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Oxford must go postal

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Sir, My retired colleague Professor Gale is quite wrong (letter, Dec 7). A postal vote is a democratic necessity before Oxford academics take a decision crucial to those with a continuing stake in the university. Contract researchers -who spend all their time raising funds for their next grant and most of whom did not have time to attend two three-hour debates -outnumber tenured faculty at Oxford, and they will suffer more if the proposed reforms are rejected. He is also wrong about charity law. Oxford and Cambridge, and their colleges, are about to become regulated charities. The regulator (the Charity Commission) and sub-regulator (the funding council) make it quite clear that charitable trustees must not normally be people on the payroll of the charity. The reasons are obvious and have been enshrined in English trust law since 1734.

Professor Gale has overlooked that the present UK Government, in its response to the Lambert Review published in July 2004, requires the vice-chancellors of Oxford and Cambridge to report within three years what "progress" they have made in governance. It is quite clear that by "progress", the Government means, among other things, progress towards the standard charity trusteeship model. To date, Oxford has made none. It has only eight months left before the reporting deadline. That is why I hope the whole of Congregation - not just those who could spare two Tuesday afternoons -will support the reforms. They preserve Oxford's status as a workers' co-operative while adding an acceptable body of charitable trustees.

Oxford is in the world's top ten despite its governance arrangements, not because of them.**PROFESSOR IAIN MCLEAN** Nuffield College, Oxford