

COUNCIL (STRATEGY MEETING)

Open Minutes

Of the meeting held on Tuesday, 02 June 2020 via Microsoft Teams.

Present: Michael Hipkins (Independent [Chair]), Irene Kirkman (Independent [Deputy Chair]), Joanna Boardman (Elected PSE representative), Nick Braisby (Vice-Chancellor), Andy Cole (Independent), Anna Crabtree (Independent), Annet Gamell (Independent), John Hathaway (Senate Nominee), Florin Ioras (Senate Nominee), Maggie James (Independent), Tim Marshall (Co-opted), Ken McCrea (Co-opted), Anthony Murphy (Independent), Cheryl Pitt (Elected academic representative), Susan Rosser (Independent), John Smith (Independent), Supriya Sobti (Independent), Tao Warburton (Students' Union President)

In attendance: Alexandra Bode-Tunji (Director of Human Resources), Gavin Brooks (Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor), Rachel Cragg (Interim Pro Vice-Chancellor: Education & Digital), Ellie Smith (Academic Registrar & Secretary), Trevor Gabriele (Director of Finance), Marcus Wood (Minute Secretary)

Apologies: Bob Shennan (Independent), Megan Staples (Student representative)

Welcome / Chair's Comments

20.57 The Chair welcomed members to the meeting which was being held virtually due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and lockdown restrictions. Thanks were conveyed to the Secretariat for setting up the video conferencing arrangements. The Chair also welcomed the newly appointed Director of Finance to his first Council meeting. It was noted that the meeting would focus on strategic items.

20.58 Standard business items, including approval of minutes and updating of actions would be considered at the Council Business meeting in July.

Chair's Comments

20.59 The Chair noted the substantial levels of operational work undertaken since the previous meeting due to the pandemic to ensure continued operation of the University through online delivery of teaching. The University was well placed in respect of the pandemic and its repercussions as Bucks was not as reliant on overseas student fee income as other HE providers.

Declarations of conflicts of interest

20.60 No conflicts of interest were declared.

Vice-Chancellor's Report (COU20-12)

20.61 Council considered the Vice-Chancellor's report which covered:

- University updates including in particular: Covid-19 and its impact on student recruitment and finances
- Sector updates, including a recent UUK request to Government for financial support, positive moves from the OfS to reduce the regulatory burden; and ongoing political uncertainty
- Partner meetings attended
- Positive developments within the University since the previous report

20.62 Further updates were provided to the meeting:

- Revised proposals on temporary student number controls for 2020/21 were beneficial as they now took into account providers' forecasts. However, these would still lead to a shortfall of 1200 students which, although manageable, would require discussion with partners
- Discussions have been continuing with the OfS regarding:
 - Advice over the use of unconditional offers which had caused confusion across the sector. The University continued to highlight issues around entry via portfolio used in many programmes
 - The proposal to introduce a new, broad condition of registration to be applied retrospectively from 12 March 2020. Although time-limited, this could ultimately lead to provider deregistration
- A meeting has now been arranged with the Minister for Higher Education for June to discuss the crisis within the higher education sector caused by coronavirus and its likely long-lasting effect. Areas for particular discussion would include SNC arrangements, eligibility for additional student numbers and the impact on widening access, and penalties for exceeding controls, as well as the need for clear leadership and consistent messaging from the government

20.63 In discussion Council further noted the following:

- The importance of Clearing for student recruitment, as well as the February mid-year intake which might see higher numbers of students deferring from September
- Partner notice periods and their contractual requirements to support students through to completion ('teach out' arrangements) which might take 2-3 years
- The need to ensure that the University's size is properly reflected in the reporting of partner income as gross rather than net income
- Strong levels of support for the UTC regionally arguing against any closure
- Open and mature conversations with the Students' Union over grant contribution levels, including the need to mitigate damage

Update on coronavirus

Actions taken to date

- 20.64 Council noted actions taken to date, including:
- a. Establishment of a Strategic Major Incident Group chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor responsible for strategic oversight of, and direction for, the University's response to all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis.
 - b. Establishment of workstreams reporting to in to SMIG covering Operational (COG), Educational (CEG), and Health Education (HEARG) matters
 - c. The move to delivery of all teaching via online learning and closure of campuses to all but essential access
 - d. The request for all but essential staff to work from home and the furloughing of roles where staff could not work and there was a loss of income
 - e. The release of students from University accommodation contracts when requested among other financial support mechanisms for students
 - f. Moves to support students during restrictions, including the approval by Senate of a *No Detriment Policy* to ensure that no students were disadvantaged by the change to remote assessment
- 20.65 It was noted that throughout restrictions there have been regular communications to both staff and students from the Vice-Chancellor and other UET members. UET has also been mindful of mental health issues and other challenges of remote working. Staff and students have been surveyed to identify issues and areas for improvement. Survey results and anecdotal feedback indicate that overall morale appears high. A second student survey would be undertaken shortly to provide comparison.

Resumption Plans

- 20.66 The Vice-Chancellor confirmed the University's current intention to resume campus-based teaching in September, albeit dependent on government and Public Health advice and guidance.
- 20.67 It was intended as much as possible to replicate the typical student experience. However, some restrictions would remain in place and it was anticipated that the University would be working to 20% of current capacity due to social distancing requirements.
- 20.68 The University is working to articulate its offer for 2020/21, including arrangements for accommodation (completed), learning and teaching, and the physical environment. Confidence was expressed that the University will be able to offer a package for all students, including good quality online teaching where necessary.
- 20.69 The University anticipates a two-phased return:
- Phase One in mid-late June will see the resumption of essential business activities, including the University's on-site tenants. During this phase there will be testing of systems in place to support social distancing, cleaning, and wayfaring on all campuses.
 - Phase Two in September will see the resumption of all activities on campus
- 20.70 It was confirmed that the University continues to monitor advice from the sector, government, OfS and UUK closely, including guidance for vulnerable staff. Employee guidelines are being prepared to support a return to campus while observing social

distancing requirements. HR is also developing a *Working from home* policy in consultation with Trade Union colleagues to support staff individual preferences while ensuring a focus on core business needs and productivity. Meanwhile, a JISC toolkit is being used to upskill all academics for online pedagogy to ensure that where remote learning is still required it is of the expected standard.

Financial impact

20.71 It was reported that prior to the outbreak the University was on track to deliver an annual surplus with a healthy cash balance. Covid-19 has affected this and the University is now forecasting a small deficit.

- Scenario planning is being based on low / medium / and high risk scenarios drawing on data from <£100m turnover Universities for comparison
- Cost management controls are in place especially around staffing, however given recent transformation activities there is little appetite for further cost reductions
- Priority is to protecting the strong cash position. A daily cash report is being received which shows a strong year on year comparison.

20.72 There is a further need for discussion around the reporting of partnership income. Currently, the net rather than gross figure is reported which understates both the size and complexity of partnership activity and does not accurately reflect the University which might be important in protecting the position of the University going forward.

20.73 The sale of Missenden Abbey is on hold due to Covid-19 and receipt of a revised, less favourable offer. Further discussions will be held at the forthcoming Missenden Board. All options remain on the table.

Other

20.74 Council recognised that a positive impact of the outbreak had been the reduction in greenhouse gases into the environment. The University itself had been using less energy and water during lockdown, while reliance on paper had disappeared overnight. The positive impact on the environment will be reviewed so as not to lose any benefits. This might include greater flexibility around working practices in addition to previous announcements about use of software to reduce printing.

20.75 Council noted the supportive and positive approach adopted by staff at all levels of the University and wished their thanks to be conveyed to them. Council paid particular tribute to the work of:

- The Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Gavin Brooks, for managing the University's overall response
- The work of the University's Communications Team, led by Louise Harvey, ensuring coherent and consistent messaging to staff and students
- Organisational resilience and estates planning by Phil Wood to support resumption of on campus delivery

Any Other Business

Other items were considered under Reserved Business

20.76 The Chair noted that it was the final meeting of Council for the outgoing Students' Union President and thanked her for her work on Council and for the University.

Date of next meeting

20.77 The next meeting of Council would be the Business meeting scheduled for 6 July 2020. Members were reminded that an extraordinary meeting had also been scheduled for 28 July to approve the 20/21 annual budget for the University.