

Oxford Heads of Houses: the role and recent trends in appointments 2008 – 2018

Oxford University colleges have had a busy year appointing to the Head of House role in 2018. Seven colleges will have welcomed new principals during the year. The new occupants at Balliol (Dame Helen Ghosh) and Wolfson (Timothy Hitchens) have already started in post, with the remainder due to start in Michaelmas Term: Merton (Professor Irene Tracey), Oriol (Neil Mendoza), St Edmund Hall (Professor Kathy Willis), Mansfield (Helen Mountfield QC) and Harris Manchester (Very Revd Professor Jane Shaw). Balliol, St Edmund Hall and Harris Manchester have thereby appointed their first woman, Merton their second, and Mansfield their third. The backgrounds and experience of these candidates are diverse. This short paper updates an earlier one which examined the role of the Head of House and trends in appointments during the period 2005 – 2015.

Role

The Head of House role of a College is a distinctive one. Each Governing Body places its own interpretation on the requirement, according to need at the time, but three key elements appear common to all colleges. The first element of the role is the obvious task of chairing the Governing Body in what is a highly democratic environment. The way in which decisions get made can often be the key to how they get implemented. Each Fellow will expect to have an equal voice in debate and this can require skilful chairing.

The second element of the role is that of assuming responsibility for executing the will of the Governing Body, although s/he will be able to rely on the Officers of the College, particularly the Bursar, Senior Tutor and increasingly the Director of Development and Alumni Relations. The role has neither the features of a non-executive chair nor those of chief executive. However, overall responsibility for the administration of a college falls to the Head of House. This is the multi-faceted element of the role; at its core it includes all aspects of the effective operation of the College as a place of education, research and scholarship, and for the fulfilment of its charitable purpose.

The third task is the critical need for the principal to represent the College externally, at several different levels. S/he will attend meetings of the Conference of Colleges (and other University committees) and the Governing Body will expect its views to be advanced successfully, such that the voice of the College is heard when influencing wider university decision-making, especially concerning matters of direct concern (increasingly crucial in the politics and funding of UK higher education, and the febrile Brexit environment with its implications for research and free movement). Fundraising forms a large part of the external role of the Head of House and is always emphasised in the recruitment process (see below). S/he leads on alumni relations, travelling when necessary, and represents the College to all other external stakeholders, whether in academia or Government.

Qualifications

What do Governing Bodies look for in their principal? Recent prospectuses reveal a uniform description of the ideal candidate. All are open to candidates from outside academia, with the important caveat that the successful candidate has sufficient affinity with higher education and the capacity to engage with an academic community. Recent examples include:

- A strong commitment to the values of teaching, research and academic excellence, in particular a strong appreciation for a multidisciplinary community of scholarship (Balliol 2017);
- A distinguished record of achievement in an academic or other professional field ... [with the capacity to] ... engage with the social and intellectual life of the College and ... with the whole ... community (Mansfield 2017);
- A clear understanding of, and commitment to, the College's values and academic purpose, in respect of both teaching and research (St Edmund Hall 2017).

The role of the principal in fundraising is also described in broadly similar ways:

- Sound financial understanding and acumen, with a genuine enthusiasm for fundraising (Balliol 2017);
- Sound grasp of financial issues and an enthusiasm for playing an energetic and imaginative part in the College's fundraising activities (Mansfield 2017);
- An ability and willingness to engage enthusiastically with alumni and with fundraising activities (St Edmund Hall 2017).

Enthusiasm for, and imagination in, fundraising is where the ideal candidate bar appears to be currently set, rather than demonstrable experience. Regardless of background, an evident record of distinction is a priority in the candidate's chosen field, with strong intellect and a commensurate level of leadership experience. Direct experience of the Oxbridge collegiate system is rarely mentioned, but most candidates assume that an Oxbridge degree is an advantage.

Trends and comparisons

A comparison of the current Heads of Houses with those in post ten years ago reveals some interesting facts. The gender balance is beginning to change. There will be 12 women principals in post by the end of the year, an increase of three since 2008, and five since 2005. The average tenure of all Heads remains approximately 10 years.

A more telling change since 2008 is that today only 19 (50%) colleges have an academic as their principal, a decline of 11 (29%). There were eight economists as Heads of House in 2008, today there are three. Lawyers have always featured, although more prominently of late. There are four QCs as current Heads, compared with just two lawyers in 2008. Media is slightly better represented today, with three Heads compared with one in 2008. The tradition of civil and other public servants (including diplomats) being Heads is increasing, eight today compared with three in 2008, and this is now the largest group after academics. The appointment of Baroness Royall to Somerville marks the first politician as Head of House. An area largely missing in the past has been that of business. The Warden of New College is soon to be joined by

the new Provost of Oriel, both having business backgrounds; there was one such principal in 2008.

Conclusion

In summary, the role of Head of House continues to attract candidates from a range of backgrounds and Governing Bodies are increasingly willing to consider well-qualified people whose careers have not been substantially spent in academia. Although the increase in the number of women is to be welcomed, some might regard the current proportion (29%) as remaining relatively low, and no College has yet appointed a principal with a visible minority background. For Governing Bodies seeking to make fresh appointments, the good news is that the Head of House opportunity remains capable of attracting candidates of real distinction.

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June 2018

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