

## Audio file

[2026-04-28-student-voices-aitken.mp3](#)

## Transcript

Wantoe

What does it actually mean to experience Oxford as a student, and who is shaping that experience behind the scenes? Those are the questions I've been thinking about lately, and they sit right at the heart of today's episode. Welcome to our Oxford Student Voice, a podcast by the Oxford Student Union. My name is Wanto Tia Wanto, and I'm the President for Postgraduate at the Oxford Student Union. This series exists for one reason, to put students in direct conversation with people shaping this university. So we can ask the questions that actually matters to you. Every episode, I sit down with someone whose decision ideas or leadership affect the more than 26,000 students at the University of Oxford. Not to give them a platform to prepare remarks, but to have real conversation. The kind of conversation where we understand not just what decisions are made, but how they affect our students across the university. Today, my guest is Jill Etkin. Jill is the Register of the University of Oxford, one of the most senior roles at the institution. Her roles are at the intersection of governance and delivery, which means she is deeply involved in how decisions is taken and how the highest level of the university actually translate into systems and processes that students face with every day. Before returning to Oxford, she spent over 25 years in Whitehall, working at the highest level of the UK civil perspective and shaping national governance policy and the challenge of making large, complex systems function effectively. She also studied here at a huge college. So this is not just someone running the institution, it's someone who has experienced it as a student and has now returned in one of the roles most responsible for how it works. What I want to explore today is not just the institutional story, but a human one. How decisions are made, what is difficult, what is changing, and what it means to shape the institution like Oxford from the inside. Jill, welcome. I'm very glad you have to join us today.

Gill

I'm delighted to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Wantoe

Yeah, I've been very excited for this conversation. You know, the most important aspect is your background. You spent many years at Whitehall and the interesting aspect is you

work within government. What has government level taught you and comparatively of your current role?

Gill

Well, my background was a complicated one. I did a philosophy and theology degree here. I then worked in the voluntary sector. I became a lawyer and then I ended up in Whitehall. And looking back, all of that makes sense. The government, what does government teach you? It teaches you the value of rigorous evidence-based thinking. And added to that, you have to learn, and this is the bit that Oxford prepares you for but doesn't fully equip you for, you have to learn how to apply judgement and to use that experience. Complex organisations, and I'd include the university as well as all Whitehall departments as examples of complex organisations, They're about influence and persuasion as much as they are about solid business cases.

Wantoe

Very interesting. And the fascinating aspect is there are a lot of students who probably want to know what being a registrar is. You know, how the university administrative systems are designed and who is at the centre of it and what is the process. How does it look like in translating for students?

Gill

So first and foremost, being the registrar is to be the head of the professional services that run the administration of the university. And that means several things. It means that I spend time with departments, with divisions, with the central services. It means that I'm listening to students as they put their influential voice into a variety of our committees, seeking to influence our policies and seeking to give us feedback about how its implementation is working. I'm also secretary to council and to congregation, so these are our governing bodies. And combining that professional services role with the governance role and the fact that I work so closely with the Vice Chancellor means that I'm really the person who's expected to join up the dots and have an idea about what's going on everywhere, which means I'm quite a good person to be talking to members of the Student Union as we work to both get in place the right policies, but also to make sure that we're able to implement them and make them effective for students.

Wantoe

Yeah, and which made this conversation very exciting, just the right person in terms of it. One of the most important aspects is how systems affect students. So like you said, the university administrative system are designed, you know, in a way that students are placed at the center of it. In terms of how the process look like when something change, you know, what is at a code of this decision? in terms of your role, how primarily this decision translates to students?

Gill

So I have the privilege of being able to go to absolutely any meeting held in the university about its running, which means that people keep me informed about what's going on. And one of the important things that can happen when there are changes are that there's an aspiration to do something that will make an improvement or an adjustment of some sort. to something that might affect the student experience. But then there's another set of decision making going on somewhere else that might not be properly joined up. So part of my role is to notice that and to make sure that we get the right voice in the room. On the whole, Education Committee, which of course is a key committee for things that matter to students, has really strong student representation. But sometimes there may be policies that are being developed there which are hard to afford or hard to resource or we don't have the capability to deliver. And it's really important that pragmatic voice is also fed in and I'm part of the system to make sure that happens.

Wantoe

Very much. And you know, one of the biggest changes at the university is the technological and changes in AI as well. And I primarily want us to be able to talk a bit about this aspect. How should students feel different about this change in dynamics, especially the university in terms of technological advances, artificial intelligence also as well.

Gill

So all universities, in fact all of society is undergoing major change as a result of technology, not just AI of course, but AI is the one that we talk about most. There's been significant investment in Oxford and I hope that students have noticed that they get a much higher quality access to, for example, ChatGPT and many other AI tools than other universities have as the norm. We are investing significantly into digital, although I think we're behind in some areas. So if you think about My Oxford app, which I imagine that everybody would like to open and find seamless every day, is still a bit clunky and needs some more work. I think we also need a bit more investment in how technology works in our teaching spaces. how we use it in assessment, how we use it in timetabling. Some of those things won't be as visible to students, but those are all things that we want to invest in. big debates are going on as to how AI should influence teaching, how it should influence assessment, indeed, whether or not we should still have online interviews for admissions. So there's a big debate going on. And Oxford is part of a national debate on those things. We're no different from anywhere else.

Wantoe

Very interesting. And I think it's also a very, you know, it's one of the biggest changes that we could think about in human history. At the intercept of this also says something we call the student voice in governance, which is very critical at the student union, that's primarily one of our biggest objectives is representing students. In terms of student, you know, consultation, does it actually shape the outcome? of decision-making process in this ave.

Gill

It certainly does. We always want to hear from students and it feels to me as though we're now two years into a much, much stronger way of having a stronger relationship between the university and the student union. Two things have changed. One is that we realise that we need to ensure that the sabbatical officers are present and able to influence at every level and they have a divisional... boards, the key committees of the university, and most importantly, of course, council, where all of the sabbatical officers are able to attend should they want. But we've built in much stronger, and I really am grateful to the student union for enabling this to happen, but we've built in a much stronger voice now from the collegiate student unions. Every college has both undergraduate and MCR representation. And that's really, really important. It's improved the quality and the range. And I think the transparency of the student voice in the last couple of years. So that feels a whole lot better. And we've written down what we expect of the relationship. We have a relationship agreement. And that strikes me as being a really major step forward. And I hope students are noticing the benefits.

Wantoe

Yeah, I definitely agree with you. The transformation also has been really critical as well in achieving that. So in my role, I sit with MCR president meeting twice a term, just primarily to build that correlation. So I definitely agree. And I'm sure you've done a lot of work with the transformation of the SU as well. In terms of this aspect, how do you see the growth to the current status that you highlighted, most stronger student votes?

Gill

I'm just grateful that it's happened and I really appreciate the hard work that the people working in the student union and the sabbatical officers over several years. You're probably the third or maybe even the 4th that we've been talking to sabbatical officers about the need for change. Everybody pulled together really well and everybody understood that there were difficulties and, you know, there just simply wasn't the strength of student voice and it wasn't representative of all of our students. While you can always do more in terms of consultation, consultation is the way in which Oxford makes its decisions. It makes sure we never make decisions which haven't been tested with all relevant parties. And it feels to me now that we've really turned a corner and students will listen to much more. There are some great examples where student voice

has been really influential. There was a decision a few years ago to remove the graduate application fee That was something that was very difficult for the university. It lost a significant amount of income that is hard, is impossible to replace. But that was a campaign that was led by a combination of academics and students. They were very, very influential in our recent review of the investments that the university makes. And a real achievement of recent years, which has taken place in parallel to the transformation of how we work with the Student Union, is the new Student Experience Committee. So we've brought front and foremost a strategic look at what the student experience is in the university, which looks across college experience and departmental experience. That was new for the university and it's really making excellent strides.

Wantoe

I definitely agree with you, and I'm ready with a lot of prospect in how this can be able to build further in incorporating more students. One of the very interesting things, Jill, is the colleges culture at Oxford. It's almost unlike any other university you could think about. What is most interesting is that you sit at the heart of this culture in your role in delivery. How do you work with this culture in terms of ensuring students have the kind of change that they want effectively?

Gill

So we are devolved and I think that's a strength. It's sometimes difficult to work with. It means that you have to consult more people. It means that you have to think about more vested interests, more absolutely legitimate interests. That makes decision making slower, but it can make it better. And it's certainly the case in Oxford that you can get change done. It's just that it takes a long time. but when it is done, it tends to stick. So the model has its difficulties, but broadly, I think it, broadly I think it works. How do I address the fact that there are so many different stakeholders and so many different points of view to take? So in my role as registrar, what I really care about is that we have some central principles which are non-negotiable. There are things about the quality of our education, the quality of our welfare support, And I'll call them minimum standards about the wider support that we offer students that are absolutely crucial. And the university works very well with all of the players, whether they be departments, divisions, colleges, and indeed taking into account the student feedback in terms of making sure that offer is valid, is strong, and people recognise that they can get that. Then there's divergence. There's divergence often for very practical reasons between subjects, between disciplines, but also between... between the amount that different colleges decide that they would value to offer or that they can afford to offer. On the whole, what I notice is that the offer to students is probably way higher than almost any other university in the country. So I take real comfort from the fact that the student experience here is, I think, pretty fabulous compared to what's available elsewhere. There are some differences. It's important that the university recognises those, but it is

one of the strengths of our model that we have differences and that we thrive through those. Often something is weaker in one place, but something else is stronger. And that means that students can find what they most need.

Wantoe

And the interesting aspect is the increasing speed and clarity and transparency that come with your role. Do you think, where are the gaps in terms of achieving, distance? Do you see like in a way probably, that you could be able to recognize to say maybe this could be done differently?

Gill

So I wish we did make changes once we've decided on them. I wish it was easier and therefore quicker to do. Often it isn't. And of course, an academic year cycle, it very much determines that decisions that we make, perhaps in January 2026, aren't going to affect, say, an admissions or an examination cycle until probably 27, 28. So there's always a lag just because of the way that the academic year works, the rhythm of that year. I think where we could be better is just how much we communicate. I'm not sure how much, interested in your views, not sure how much communication students want of where we are with complicated projects. I'm sure they don't want monthly updates on why it's still going slowly. But I do think we could improve our communication so that people are aware of what we're trying to do and what we're prioritising and what that means that will happen to a slightly slower timetable.

Wantoe

Yeah, I do agree. Communication is actually critical in terms of getting students closer with some of the decision-making process. And I think that's actually why we are doing a podcast in the 1st place to get students a sense of how effectively the university is functioning. One of the other critical aspects that I do recognize about communication is bringing a senior leadership closer to student understanding of how governance workers are. I do think OXO is very complex in terms of the structure.

Gill

It is indeed. I agree completely.

Wantoe

Well, the other thing I also want us to talk about is, I mean, AI again in administration. Are there limits to where you probably will want to get students involved in the decision-making process in terms of AR? Do you see it as a very complex dynamics for OES that are futuristic? of inclusion to the university.

Gill

Well, there's certain AI benefits that don't really need much consultation. I mean, there's certain AI improvements that we can make in processes and systems that everybody would be grateful if we could just speed things up and stop using paper and just make life easier. So I won't be consulting for consultation's sake, where there's a simply is a better way of automating something. and everybody is going to be very happy with that. I think we should just get on and do it. So that's one thing I will say. There will obviously, though, need to be more discussion about AI in terms of how students use AI, how it affects examinations, how it affects admissions, how it and training and educating people in the absolutely appropriate, creative, wonderful ways in which AI can be used as compared to ones in which it would be creating unfair advantages and indeed completely undermining the purpose of education, which is teaching us all how to think.

Wantoe

Yeah, and I'm also very excited about how this prospect could probably work for students in decision-making process. The other aspect in terms of AI is just coming back into a decision-making process. When something isn't working for students, what does the process look like for changing it?

Gill

So let's assume it's something that would be under the remit of the Education Committee, which is most likely. The feedback would be given through to that committee and that committee would commission work on what the problem was, what the solution was and would make recommendations. Hopefully, hopefully that, and in fact many, many, many occasions Those sorts of improvements are ones that can be implemented. They can simply be implemented. It's not a question of asking for a lot of money to be able to do those. So whenever that's possible, that's what we do. Where they do require an investment, then there's a bigger conversation to be had because university finances across the country are such that there isn't spare money lying around waiting for a good project. So where investment is needed, there may well need to be a consideration about prioritisation and whether or not we can afford to make a change, valuable as it might be at this particular moment in time.

Wantoe

And the other question that I probably want to be able to ask is just around, if there is one thing, because you've been in Oxford for a very long time, which is, I know there'll probably be multiple things, to put into this scenario. If you could change one thing about OCTO systems in relation to students, what would it be?

Gill

I don't think we have good enough sport provision. So our sport is complicated in that many colleges have very different levels of sporting provision. And then we have a central swimming pool and the running track and a number of other facilities. They're okay, but they're not good enough. And so we're really, really enthusiastic. And I think there is light at the end of the tunnel that we will be able to invest in much, much better sports facilities for the future.

Wantoe

And I think sport is also very crucial because we just won with the Oxford Blue against Cambridge, which was a historic.

Gill

Well, of course, it took a women's team and I'm delighted to see their time coming up. The other thing though that I think as well I would like to, the thing that worries me most I think is that there are disparities between colleges in terms of what they can offer to students. As I said, it's in one sense it's a nice problem to have because I think overall the student experience in Oxford is probably way better than it is in most other universities and the collegiate system is at least in part responsible for that. But it would be good to iron out some of those disparities and that takes time because every college is an independent institution with its own sources of very different levels of funding. But that's something I would like to see improved.

Wantoe

Just speaking on the disparity question, which I agree with yes, actually a really big of the university. Do you think that will require, what primarily do you think this will require? Will it require changing traditional systems? I mean, let's say for instance, for graduate college not requiring a college placement, for instance, would that probably change?

Gill

There will be discussions way after you and I have left the university about our traditions and the ways in which we've set ourselves up over the centuries. And so I'm not going to, I'm absolutely not going to take a punt on those. But I think working together and working carefully and gradually and thinking about what really matters and in particular what really matters to the student experience Changes have been. Things are much better than they used to be. And I think we can make progress.

Wantoe

And the other question in terms of the heart of disparity, obviously international students sit at that focal point. I mean, your role primarily as a registered place, you are the heart of making decisions that also impact a lot of international students as well.

Do you think this disparity conversation also have a lot of impact on international students?

Gill

Everything that the university has to offer is available to all of our students. There is a question about how all of our students are funded and international students may feel that more in some respects, but I'm not always sure that it's a bigger problem than it is for home students. We haven't taken as many international students as many other universities have. because it's remained important to us to have a, to be serving the country in which we sit. But we have a growing and excellent cohort of international students. Is the balance right? I think you and your fellow students will tell us.

Wantoe

Yeah. And just with the intergenerational conversation, because you study at St Hughes, which is very interesting. With your current role, how does that place you into the perspective of, do you think your experience as a student has a critical influence in how you currently understand the university system?

Gill

Oh, of course, of course it does. So I was a student here a long time ago. St Hugh's then was, it's a little bit up the Banbury Road, so it's always been a refuge. It's always been away from the hurly-burly of the centre of the university, and it still is. And the key theme I take from having been a student here decades ago and now being registrar is that the important things don't change. So the quality of education, the closeness of the relationship between tutors and students in their learning journey seems to me to be more or less unchanged. And that is at the heart of everything we do. And so is that the glorious refuge that all of our college buildings give to students. The things that have changed are there are now more graduates. When I was here, there were only 5% of students who were graduates, so it was very much an undergraduate university. That's really changed the character. It's meant that there's a lot more senior, authoritative, investigative, research-based studentship going on, and that, I think, is a real benefit. I think that has enriched the university no end. Plus, we have some absolutely fabulous buildings now, which mean that we have many better facilities. In fact, in many respects, I'm envious for my 18-year-old self of what's now on offer.

Wantoe

Yeah, I do agree. There is a lot of modern infrastructure. The other thing in terms of that period also, do you think anything academically also have changed?

Gill

Hard of me to say, as I'm not a current student, but everything I see, and particularly in my role in St Hugh's, where I'm a fellow still, is that the academic rigour and the importance of training people to think and to be equipped for the outside world, that remains, and that's at the heart of the offer that Oxford gives. is central to the student experience then as now. I think there are more activities, there are more funded activities that students can partake in now, but it's a growth on something that was already apparent then. And these traditions, these long-standing traditions, you know, this place knows how to treat students broadly and knows how to help them thrive. Long may it continue.

Wantoe

And just to carry your advice, because one of the interesting things is you spend many years into public services at the highest peak. Just someone, a student who is inspired to pursue that path, what couple of advice will you provide them?

Gill

So being a A national civil servant working in Whitehall is an honour and a privilege. I wouldn't have changed my career path one jot. Being able to be at the heart of politics and the buzz, being able to influence, advise and indeed implement and do is a wonderful, wonderful career. And if anybody's thinking of doing it, I recommend that they have a go.

Wantoe

Great. Do you have any final words?

Gill

No, but good luck to you in the future and I'm delighted that we have things so much better on track with the Student Union and hearing the views of students across the university.

Wantoe

Jill, thank you so much. What I'm taking away from this conversation is that Oxford is not just defined by its traditions or hearing its decisions, but by how those decisions are filled. The system may sit behind the scenes, but the experience is always fun and central for students. And maybe that's the real questions this episode leaves us with, not just how Oxford works, but who it works for and who gets to shape what it becomes next. You have been listening to our Oxford Student Voice, a podcast by the Oxford Student Union. If this conversation made you think, question, or even see Oxford a little bit differently, share it with someone who should be part of that conversation too. because a university is not just something you attend, it is something you shape, and your voice should never be on the outside of it. We'll see you next time. Thank you.

