspect of these. The student should be given the opportunity to make their case to the college. Some colleges allow the JCR

Representative to speak on behalf of the student. If you do act as the student representative in Governing Body it is essential that you have full command of the facts. Although it may be difficult, try to speak clearly and honestly about the situation. Offer pledges and suggestions as to how the situation will change and then state the detrimental effects upon the student of them being sent down. If the student feels a victim of any sort of prejudice, then state this, but do not attempt to manipulate the authorities. You need to discuss with the student what should be said in the meeting. This is especially important if the student facing the disciplinary measure plans to speak because they may get upset and you may need to take over.

If the student does get 'rusticated' or 'sent down' they may wish to appeal against the decision. It is important to look into this at the very beginning of the disciplinary process. Many colleges after sending down a student act very fast and students can be required to vacate the college almost immediately. Some colleges have deadlines of only 1-2 days in which to appeal against a decision of Governing Body. Your College Handbook will set out the next stage of the appeal process, should the appeal to the Governing Body be unsuccessful, usually involving an appeal to the College Visitor or the Appeal Tribunal of the Conference of Colleges. All students, upon completing all the procedures available to them, are entitled to appeal to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (the OIA - <http://www.oiahe.org.uk/>). This must be done within three months of the letter of completion being received. The OIA can rule on the procedures applied to the affected student, and if the appeal is upheld, make recommendations to the college or university. Although these are not mandatory, they do carry significant weight and are likely to influence the college or university's decision. Appealing to the OIA is free.

When faced with a potential sending down it is important that you listen to the student and provide accurate help and advice to them. The student will obviously be under a great deal of stress and so they will need the support of you and the other JCR members. Luckily, instances of students being sent down are relatively rare but you should be aware of your college regulations before faced with such a situation. Many JCR Academic Affairs Officers only become aware of the unfairness of the disciplinary structure when it is too late to help the particular student. Ensuring that your college has a fair disciplinary and appeals structure is something that you may wish to campaign on.

The OUSU Student Advice Service is available to offer advice to JCR Officers assisting students facing disciplinary action. You've not failed if you have to refer a student to someone else for help or if you ask for advice yourself on how to deal with particular issue – taking a step back and asking for support is an important step in dealing with any academic affairs issue. Over the last few years OUSU sabbatical officers have represented students in hearings at colleges, the Conference of Colleges Appeals Tribunal and the Proctors so we're very happy to help if you feel that we could be useful. The contact details for the Student Advice Service are available at the end of the Guide.

## Possible Campaigning Ideas

### Academic Feedback

Over Summer 2009 a working group of Senior Tutors and an OUSU representative has been looking at feedback to students and feedback from students on their tutors. Students should receive feedback from their tutors as to their academic progress, and students should be able to feedback on their experiences to their college. This is beneficial for future students and tutors, to ensure the style and content of tutorials provided is as helpful as possible.

For the college's part:

- Collections should be marked and returned by the middle of the term in which they are taken.
- Students should have a meeting at the end of every term with at least one of their college tutors to discuss a written report and general progress.
- Either written reports should be received in advance of the meeting, or an individual should be warned if their reports are likely to be seriously critical. These written reports should now all be available on [www.oxcort.ox.ac.uk](http://www.oxcort.ox.ac.uk).

Every student should receive teaching helpful to their academic progress:

- They should have the complete attention of the tutor for the designated length of the tutorial, without a break in teaching of over ten minutes, except under exceptional circumstances, in which case the opportunity to reschedule the tutorial should be given.
- Tutorials must be conducted in accordance with the University Harassment code. If the conduct of the tutorial becomes inappropriate, the student should be able to leave if they wish.
- Students should not have to meet tutors socially unless they so choose.
- It must be possible to change tutor, if absolutely necessary, without explaining the reasons to the particular tutor concerned and without suffering adverse consequences.

Tutorial feedback forms, organised by the college, are also an important mechanism for students to feedback about the general quality and usefulness of tutorials. These should be conducted at the end of each term, and the findings made known to the tutors. Students should have the option of anonymity in any feedback responses.

If your college does not meet any of these standards, you may wish to campaign to improve its feedback mechanisms. You may also wish to seek to introduce more diverse forms of feedback, including student-led 'focus group' feedback sessions. These have been introduced at several colleges in the last few years, being pioneered at University College and The Queen's College in the 2007/08 academic year. These feedback sessions will be discussed over the year as a potential idea which more common rooms may seek to pursue.

### Library Opening Hours

Libraries are vital resources for students. Different colleges have different opening hours for their libraries, some including 24-hour access. Students can benefit from the flexibility

such opening hours allow them. However, there are some concerns about the welfare impacts of being able to work through the night in the library. This is a matter for your JCR to decide, but is an issue that you may wish to campaign to ensure that college provision matches student preferences. Many colleges in Oxford now have 24 hour libraries, so there is a wealth of information available if you decide to campaign for your college to extend its library opening hours.

### **Library Provision**

Just as important as opening hours is the quality of material available in libraries. Resources such as duplicate textbooks are very helpful for many students. Although duplicate copies are often available in faculty libraries, the local access and typically longer loan periods of college libraries means that it is beneficial for many students to have these resources available. You may wish to consider encouraging your library to provide multiple copies of the most popular books, and matching provision with reading lists provided by tutors in major subject areas.

### **Study Skills**

The difference in learning styles between school and university is vast. Some students find it difficult to adjust initially. Offering guidance on what is broadly termed 'study skills', which includes tips on structuring essays, using evidence, time management, taking notes, using reading lists, reading for study, etc., can help students make this adjustment and ensure they are quickly learning at their full potential. While of course the tutorial system means that we get individual attention, there are times when most students would appreciate some basic advice or information. OUSU will be prioritising study skills as an issue this year, and we will be working with colleges, departments and the Oxford Learning Institute on how best to improve learning development within the university. We will also be providing Finals Forums in Hilary and early Trinity Term so finalists can get tips on effective revision and how to go about getting the most from the time which they spend on it.

Due to the lack of University provision, some colleges have started running seminars for freshers to offer a few tips as they start at Oxford. If your college does not already do this, you may wish to campaign for greater help and support for your students. This could be done via programs such as Learnsmart (pioneered at Oriel College) or via new schemes set up by interested tutors.

### **Right to retake Prelims and Mods**

Over the last couple of years, major victories have been won on the right to resit Prelims and Mods. There is now an expectation that failure in either of these exams will lead to a resit rather than immediate expulsion in most cases, except when students have already been placed on academic disciplinary procedures. It may be worth clarifying the rules regarding First Public Examinations in your specific college and making first years aware of them, so that they know what likely outcomes are in the event that they do fail their Prelims or Mods. The university is likely to continue reviewing rules regarding First Public Exams over the 2009/10 academic year, so this issue will continue to be on the agenda of OUSU and of colleges.

## **Exam Paper Transcription**

If a candidate in a university exam writes a script which is deemed to be 'illegible', then the Exam Regulations (Section 16.7) state that the candidate must have their paper transcribed, with the costs not being charged to the university. Some colleges relay the full costs of this to the candidate while others may be prepared to pay the costs themselves. If a candidate has written several illegible scripts the costs of transcribing may run into three figures as they will involve paying both for an invigilator and a transcriber, so you may wish to campaign for your college to pick up the costs of transcription if they do not do so already.

## **Representation**

Over the last few years, levels of student representation in colleges have improved across the university, with virtually all colleges now having student representatives sitting on their Governing Body. The picture on Academic Committees is more uneven – a survey done by OUSU in 2008 showed that some colleges have students as full members of their Academic Committees, whereas others didn't have students on such bodies at all. Students are full members of Oxford's Education Committee, meaning that our views are fed in there. If you're not on your college's Academic Committee you may want to push for representation, to make sure that student views are being heard on questions relating to education policy, and that changes aren't being made without your knowledge or input. Likewise Academic Review Committees – which oversee the academic disciplinary procedures in colleges – can at times be inscrutable, with students not being aware of their rights in front of such panels. You may want to seek to clarify the roles of these committees, including possibly pushing for students to have greater rights to represent themselves in front of them. Even if you're not represented formally on committees it can be helpful for you and other JCR Officers to have regular bilateral meetings with College officials. Good relations with your Senior Tutor and Academic Administrator could lead to you being kept more in the loop about events and changes in policies, and also helps ensure that college is aware of student needs and wishes.

## **College Regulations**

There is great variation in the manner that colleges proceed with academic cases against students who are under-performing. Colleges typically state in their undergraduate handbooks what procedures will be followed with reference to academic discipline. Although these procedures vary, the disciplinary procedure ought to be clearly explained to students and this is one possible area in which you could campaign for change. Many colleges have a student-friendly appeals procedure, while others limit students' opportunities to have their say. In July 2009, an external review of the university by the Quality Assurance Agency advised that Oxford review complaints and appeals procedures available to students, and also stated that the university should make sure that students were aware of these. As such, it is likely that colleges will be reviewing their own internal procedures at the same time as university-wide discussions will be ongoing over the course of the coming academic year.

In 2008 the Senior Tutor's Committee of Conference of Colleges (an intercollegiate forum where Senior Tutors get together and share best practice) recommended a model that colleges follow. This model emphasised, fairness, transparency and the important nature of

academic disciplinary proceedings – owing to the magnitude of its potential consequences for individual students, it is not a process which should be carried out on a whim. This model contains multiple stages, including informal warnings, formal warnings, penal collections, review by an Academic Panel, and then ultimately Governing Body. For the majority of students who end up on academic probation their case will not reach this stage. But owing to the importance of academic discipline as an issue, and the fact that it will be reviewed over the course of the coming academic year, you may wish to take it up as an issue during your time in office.

In all cases where a Governing Body determines to send a student down, there remain avenues of appeal. The Conference of Colleges Appeals Tribunal (CCAT) is a body which was set up by Oxford colleges acting as a whole to review decisions made by Governing Bodies in this regard. CCAT reviews cases on the basis of whether college procedures were correctly followed – if it determines that they were not then the Tribunal can reinstate a student who has been expelled. Beyond CCAT the highest appeal body outside of the courts is the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education which reviews cases from all over Britain. More details can be found on [www.oiahe.org.uk](http://www.oiahe.org.uk).

In academic disciplinary cases – as with all issues – please remember that OUSU is there to support both you as elected student officers and individual students. Such cases can be complex, time-consuming, and stressful. Sabbatical officers at OUSU deal with these cases reasonably frequently, so please feel free to refer students who are dealing with academic disciplinary procedures to us for assistance. Examples of disciplinary procedures at two colleges are given below, to give you an approximate idea of what regulations are in place at different colleges.

### **Corpus Christi**

Junior members who are not working at a satisfactory standard will be issued with a First Formal warning. This is dealt with by the subject tutor, after consultation with Senior Tutor, and will be given in a special interview. During this interview, the student's work will be discussed, and the student will have the opportunity to raise any mitigating circumstances. A letter specifying the required outcomes to avoid further proceedings will be issued. Should the required improvements not be met, a second formal warning will be issued in a special interview by the Senior Tutor. The student will be given the opportunity to refute the allegations of unsatisfactory work and bring to light any special circumstances. Continued failure to improve will result in Special Collections, the conditions of which will be set by the Academic Committee. Two assessors will mark the work, one of which will be external and never have taught the student to ensure independence. If a student passes the collection, they may still remain on probation. Failure to reach the required standard will see the student referred to Academic Committee, which will invite written submissions from the student concerned, and the student will be able to attend along with an advocate to the meeting of the Academic Committee. The committee may propose that the student is sent down, rusticated or readmitted on terms of their choosing. This decision needs to be approved by Governing Body, and the student can submit written comments on the Committee's decision. After Governing Body, the student can appeal to Conference of Colleges and the OIA.

## **Merton**

Poor performance will first result in an informal warning. If this does not rectify performance, a formal written warning will be issued, and the Senior Tutor (unless they know the student well, whereupon someone else will be nominated) will discuss the matter with the student. If this fails, the student will be put on academic probation, which may include passing a penal collection, to be marked by an outside examiner. If at the end of this probation the terms have not been met, it may be extended or referred to the Academic Review Committee. This consists of five members of the Governing Body and give the student fair opportunity to make representations. This committee can ban, rusticate or expel students from the college. Students have the opportunity to appeal to the Academic Appeals Committee against the findings or proportionality of the punishment. This committee comprises five different governing body members, none of whom are the student's tutor.

## University Issues

### A Rough Guide to the University's Structure

Campaigning for change in Oxford is a complicated business at times. This is partially due to traditions that are held in high esteem by many academics and administrators, but is largely because of the University's highly federated structure. The University consists of three main components: the Central Bodies and Administration, the Colleges, and the Divisions, Departments and Faculties. Basic details of this structure can be found at [www.ox.ac.uk/about\\_the\\_university/introducing\\_oxford/the\\_structure\\_of\\_the\\_university/](http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/introducing_oxford/the_structure_of_the_university/)

### Congregation

The most powerful body in the University is Congregation, which meets very occasionally to debate and decide issues of particular importance. This comprises the 3,700 members of the University's academic and administrative staff, and has ultimate responsibility for all legislative matters. It is able to discuss and pronounce on policies proposed by University Council. It could be considered akin to a Parliament (and is widely referred to in the press as 'the Parliament of dons'). This democratic structure of the University is unique to Oxford and Cambridge.

### University Council

The most important committee in the University is University Council. Council is a Committee that meets three times a term to run the activities of the University. Students have representation on Council but the student representatives do not have voting rights. Council sets the strategic direction of the university as a whole, approves the university budget, and receives reports from other committees.

### Other Central University Committees

There are four major committees below Council: Education Committee, General Purposes Committee, Planning and Resource Allocation Committee, and Personnel Committee. The most important in terms of Academic Affairs issues is Education Committee, which is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education). Education Committee oversees access and admissions; curriculum design and course structure; teaching, learning and assessment; academic and pastoral support and guidance; and the administration and review of the Divisional Boards. This committee has an extremely important role to play in affecting students' time at Oxford. Oxford students are represented on Education Committee by the OUSU Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs) and the Vice-President (Graduates).

There are also many smaller committees under Council including Student Health and Welfare, Investments and the Joint Committee with Students. OUSU Executive members sit on a range of committees, including the Senior Tutor's Committee, the university Admissions Executive, the committee which oversees library provision and a range of undergraduate and graduate-specific policy-making bodies. Members of the OUSU Executive also have regular individual meetings with senior University figures who are responsible for policy-making, giving students an opportunity to feed into decisions made at all levels of the university.

## **Divisions**

Underneath Council there are the Four Divisions, each headed by a Divisional Board. These divisions are Humanities; Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences; Medical Sciences; and Social Sciences. All of the subjects studied at Oxford will now have a Divisional Board who is responsible for it. Some subjects like Philosophy, Politics and Economics will fall under two divisions. Divisional Boards oversee the management, operation, personnel, standards and direction of their sub-units (e.g. departments or faculties). Although day-to-day running is largely delegated to the different faculties, any major changes, the strategic direction and relations between sub-units is decided by the Divisional Board. Students are represented on Divisional Boards by two representatives elected in OUSU Council – each Board has a space for both an undergraduate and a postgraduate representative.

## **Central Administration**

The Central Administration is primarily based in Wellington Square and carries out the decisions of University Committees, and ensures the day-to-day running of the University, from admissions to exams. They could be described as the University's Civil Service, who support Council and the four major committees (along with all other University Committees), while also running central University services like the International Office, the Graduate Office, the Disability Office and Student Finance and Access Office. Some elements of the University's administration are scattered about the city. These include Service Units (such as the Computing or Careers Service), which work within general rules set out by a Committee that oversees their activities.

## **Colleges and PPHs**

Separate to the University structure are the 38 Colleges and 7 PPHs. The colleges are legally autonomous bodies, which have very broad commercial freedom due to their independence from the University. Most are run by a Governing Body made up of College Fellows. Colleges have recognised that their interests are generally best served by co-operating with each other and with the Central University. Cross college bodies such as the Conference of Colleges and the Admissions Committee encourage colleges to adopt similar practices and policies. College members are elected from the Conference of Colleges to sit on major University committees to promote communication. Coordination of policy in Oxford is made more difficult by college autonomy, with colleges frequently doing things in subtly different ways from each other, or from whatever the University or OUSU suggests.

## Potential New Developments in 2009/10

### **New Vice-Chancellor**

The Vice-Chancellor is the most prominent university official at any UK university, with the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford being nationally significant. The tenure of John Hood as Vice-Chancellor of Oxford lasted from 2004-2009 and included a large expansion of university facilities, internal reforms of the university's finances and – most controversially – a review of the university's governance arrangements which took up much of the period from 2004 to 2007. Hood's proposals were ultimately defeated after heated debate across Oxford, and it remains to be seen what the new Vice-Chancellor's priorities will be. Andrew Hamilton (who takes over as Vice-Chancellor) has formerly been the Provost of Yale University, and will serve for seven years, meaning that he will be the leading executive figure within the university long after most students currently here have departed.

### **Review of Higher Education Funding**

The 2004 Act which introduced top-up fees across the UK included a provision mandating a review of Higher Education funding in 2009. This is likely only to be completed after the General Election due at some point before June 2010, with preparation beginning in 2009. The OUSU President sits on the University working group looking at fees policy, and students unions across the country will be seeking to ensure that the student voice is heard on this issue at all points in the review. In May 2009 the students of Oxford voted to support a graduate tax as a replacement for the current system of tuition fees and OUSU (along with the National Union of Students) will be lobbying the government to support this method of fully funding higher education throughout any review which takes place.

### **Improved Feedback**

A working group of Senior Tutors in summer 2009 will be making suggestions about how to improve feedback for undergraduates during the coming academic year. This group was started as a result of a paper produced by OUSU and has looked at student's feedback on tutors, as well as the importance of the feedback which tutors give students. The National Student Survey persistently shows that a major issue at all universities is that of students being uncertain of what their examiners are looking for, which goes alongside the issue of students being given adequate feedback on their work. The working group has considered alternative models of providing feedback, including student-led focus groups within colleges on individual subjects. The group has also looked at promoting the use of OxCort, reiterating the importance of tutors promptly marking collections, and making students aware of what feedback they should be getting from tutorials and managing expectations accordingly.

### **Review of Examinations**

Trinity 2009 was the first term which saw the abolition of pass lists for examinations, with students getting results online for the first time. In 2009/10 OUSU will be working with the university to improve students' awareness of what examiners are looking for when marking exams, as well as the provision of extra time for students who require it. This review will be ongoing throughout late 2009 and into 2010, and will aim to improve the student experience of examinations to the maximum extent possible. OUSU will also continue to work with the university on the 'Finals Gap' which persists at Oxford, resulting in women

getting a statistically significantly lower number of First Class degrees than men in certain subjects. This topic was one which the Quality Assurance Agency recommended the university continue to work on in a 2009 'Institutional Audit' of Oxford.

### **Study Skills**

Over the coming year OUSU, Common Rooms, colleges and departments will be working together on promoting study skills to students. Many students feel that they are not given enough support with regard to how they could work most effectively with common problems including those regarding effective note-taking, essay technique and how best to manage revision. Study skills have been on the university agenda for several years, and this year OUSU will be lobbying departments and faculties to put on finals forums. We also hope to work closely with Common Rooms on improving study skills provision in colleges, including putting on sessions for new Freshers and in the runup to exams where these do not already exist.

### **National Student Survey**

The National Student Survey (NSS) is conducted by Ipsos/Mori every year and aims to canvass the views of finalists at universities throughout Britain. Oxford is typically ranked very highly by its finalists. In 2009 under 50% of Oxford finalists responded to the survey meaning that Oxford-specific data was not published (although the university has access to it). Oxford takes data from the NSS – and other large quantitative surveys – very seriously, meaning that a priority for the university and for OUSU in 2010 will be boosting the number of students who fill out the NSS as the data it yields can be invaluable in supporting student campaigns on issues to do with education policy at the university.

### **As yet unknown...**

Members of the OUSU Executive sit on basically every key education policy decision-making body in the university, and we will be holding regular meetings this year for Common Room academic reps to get together, share ideas and discuss specific topics. If there is anything which you want us to do – from answer simple questions, to advising students who have found themselves in academic problems, to take up a specific issue with the university – please get in touch and let us know. OUSU is your student union, and we're particularly keen this year to work more closely with Common Room reps so that we can get more done on behalf of students.

## Help and Support

### In Faculties:

#### Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs)

Most of the faculties and departments in Oxford have a Joint Consultative Committee (JCC). These committees provide an opportunity for undergraduates to voice opinions on academic and administrative matters. The organisation of JCCs varies across subjects; some have a representative from each college, whereas others elect a few people each year in core lectures. The membership of JCCs includes student representatives, subject tutors and departmental staff.

JCCs are important because they provide an opportunity for interactive discussion between students and academic staff. They give students the chance to make their feelings known and perform the important function of collecting and communicating students' opinions in an organised way. Departments and faculties are known to respond to the concerns and wishes of students, and JCCs have an impressive record of achieving real results, whether through securing cheaper photocopying, more core books in the faculty library or changes in course structure. If you have a faculty related comment, query or problem (e.g. about exams, lectures, reading lists, etc.) getting in touch with your subject JCC representative is probably the best way to get the department's attention. Look out for their contact details in colleges, faculty notice-boards and handbooks.

#### Graduate Joint Consultative Committees (GJCCs)

Like their undergraduate counterparts, Graduate Joint Consultative Committees (GJCCs) provide a forum for graduates to express their opinions and concerns about course structure, teaching, supervision and other academic support issues. GJCC representatives are usually elected within the incoming year-group and work closely with departmental officers to assure quality provision and high standards in all degree programmes.

#### Divisional Boards

Each Division has an undergraduate and graduate Divisional Board representative who may be able to provide some advice or information about issues within their Division.

### Within the University:

#### OUSU Academic Affairs Meetings

We will be expanding the support which we provide to Common Room Officers this year with the aim of having weekly meetings where we can talk about a specific topic while also having the opportunity to share best practice and find out what issues are affecting all of us across the university. Please get in touch if you feel these meetings should be looking at any specific issues or should be operating in a different way.

#### OUSU Student Advice Service

If you want to talk to someone confidentially about academic matters the Vice President (Access and Academic Affairs) and Vice-President (Graduates) are available for impartial listening and advice as part of the Student Advice Service.

### **Disability Office**

The Disability Office can offer students advice on admissions, examination arrangements, available funds, special equipment, different studying strategies and other information that is aimed at making life easier for students with disabilities.

### **International Office**

The International Office run orientation programs, can advise on funding, visas, immigration, hardship, and other useful information for international students.

### **Proctors' Office**

The Proctors' Office deals mostly with enquiries about exams and they can help students to make special arrangements if they have particular requirements (see *Exams and assessment: special arrangements*).

### **Useful Websites**

OUSU: [www.ousu.org](http://www.ousu.org)

University Examination Regulations: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/examregs/>

Proctors' and Assessors' Memorandum: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors/info/pam/>

College Information and Forms:

<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors/oxonly/collegeforms.shtml>

Examination Information: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/schools/examinations/index.shtml>

Details of library opening hours: <http://www.ouls.ox.ac.uk/libraries/libraries>

University Education Committee, including information on policies etc:

<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/>

OxCort (online reports at the end of each term): [www.oxcort.ox.ac.uk](http://www.oxcort.ox.ac.uk)

Oxam (archive of past exam papers): <http://missun29.offices.ox.ac.uk:80/pls/oxam/main>

## Contact Information

### OUSU Student Advice Service

[advice@ousu.org](mailto:advice@ousu.org)

01865 (2) 88466

Thomas Hull House, New Inn Hall Street, Oxford, OX1 2DH  
(Opposite the Westgate Centre)

### OUSU Vice-President (Access and Academic Affairs)

Jonny Medland

[access@ousu.org](mailto:access@ousu.org)

01865 (2) 88464

OUSU, Thomas Hull House

### OUSU Vice-President (Graduates)

Sarah Hutchinson

[graduates@ousu.org](mailto:graduates@ousu.org)

01865 (2) 88463

OUSU, Thomas Hull House

### The Proctors' Office

[www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors)

University Offices

Wellington Square

01865 (2) 70090

### Student Information

[student.information@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.information@admin.ox.ac.uk)

Examination Schools

High Street

01865 (2) 76903

### International Student Advisory Service

<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/io/>

Examination Schools

High Street

01865 (2) 70104

### Disability Office

<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/disab/>

University Offices

Wellington Square

01865 (2) 89825

General resources and information can be found on the OUSU website [www.ousu.org](http://www.ousu.org) and in the Student Survival Guide.