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Reflections on Designing the Academic Dress of the University of Hertfordshire

By Bruce Christianson and Philip Waters

Thirty years ago the authors were involved in the design of the academic dress for the new University of Hertfordshire. Here we reflect upon the process, and try to remember what we thought we were doing. We stress that our recollections are unreliable, our opinions are our own, and what we say may not represent the official view of the University of Hertfordshire or, for that matter, anybody else.

The University of Hertfordshire began life as Hatfield Technical College in 1952, and our degree candidates were presented as external students of the University of London.¹ In 1969 we became a polytechnic. Following this, the vast majority of our students were registered for qualifications awarded either by the CNAA, the Council for National Academic Awards, or by BTEC, the Business and Technology Education Council.² A small minority of our students continued to study for awards made by other bodies, including some certificates and diplomas awarded by the Polytechnic itself.³

Awards ceremonies were held each year, but these were not conferment ceremonies, even in the case of the institution's own awards. Instead, the ceremonies were presentation ceremonies, where the new graduates and diplomates were presented to the Academic Board of the Polytechnic, wearing the academic dress prescribed by the awarding institution for their award, and which they were by then already entitled to wear.⁴

The CNAA academic dress incorporated a grade-hood system, based on a variant of the Aberdeen shape.⁵ All the hoods were made of a distinctive gold-yellow panama, with

We would like to thank Roxanne Garara (née Measey), Assistant Registrar (Exams & Awards) at the University of Hertfordshire, for sourcing the photographs; and her predecessor Anne Austin (née Walmsley) for incisive comments on an early draft of the paper.

1 The College also had students studying for a wide variety of other qualifications. For a potted history of the institution visit <www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/the-history-of-our-university> [retrieved 28 March 2021].

2 All degrees and postgraduate qualifications, including doctorates, were awarded by the CNAA; both bodies awarded sub-degree certificates and diplomas.

3 The Polytechnic Diploma, for example, was an award accredited as equivalent to a bachelor's degree without honours.

4 The awards had been conferred by an administrative action, well prior to the ceremonies. This practice differs from that of the ancient universities in the British Isles, where conferment of the award takes place during the ceremony. However ceremonies held by the University of London have always been of the type described here.

5 The CNAA shape is [a1] in the Groves classification system. The [a1] was probably the 'altered' pattern adopted by the University of Aberdeen in 1861, and was certainly being used there by 1891: see Cooper p. 127 n 23; and p. 128, Fig 3 & n 29. The [a7] pattern currently used at Aberdeen (and depicted in Shaw) is a later variation. The [a1] shape was also in use at the University of York prior to its adoption by the CNAA.

a silk lining denoting the level of the award: turquoise for bachelors' degrees, white for masters', turquoise with a white facing⁶ for four-year first degrees such as the MEng, and maroon for the PhD. The hood for higher doctors was lined and bound with cream damask in the St Aidan pattern.

The bachelors' gown was a Cambridge BA pattern, but without the strings or the slit in the arm seam:⁷ at the front, the sleeve of the CNAAs bachelors' gown reached only to the elbow. The masters' gown was of the standard Oxbridge pattern, but had no cut-out in the boot of the sleeve. The doctors' gowns were made in the masters' pattern: a black gown with maroon silk yoke and facings in the case of the PhD, and a gold-yellow gown with cream brocade facings in the case of a higher doctorate. Unusually, the CNAAs academic dress regulations precisely specified the length of the gowns: bachelors' gowns were to be worn twelve inches off the ground, and all other gowns eight inches off the ground.

Higher doctors wore a velvet Tudor bonnet with a gold cord, PhDs wore a cloth bonnet with a maroon cord, and everyone else wore the traditional black trencher and tassel.⁸

Those holding diplomas wore the CNAAs bachelors' gown, usually without a hood, although by 1990 BTEC had prescribed a hood for the holders of its Higher National Diplomas and Certificates (HND and HNC). The BTEC hood was also in the CNAAs Aberdeen shape, with a scarlet body and a deep blue lining, and so bore a superficial but startling resemblance to the hood for the Oxford DPhil.

A series of awards ceremonies was held over the period of a week in November, allowing those who had to re-sit examinations in the autumn⁹ to be presented along with the rest of their cohort. This delay meant that the ceremonies had more of the flavour of a reunion than of a passing-out parade.

The government had signalled that The Hatfield Polytechnic (as the institution was then known) was to receive University Status in 1992 under the Further and Higher Education Reform Bill, thus allowing us for the first time to award our own degrees.

Relatively late in 1991 it became clear that the government proposed to abolish the CNAAs at the same time as the new universities came into being.¹⁰

This meant that the cohort graduating in the summer of 1992 would not be able to complete their degrees under the regulations upon which they had embarked, but would need to receive degrees from the (very) new University of Hertfordshire. Our new academic dress would therefore need to be in place in time for the November 1992 ceremonies, less than a year away.

A working group was established by the Academic Board to develop the academic regulatory framework for the new university. Another ad-hoc group was set up by Marketing and External Relations to address the corporate image implications of the transition to university status. These included (amongst many other more conventional branding is-

6 We follow Smith's terminology, so a facing is a narrow band placed on the lining, running along the inside edge of the cowl.

7 The Cambridge bachelors' gown sleeve had been steadily creeping up the forearm for a hundred years or so, and by the 1960s the slit was no longer essential for eating or writing on a chalkboard. The CNAAs bachelors' and masters' gowns are [b1] and [m10] respectively in the Groves system.

8 [h2], [h2], and [h1] respectively in the Groves system.

9 Seasons mentioned are relative to the northern hemisphere.

10 On the 6th of May 1992, see <www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1992/831/made> [retrieved 28 March 2021].

sues) the petition for a Grant of Arms, the design and tendering process for a university mace, and the development and procurement of a system of academic dress for the University. The authors found themselves co-opted onto both the regulatory framework and the corporate image groups.

Academic dress occupied a curious niche. While most public events were the responsibility of Marketing, the awards ceremonies were firmly in the hands of Registry. And while the design of the academic dress was regarded primarily as an issue of corporate image, particularly with regard to colour, the academic dress regulations were the responsibility of the Academic Board working group. This could easily have led to tension, and the fact that it did not was largely a result of the willingness of all those involved to respect one another's expertise.

At the time, J. Wippell & Co of Exeter had the contract for providing robes to the Polytechnic, and they were regularly consulted during the design process regarding the feasibility of the different options being considered. The initial proposals set out to the ad-hoc group in the brief prepared by Marketing included the option of having no academic dress at all.¹¹ This possibility was firmly laid to rest by Professor Neil K. Buxton, at that time the Director the Polytechnic and subsequently the first Vice-Chancellor of the University. 'The parents will expect to see gowns and hoods,' he insisted, perfectly correctly as it turned out.¹²

At this point, it is probably worth stepping back and considering what we believed we were trying to achieve, and the constraints we were under. Our objectives were that our robes should be consistent with our corporate image, be distinctive to the University of Hertfordshire, have a clear internal logic, provide an attractive spectacle, and look modern—but be compatible with tradition.

We were under considerable time pressure, and our immediate concern was to have something that would create a favourable impression at our own awards ceremonies. However, we were also mindful that our doctoral graduates might go on to become academics, and so it was important that our robes look good at the ceremonies of other universities as well as our own.

At the time, the planned corporate colours for the new university were black, white, and grey.¹³ Interestingly, it was our consideration of the spectacle of the awards ceremonies that helped to persuade the corporate image team to replace black as a corporate colour with a distinctive shade of mauve purple.¹⁴

Many of the decisions turned out to be quite straightforward. We wanted our hoods to be lightweight so that they would sit well on the shoulders without strangling the wearer¹⁵ or requiring constant adjustment, and we wanted them to flourish well so as to display

11 There is almost a tradition of 'new' universities going through a phase of wondering whether they really need to adopt faux-medieval attire for festive occasions: both the University of London (from 1836 until 1843) and the Open University (from 1969 until 1972) at first attempted to dispense altogether with academic dress, but their students were having none of it: see the respective accounts by Goff.

12 In the case of mature students, of which we had a surprising number, their children also proved reassuringly keen on academic dress. It is a curious fact that, as at the University of London, our graduates and diplomates have never been required to wear academic dress when being presented to the Academic Board, although very few of them elect not to. On the other hand, staff who wish to take part in the academic procession are required to robe.

13 Pantone 6C.

14 Pantone 2597C.

15 Particularly when the wearer was attired in a light blouse, rather than a stiff-collared shirt



Fig. 1. Postgraduate masters queuing.

the lining. We considered alternative full shapes, but we already had considerable experience of the CNAA variant of the Aberdeen shape, and it seemed to meet our requirements.

The cloth outer of all CNAA hoods was a distinctive shade of CNAA yellow, and we decided that we would follow this approach, with the outer for all our hoods being made of cloth in the corporate shade of cool grey.

We were also enthusiastic to retain the grade-hood nature of the CNAA system. Part of the Polytechnic's mission was to bridge the two cultures¹⁶ and to promote inter-disciplinary academic programmes, so we actively did not wish to distinguish among awards in different disciplines but only among awards made at different levels. We decided that degree hoods would be lined with watered silk:¹⁷ white for Bachelors' hoods, and purple for Masters'. Extended first degrees, such as the MEng, had the white lining but with a purple facing.

BTEC had allowed hoods to the holders of their diplomas, for which many of our students were still enrolled¹⁸ so, in the interest of parity, we had to allow hoods to those who were awarded University Diplomas. Diploma hoods were lined in plain (unwatered) grey silk, shaded to match the outer, but with a facing of white watered silk for higher diplomas, and of purple watered silk for postgraduate diplomas.

We did not prescribe hoods for the holders of University Certificates, partly because certificate holders were not invited to attend awards ceremonies. The exception to this

and stout kipper tie.

16 Adumbrated by Snow. Indeed, C. P. Snow had been appointed the Polytechnic's first official Visitor in 1972, and regularly spoke at the awards ceremonies.

17 This wasn't due to any influence of Birmingham, we just liked the moiré effect.

18 While the CNAA was to be abolished in 1992, BTEC was not.

rule was the teaching qualification PGCE (post-graduate certificate in education), which did qualify the holder for attendance. This anomalous situation came about because of the credit rating. Most postgraduate certificates were rated at 60 CATS points¹⁹ but the PGCE required an entire academic year of study, and was rated at 120 points at level 7, which was the same as a postgraduate diploma. We gave some thought to a special hood²⁰ for the PGCE but in the end decided to stand firm by the grade-hood principle: the PGCE was credit rated the same as a postgraduate diploma, and so it should have the same hood regardless of nomenclature.²¹ We left doctoral hoods to one side while we made some decisions about gowns.

While we were very concerned to ensure that, as far as possible, none of our hoods was likely to be mistaken for that of any other institution, this was not felt to be imperative for our gowns. The option of having gowns distinctive to the University was considered, but rejected for all but the doctoral robes. Apart from considerations of cost and lead-time (the first ceremonies were by now fast approaching), our feeling was that it was relatively uncommon now for gowns to be worn without hoods on any occasion when knowledge of the wearer's university was of the essence. We also noted that the black gowns of many eminent institutions, at one time distinctive to them, were now so widely worn by other universities throughout the Commonwealth as to be generally available for adoption.²²

We therefore decided to choose our gowns so that they told a story. The gown for bachelors' degrees was to be the same gown worn by bachelors at the University of London, which had awarded degrees to our students when we were a technical college. Our masters' gowns would be the gowns prescribed for masters by the CNAA, which had awarded degrees to our students while we were a polytechnic. Our doctoral robes would be distinctive to the University of Hertfordshire, and a reminder of our responsibility as a university for awarding our own degrees.

After looking through copies of Smith and the first edition of Shaw²³ we decided to adopt an older variation of the Oxford doctors' pattern robe, with the sleeve trim forming a cuff of the same width as the facings at the front rather than reaching up to the bicep.²⁴

19 CATS is the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme, a UK framework for quantifying the size and level of a university qualification: <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Credit_Accumulation_and_Transfer_Scheme> [retrieved 28 March 2021].

Points quoted here refer, anachronistically, to the 2020 version of CATS. In broad terms, four CATS points are equivalent to two ECTS points, or to one US credit hour.

20 We even got as far as having a prototype made: it was grey, lined plain black, with a watered purple facing, and looked really good over a black gown.

21 Later the same principle led us to prescribe the higher diploma hood for all foundation degrees.

22 In England, these patterns include at least the gowns of Oxford, Cambridge, London, and the CNAA. For a clear summary of which former polytechnics adopted which patterns in 1992 see Appendix 9.3 of Hynes, pp. 114–21, particularly the summary table on p. 120. For full details, refer to Groves.

23 Thoughtfully brought to the meeting by Robin Richardson of Wippells.

24 The sequence of gowns is thus [b4], [m10], [d2] in the Groves system. We also stipulated, *contra* the CNAA regulations, that all gowns were to be worn eight inches off the ground: although lengthening the gown for those below the grade of Master, this stopped a few inches short of the medieval stipulation that academic gowns should reach the ankles (*toga talaris*), apart from those wearing high heels.

For the PhD we followed the University of London²⁵ in specifying dark red cloth²⁶ for the body of the robe, rather than scarlet, with watered purple silk for the facings and cuffs. The hood was lined with dark red watered silk, and faced with purple watered silk to match the gown. The research-based professional doctorates were given the same dress as the PhD, on the grade-hood principle of parity of esteem.

For the higher doctorates, we chose purple²⁷ cloth, trimmed with white brocade in a St Aidan pattern.²⁸ The hood was initially completely lined with the same white brocade used to trim the gown, although this was later modified (see below).

For doctors in undress we prescribed the same gown as for masters' degrees. We did consider the addition of a row of lace above the armhole²⁹ but in the end decided that black gowns were more likely to be worn if they were readily obtainable and did not require special adaptation.

Those awarded diplomas, whether from the CNAА, BTEC, or the Polytechnic itself, had traditionally worn the CNAА bachelors' gown. We decided to continue this custom of parity, and give our diplomates the same London pattern gown as our bachelors.

Holders of certificates did not attend awards ceremonies, or wear hoods, but should they be permitted a gown if they attended an occasion when academic dress was to be worn? And if so, on the principle of parsimony, should it be the same gown worn by holders of diplomas? What about those undergraduates who had completed sufficient study



Fig. 2. Bachelors celebrating.

²⁵ As by then had many other institutions.

²⁶ Murrey we should call it, if we abide by King Henry VIII's statute: see Cox. Our choice may also have been influenced by the maroon-coloured trim on the CNAА PhD gown.

²⁷ We chose the purple because the cloth was available in our corporate colour, but noted that it was also permitted by Henry's statute. Keele had previously adopted purple doctors' robes, albeit in Cambridge pattern, and Imperial College would later follow suit.

²⁸ This looked nice, and was a nod to the brocade trim of the CNAА higher doctorate.

²⁹ You may like to know, the lace would have been oak-leaf lace, and silver not black. For the use of lace on undress gowns see Tsua.



Fig. 3a. Academic Dress for Dummies: PhD/Professional Doctor (left), Postgraduate Diploma, Higher Doctor.

towards their degree to obtain a certificate, were they to request one? Should their gown reflect their standing? And did it then make sense to prescribe a different gown only for first year undergraduates?

Eventually we took a deep breath and applied the same principle to undergraduates as we had for doctors in undress: gowns were more likely to be worn if they were of a pattern ready to hand, and so all undergraduates of the University were permitted the black bachelors' gown³⁰ without a hood.

Hats were very straightforward. The only change was to replace the coloured cords on the doctors' bonnets with grey ones.

In the meantime, the Academic Board's regulatory framework group had determined that the University of Hertfordshire would confer awards using a similar protocol³¹ to the CNAAs.

30 I.e. the [b4]. The rejected alternative we considered was to give undergraduates the [b1]: short gowns for undergraduates are a relatively recent (mid-nineteenth century) innovation, *contra* the medieval statutes that required them still to be ankle length.

31 The qualification is conferred by administrative action within the Registry, and is effective from the date on which the candidate satisfies the Board of Examiners. This was also in essence the protocol used by the University of London.



Fig. 3b. Postgraduate Master, Higher Doctor, Bachelor, PhD/Professional Doctor.

This decision meant that our awards ceremonies would continue to be presentations of graduates and diplomates to the Academic Board, rather than being the point of conferment.³² The only exception to this is honorary awards, which are actually conferred in the course of the ceremony. This comes about because at the University of Hertfordshire honorary degrees such as the HonDSc are, for regulatory reasons, genuinely different awards from examined higher doctorates such as the DSc, and are conferred by a joint act of the Corporation of the University and the Academic Board, rather than upon the sole authority of the Academic Board. Our honorary degrees could therefore, in principle, have different academic dress to the corresponding examined degrees, a point to which we return.

That matter being settled, we could then turn to consider a deceptively profound question: who would be entitled to wear our robes?

As mentioned before, the University would for some years continue to present at our awards ceremonies students who gained their qualification from a different awarding authority, such as BTEC, as a result of study at the University. We were clear that we wanted

³² This protocol had the side advantage that our students obtained their qualifications immediately, and did not need to wait for the ceremony before they could describe themselves to potential employers as graduates.

everybody who was being presented to the Academic Board to be wearing our academic dress, to symbolise their new standing within the University of Hertfordshire, regardless of who the awarding authority was.

We also wished to allow our academic dress retrospectively to those who had gained a qualification as a result of study at the Polytechnic or the Technical College, and who were thereby members of the alumni association of the University. They would also be entitled to wear the academic dress of the nearest equivalent award of the University of Hertfordshire, regardless of the awarding institution for their qualification.

The final group on which we desired to confer rights to our academic dress were the University staff. Like most modern universities, the University of Hertfordshire encourages members of staff who hold their degree from elsewhere to wear the academic dress of their alma mater at the University of Hertfordshire's ceremonies. However, academic dress for institutions outside the United Kingdom can be difficult to obtain, especially at short notice, and some universities, for example on the continent, do not prescribe academic dress for their graduates.

Accordingly, we decided to permit members of our staff to wear, as an alternative, the academic dress of the University of Hertfordshire corresponding to the nearest equivalent qualification to their own.³³

Finally, the senior officers of the University had special dress prescribed for them. Here our objective was to follow tradition, but be fairly understated about it. For the Chancellor and Pro Chancellor (the latter being *ex officio* the Chair of the Corporation of the University) we adopted the standard lay pattern³⁴ gown, made in royal blue³⁵ Chelmsford pattern damask trimmed with silver oak leaf³⁶ lace round the facings and the flap collar, the arm holes, and across the bottom of the sleeves. The Chancellor's gown has the addition of four inverted (point up) chevrons of lace on each sleeve. The Secretary and Registrar, who is Clerk to the Corporation, wears the same gown and silver trim as the Pro Chancellor, but made in plain dark blue.

The senior academic officers of the University, the Vice-Chancellor and their Deputy, wear lay gowns in the same pattern and trim as the Chancellor and Pro Chancellor respectively, but in dark blue with gold oak leaf lace. The Vice-Chancellor's robe is Tudor Rose pattern damask, and the Deputy's robe is plain. Fellows of the University wear a lay pattern gown made of grey cloth, with flap collar and facings of purple cloth, and trimmed with purple cloth on the armholes and white St Aidan damask on the outside of the facings.

33 The ancient universities (Oxford, Cambridge, and Trinity College Dublin) achieve this by a process called incorporation, which involves actually conferring their own degree on the relevant staff member, although see also <www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/199664/MA-Status.pdf> [retrieved 28 March 2021]. Our procedure (more common generally in the British Commonwealth) is to treat the staff member as if they held our degree for the purpose of their standing under the University regulations. In technical terms, our practice is *ad eundem statum*, rather than *ad eundem gradum*. See Dickson for more on these issues.

34 [d4] without the wings over the sleeves.

35 The Pro Chancellor's gown remained a conventional royal blue, but in 2005 the Chancellor's gown changed to purple Chelmsford damask with silver trim. The liturgists among you will recognize the Advent array.

36 The oak leaf pattern was picked to evoke the Hatfield Oak, which also features on the University Achievement of Arms.



Fig. 4. Philip Waters, HonDLitt, with the Vice-Chancellor Professor Quintin McKellar.

Shortly before the first ceremonies were held, Dr George Shaw (who was in the process of preparing the second edition of his book) wrote to us expressing his dissatisfaction with a number of elements of our original scheme. He particularly disliked the fact that members of staff were allowed to wear the dress of degrees they did not hold;³⁷ that undergraduates appeared gowned as graduates;³⁸ that doctors in undress were not distinguished from masters;³⁹ that the higher doctorate hood had the same colours as the hood for bachelors;⁴⁰ and that the MPhil had the same hood as the PhD⁴¹ which meant that the two degrees could not be distinguished by a hood worn over a surplice or an undress gown.

³⁷ Although, as pointed out earlier, Oxford University also did this.

³⁸ Although Liverpool University already followed this practice, as did scholars at Trinity College Dublin.

³⁹ George, unaware of the detail of our deliberations, suggested a row of black Birmingham lace above the armhole. Our reply to him rather optimistically states ‘we may revise this decision if there is persistent demand from our alumni’.

⁴⁰ To be fair, the same is true for the PhD and MLitt hoods at Cambridge University.

⁴¹ Most masters’ degrees require one year of additional study beyond that required for a bachelor; the MPhil is a research degree, like the PhD, and takes two years.

George's first three objections ran hard up against the principles underlying the decisions that we had taken, and we stood firm. Although George felt that we were departing from established practice, our intention was never so much to copy what other British universities happened to be doing at the moment. Rather, it was to rummage around in the same pool of tradition from which they had drawn their designs and practices, and to pull out something that suited our, perhaps slightly different, mission.

However, George's final two objections placed him upon very solid ground. Although it was too late to change things for the first sets of ceremonies, one of which Drs George and Mary Shaw were kind enough to attend as guests of the Academic Board, we made some adjustments later on. The colours on the MPhil hood became the purple watered silk of a masters' degree faced with the dark red watered silk of a research doctorate,⁴² and the higher doctorate hood became lined with purple watered silk and faced with a wide strip of white brocade, thus bringing both doctoral hoods into line with the colour and trim of the corresponding robes.⁴³

The first ceremonies were held in 1992 on the original College Lane site, in the Great Hall,⁴⁴ at that time the largest room in the University. In 1994 the ceremonies moved to the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Alban, and since then the academic procession progresses along the longest nave in England. At the beginning of 1992 the Polytechnic had around 5,000 students; ten years later that number had increased through mergers and expansion to over 21,000. In parallel with the increase in students, the variety of degrees and diplomas offered has also greatly enlarged. Nevertheless, apart from the small changes already indicated, the University's scheme of academic dress did not require adaptation, and remained popular with all concerned for nearly thirty years.⁴⁵

Do we have any regrets? Is there anything we wish had turned out differently? Well, it would have been pretty, and historically appropriate, for the examined higher doctorates to be trimmed with rose pink, rather than white. Pink damask was available in the appropriate shade and pattern but alas, pink was not a corporate colour. But in 2005 the University's bus company unveiled its new corporate livery: purple and pink.

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42 Thus placing the colours the opposite way around to the PhD hood.

43 Further information (including pictures) can be found in Christianson, where the Regulations (as they stood in 2006) are reproduced in full on p. 26.

44 Renamed the Prince Edward Hall in 1993.

45 In 2020 the University appointed new robemakers, and this resulted in some changes coming into effect from September of that year. The new robemaker is H. Tempest Ltd, and the University's current academic dress regulations are set out in version 4.0 of UPR AS01: <www.herts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/230540/AS01-Academic-Dress.pdf> [retrieved 28 March 2021]. You may like to see if you can spot all the changes from the scheme described here.

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