



reports to council 5th week Trinity term 2003

Will Straw

President

Rents have dominated my time since the last Council. Silent halls around the University and the impromptu 'mourning' protest at St John's before the Conference of Colleges meeting have been the direct action focus and have helped us to make our point. The problem remains our lack of representation on Conference of Colleges, where major decisions on things such as stint reform and rent rises are made. The meeting that Andrew Copson, Chris Griffin, Sonia Sodha, Stuart Colville and I had with Dick Smethurst (Vice-Chair, Conference of Colleges), Ian Honeyman (Chair, Estate Bursars' Committee), Elizabeth Crawford (Secretary, Domestic Bursars' Committee) and Dr Hardie (Bursar, Oriel College) was undoubtedly useful, but we were left without any indication that we would be given representation at the Conference or that our point of view would be heard more widely. The main flaw in the report is the plan to raise rents by VNI + 6% over four years in order to eliminate 'subsidies' and to factor in 'capital depreciation' costs. This will ensure that rents rise by 50% over a period when loans will only go up by 12.5% (assuming inflation at 3%). This is quite straightforwardly an erosion of students' disposable income (which still has to pay for food, clothes, books and other items). If anything is worth fighting for then it is this and we must mobilise a huge campaign over the next three weeks. The focus should be a huge protest in 8th Week. More details to follow.

The other thing that I've been concentrating on is graduate issues with Chris Griffin. A decision was made by University Council earlier in the year (without student consultation, surprise, surprise) to extend fees to DPhil students in their 4th Year. This means that every student matriculated after Michaelmas 2004 who stays on for a fourth year will be liable for an extra £10,000. Unlike at other Universities that operate such a policy, no waiver has been put in place to help students who do not have research council funding. It is a shocking situation and again reflects the University's disregard for student representation. With the QAA assessment coming up in the Autumn the collegiate University needs to think long and hard about student representation, because at the moment we are being left out of every major decision until it is too late.

Finally, we met with Mandy Telford (NUS National President), Ross Renton (NUS National Treasurer-elect) and Ruth Moor (NUS Regional Officer for the South West) to discuss Edd's Southerden's report on Oxford Common Room's affiliation rates. Sadly, they were unwilling to negotiate a differential rate for Oxford on the grounds that this would lift the lid on their affiliation structure. Nonetheless, they are reassessing all affiliation rates next year to ensure that all affiliations are within the means of their constituent organisations. They are also keen to continue the closer relations that have been fostered this year, not least with the two training events in 7th Week, which I would encourage all Committees and co-chairs to attend.

Sean Sullivan

V-P (Finance)

Budget – this has taken up a considerable part of the last two weeks. I would like to thank Sue in the accounts office for all her help with this. I have held two consultations with the Executive on the budget (traditionally this hasn't occurred) and am pleased to have done so.

Publications Board – I convened a meeting of the Board and after interviewing a large number of applicants we have now appointed editors for the Oxford Handbook and Freshers' Guide and an Assistant Business Manager.

Clubs and Societies – I attended and chaired the founding meeting of OUSU's Clubs and Societies committee. It was an incredibly useful meeting and there was a good exchange of views. OUSU has now been given a far clearer idea of how it can work within the university for the benefit of clubs and societies. Thanks to the Executive Office from Queens for the amount of time and effort he put into organising this event.

Bits and bobs – I have had meetings with the Senior Proctor, recalcitrant advertisers, a delegation from the NUS regarding college subscriptions to that organisation and have co-ordinated further shop deliveries.

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Andrew V-P (Welfare & Equal Opportunities)

College Inequality:

Following the mandates of 1st week Council, I presented the report to Sir Victor Blank, one of the two independent members of University Council and the chair of the committee which is reviewing the College Contribution Scheme. He was seemingly in agreement with our report's analysis of the bare inequalities between colleges and very receptive to the report's recommendations that money received from the scheme should be treated as income by recipient colleges and not just as endowment. I think that we can expect his working party to produce recommendations to the University Council which are broadly in line with OUSU policy.

I also presented the report to Dame Fiona Caldicott, the chairman of JCC and the new chair of the Conference of Colleges. She was less positive and ruled out completely the possibility of student representatives presenting the report's recommendations directly to the Conference. However, the Conference does have a sub-committee working to reduce library inequalities and we will be submitting the relevant sections of the report to them, and also to the Committee of College Librarians, the chairman of which is the librarian of St. Anne's, so if anyone has any experience of him then please let me know. Once again, Dame Fiona on behalf of the Conference expressed concern about the figures used in our report and their accuracy as well as denying point blank that there was any proof that college wealth influenced academic achievement. I believe it is possible for OUSU to tighten up this section of the report to make a good case to the Institutional Audit next year and will be working on that. I also spoke more generally to Dame Fiona and to the Provost of Worcester (until recently the chairman of the Conference of Colleges) about possible representational inroads for us into the Conference and its sub-committees but they were both very resistant to the idea.

My conversation with the Provost of Worcester followed a meeting which I attended to discuss the Estate Bursars Committee's report on rent rises, which we demonstrated against on Thursday. The meeting was not overly helpful, with our representatives being fobbed off (in my opinion) and not assisted by the continually impenetrable structures of the Conference. Our representatives made stronger arguments against the inclusion of capital depreciation in student rents and contributed to the discussion on the cost allocation methodology which is yet to be drawn up by the Bursars' Committee. OUSU should definitely try to make a written submission when the methodology is discussed and we received tentative agreement from the Bursar of Oriel that this could be done.

Counselling Service

I attended the meeting of the Counselling Service Executive Committee and expressed current student views of the service which had been related to me by Common Room officers and other users of the service both in terms of direct use and also referrals. Concerns that I raised included the lack of publicity that was produced for the Counselling Service especially in their targetting of freshers and it was resolved that the committee would investigate bookmarks or key rings for Fresher's Week. Waiting times were also discussed but it was clear that the Counselling Service was under-funded to the extent that current reduction of waiting times was impossible. There was great recognition by the Committee of the positive work that OUSU undertakes in the area of student welfare which, given that it came from Dame Fiona Caldicott (also Chair of this committee) pleased me.

Welfare

I have sent the new Student Advice Service to the printers to better advertise our new location. I hope to be able to expand the service and will be making a case for OUSU as the central dispensary of hardship, accommodation and general student information as required in the Government's most recent White Paper. We'll just have to see what happens.

The Health and Welfare Committee held a session on nutrition, with special regard to eating for exams, and have also produced posters which will go out to Common Room officers this week.

Equal Opportunities

Queer Rights and Anti-Racism have met as usual, and we have applications for

Disabilities Action co-chairs with a view to getting the campaign operational again by the end of term. The Equal Opportunities Committee are currently surveying Common Rooms to establish the patterns of equal opportunities provision across the University and also attending and investigating the structures and practices of OUSU's equal opportunities campaigns and I have decided, together with them, that I will aim to produce a report by the end of this term on OUSU's current structures for the equal opportunities campaigns and how they may progress in

and investigating the structures and practices of OUSU's equal opportunities campaigns and I have decided, together with them, that I will aim to produce a report by the end of this term on OUSU's current structures for the equal opportunities campaigns and how they may progress in the future. I see a great need for this, given that the structures I inherited a year ago were only three weeks old, and in my view and the view of many Executive Officers and co-chairs, are not working.

On the subject of another review, Jennifer Noon has finally released to myself and the VPs (Women) and (Graduates) the report of the Equal Opportunities Section Review. This report is in the main an excellent document which makes bold recommendations for future change and has the vision to implement equal opportunities reforms over a sensibly measured period of time and give this sector the level of leadership it requires in the form of a new Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Equal Opportunities). The report recommends the expansion and bolstering of the University Committee for Diversity and Equal Opportunity and the establishment of user-groups and working groups to feed into this newly empowered body. OUSU is praised in two heart-warming paragraphs which highlight our contribution to diversity not just within the University but in terms of improving Oxford's external image in this area. All in all it is an excellent document which we would be pleased to see implemented. The University has rejected it almost in its entirety. The report went to the General Purposes Committee on which there is no student representation and this Committee decided that high-level leadership in order to oversee the transition from the current situation to the idea was not needed but instead provision could be made for all heads of department and administrators to have responsibility for equal opportunities as part of their individual job descriptions. The General

Purposes Committee also considered that there was no longer any need for a separate University Committee with responsibility for diversity and equal opportunities as it could take on such responsibility itself (remember, no student representation!) The situation is outrageous and the appropriate OUSU sabbaticals will be making a complaint to the Proctors about how student representatives have been sidelined in this process and hopefully from a mandate from Council in 7th week, will be addressing our concerns to the Vice Chancellor.

The conduct of certain University Officials over the period of the Equal Opportunities Review has revealed a problem that (even more than the growing influence of the Conference of Colleges) should concern students greatly. The principle of democratic governance in our University is being eroded by administrators who have no regard for the views of the majority of the members of this University, i.e. its students.

Melanie Marshall

V-P (Women)

My main areas of work, other than meetings and casework, over the last couple of weeks:

As you will see from the council agenda, the motion to change the standing orders pertaining to the conduct of elections is now complete. It took a long time, and I was disappointed not to be able to propose more or more interesting changes, but the level of consultation wasn't adequate for me to feel happy doing so. This is doubtless due in no small part to the fact it is Trinity term. In future any large review (if requested) should take place in Hilary, and any consequences of Hilary by-elections should be dealt with separately in Trinity.

The women's open day continues to take lots of admin, but it is quite rewarding. There has been plenty of interest from attendees, but I need more names of women students who will be willing to help. Email women@ousu.org with name, college and subject if you'll be available on Sat 7th week 14th of June. I have been copying and mailing booking forms and also sorting out requests for overnight accommodation – if your college might be able to help with a single guest room, please let me know!

University Childcare panel met and progress on the new university nursery is going well. Childcare administration at the University remains badly under-resourced (a full-time designated staff member is really needed) but the condition of the Equal Opportunities department is still in limbo, as is the organisation and future of its related committees. Andrew and I are doing all we can to appraise ourselves of the situation and striving to ensure student input into these decisions. I have dealt with several (some very time-consuming) childcare queries from students and prospective students over the last couple of weeks.

Further production and distribution of the SRI guide has taken some time: all JCR and MCR presidents should have copies in their pigeon holes today. Ethics committee would like to see half of common rooms initiating SRI negotiations with college by the end of 2003: if you would like to be involved in this campaign we'd welcome your help.

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I have been helping get Promoting Choice committee off the ground. It has been dormant for a long time, but not for lack of work for it to do. Anyone who is interested in the issues and provision surrounding students and unplanned pregnancy is encouraged to join our meetings at **3.30pm on Thursdays in OUSU**. In particular we are looking to a comparison of our PC provision with that of other student unions.

Chris Griffin **V-P (Graduates)**

In my first two weeks as VP-Graduates, I have been occupied primarily with learning about the structures of OUSU representation, service provision and the various campaigns it supports. In addition, I have become more familiar with university governance and the channels through which graduates currently have the opportunity to voice their opinion. Indeed most of my time so far has been spent attending committee meetings for the first time, introducing myself to university and college administrators and getting better acquainted with the details of rent increases and the fourth-year/continuation fee proposal. Unfortunately, I have only been able to maintain a part-time schedule due to first year exam revision. Nevertheless, I am pleased with the current revival of graduate representation and communication across Common Rooms within OUSU.

Among the meetings I have attended thus far, the first was the termly one for Common Room Presidents with the Proctors and Assessor at which the issue of collegiate inequality was raised and discussed. I also sat on the Tutors for Graduates Committee and the Education Policy and Standards Committee as well as attended University Council. A session with the Assistant Director of Oxford's QAA Audit Team was very informative regarding the format and possible content of graduate-specific sections that will be included in the students' self-evaluation document. Finally, I attended the regular meetings of Executives in addition to some casework and several informal meetings with college and university staff on the rents/graduate fees front.

Of the issues that I have confronted during the last two weeks, a few stand out as most critical.

First, proposals for possibly increasing postgraduate numbers have been taken up by several bodies. I am very concerned about the feasibility of increasing graduate numbers and/or the number of taught masters courses without a concomitant increase in space and resource allocation for graduate needs. However, I am optimistic that a more streamlined admissions process will improve communication between departments and colleges and in a larger attempt to set better standards and goals for the composition of graduate education. The rents issue largely mirrors that of the undergraduate experience and I will continue working with other sabbatical officers to gain more access to the decision-making process and express our opposition to policies that place unsustainable strain on student finances. I have also been consulting Common Room representatives on the current status of fourth year/continuation fees as we prepare to address the recent university decree to extend the period of composition fee payment to twelve terms and its consequences for exacerbating graduate hardship.

I am very pleased to mention that the Executive have approved my immediate successor, Daniel Paskins, who will take over in September until a ratification vote in Council can take place in 1st Week Michaelmas 2003. I should also mention that there soon will be graduate representative vacancies on the Tutors for Graduates and Bodleian Library Committees, which are scheduled to be filled in 7th Week Council. Interested graduates should contact me for more information.

I unfortunately was not able to attend the mature students meeting in 4th Week but plan to meet with the Co-Chairs as soon as possible to begin processing the survey conducted by my predecessor. I also look forward to a renewal of activity in the international students committee and encourage current members to contact me about ideas for the remainder of term.

Sonia Sodha **V-P (Access & Academic Affairs)**

Academic Affairs

I attended Senior Tutors' Committee which has given me a better insight into the stint reform process. The problem is that we as students have been left out of the process as it has been treated as a personnel issue in the university, and has been discussed in the personnel committees of the university and appointments and planning in Conference of Colleges, both of which we have no representation on. Additionally, the proposals which are now starting to come up to EPSC, a quality assurance committee I do sit on, are basically the same proposals which are going to the personnel committees, so don't include enough information on quality assurance and consultation. Stint reform proposals for History, Politics, Economics and Law were discussed at Senior Tutors' Committee. I have contacted all the JCC chairs in the subjects I've not had contact with and am waiting to hear back from them on whether they have been consulted on these proposals and what they think of them. If you are a JCC chair in any of these

were discussed at Senior Tutors' Committee. I have contacted all the JCC chairs in the subjects I've not had contact with and am waiting to hear back from them on whether they have been consulted on these proposals, and what they think of them. If you are a JCC chair in any of these subjects, please get in touch with me (access@ousu.org).

I also went to EPSC in 2nd week, and argued that proposals put before a quality assurance body should be different to proposals going to a personnel committee. In future, proposals should be better targeted at quality assurance matters. I have met with the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) a couple of times to talk about stint reform and other academic issues since the last Council.

I also had a meeting with the QAA regarding Oxford's institutional audit next Hilary. I first had a meeting with the university and the QAA regarding the whole process, and then a meeting just with myself and some other student representatives to discuss our student submission. These meetings were very useful in giving myself and my successor an insight into how the whole QAA process will work.

We had the first Academic Affairs Committee of term, which was well attended and useful.

I also helped organise a Higher Education focus group for the Centre for Higher Education Research on the national student questionnaire which the government announced they will introduce in the White Paper. This should mean Oxford students have had an input into the form this questionnaire will take.

Access

Plans for the TS open day at Wadham in 9th week are going well.

I have spent some time putting together the Admissions Working Party Report for this Council.

I hope that there will be a really good debate on admissions issues in this Council.

I attended the meeting we had with the Chairman of the Estates Bursars Committee to talk about rents rises. I am extremely concerned about the effect of any rents rises on applications to Oxford.

General

A lot of time has been spent in Exec meetings this week, talking about the Budget and OUSU's financial situation.

I also attended the protest yesterday before Conference of Colleges on rent rises.