

# The Master's Report



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Master

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View over the Fellows' Garden towards Clare College from the Jerwood Library

## Celebration has to be balanced with recognition

It has been a very eventful year at the Hall, one way or another. Our celebration of the 40th anniversary of the admission of women has come to its climax, with the great celebratory ball last summer; the unveiling of the portrait of the first two female Fellows, Drs Sandra Raban and Kareen Thorne; Sandra’s booklet on women at the Hall; and the final sequence of lectures given by female alumni.

One can’t but be aware that celebration has to be balanced with a recognition that, on a number of fronts, diversity and inclusion remain challenges for Cambridge in general, as well as the Hall. We’re ‘good’ on some things, not so good on others, though we put a lot of effort into improving things. So celebrating what has been achieved is important. The academic year began with the unveiling in Hall of Cornelia Parker’s extraordinary tapestry, *Thirty Pieces of Silver*; thanks are due to Nigel

Thomas for this, and to Dr Alex Marr for approaching Cornelia. The installation makes good the lack of a “fine arras” specified in Dr Eden’s will in the mid-17th century; we know the arras was there for a while, but disappeared perhaps just 20 years after it was first put up, not to be replaced until now. Other important markers of the year included yet another strong showing in the summer exams, and on the river. This year, incidentally, was the first year when the new regime on release of results came into effect: something approaching a third of students across the University declined to have their results published outside the Senate House. Personally I regret the change, for reasons too complicated to list here, but the changing tide of opinion on this has been evident for some years.

Much as I can claim success for the Hall over the last year, I am also aware that the current political atmosphere



over higher education in the United Kingdom is perhaps more unsettled than it has been for many years. You will be aware of the continuing concern over admissions, access and outreach. It's important to say that concern is shared fully by the Fellowship, and – again – we put a lot of effort and money into improving admissions across a range of targets, including of course school background, social background and ethnicity. And it's also important to debunk some of the more outlandish and selective statements made by politicians and the press. Last year, the College achieved 75% maintained school entry, well above the University's target figure. The key thing we have to bear in mind, however, is that not only is there, rightly, continuing public pressure on the broad question of access, but that the new regulatory body, the Office for Students, has more teeth than its predecessors (the Office of Fair Access, and the Higher

Education Funding Council), and seems to be developing a more interventionist approach. No one knows yet how that will play out in practice. But when you combine that uncertainty with continuing uncertainty over student finance, and over the impact of Brexit, you can see just why there are concerns all round.

One of the things that usually falls out of the picture in press attention on Oxbridge is the fact that British universities are a runaway success in international terms. We should celebrate that success. For years Cambridge has been near the top or at the top of the international rankings, competing directly with the Ivy League universities, despite having nothing like their financial resources (we're working on that). The British attitude to elite universities is strangely two-faced: nearly all the criticism focuses closely on what one might call specifically

domestic aspects, when the horizon of Cambridge in terms of student recruitment (especially at graduate level) is increasingly a global one; when a third of our academic staff are from outside the UK; and when Britain has hitherto been able to out-compete our European partners in research funding. I don't like the trend for seeing education in market terms, but British higher education is a remarkably successful export, and yet we (I mean society in general) are constantly sniping at it, trying to tie it down, and interfering in it. In such a time, strong leadership is required for the University, and this year Stephen Toope took up office as Vice-Chancellor, in succession to Sir Leszek Borysiewicz. The challenges Cambridge faces are many, but that the colleges and the University together can certainly face up to them.

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