



BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
NEW UNIVERSITY
EST. 1891

COUNCIL (BUSINESS MEETING)

Open Minutes of the meeting held on 7 October 2025 in the Brunel Engine Shed, High Wycombe

Present:

- Maggie Galliers (Independent [Chair of Council])
- Karen Satterford (Co-opted member [Deputy Chair of Council and Chair of Governance, People and Vice-Chancellor's Remuneration Committees]);
- Professor Damien Page (Vice-Chancellor);
- Brian Lewis (Independent [Chair of Audit Committee]);
- Dr Annet Gamell (Independent [Chair of Student Experience Committee])
- Shaun Crawford (Independent [Chair of Resources Committee]);
- Sadie Groom (Independent [Chair of Missenden Abbey Board]);
- Andy Cole (Independent);
- Marek Pruszewicz (Independent);
- Francine Goodrich (Independent);
- Adam Honor (Independent);
- Matthew Tong (Academic Representative);
- Andy Davies (PSE Representative);
- Jean Marc Amagoua (Students' Union President);
- Charles Miles (Student Co-opted Member)

In attendance

- Trevor Gabriele (Chief Finance Officer);
- Louise Harvey (Chief Impact Officer (Chief of Staff));
- Professor Sarah Williams (Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations) – Partnerships item only;
- Professor Paul Morgan (Pro Vice-Chancellor (Pedagogy and Practice) – Student Outcomes item only;
- Ashley Church (Director of Strategy, Transformation and Futures) – University Brand Strategy item only
- Dr Emma Tomsett (Clerk to Council and Head of Governance and Compliance);
- Nick Barthram (Founder & Strategy Partner, Firehaus) – University Brand Strategy item only
- Ian Bates (Firehaus) – University Brand Strategy item only

Apologies

- Jackie Westaway (Independent);
- Justin Sullivan (Independent);
- Charlotte Stewart (PSE Representative)
- Rachael Cornwall (Chief People Officer)

Welcome / Apologies

- 25.333 The Chair welcomed members to the meeting and noted the apologies outlined above. Council was advised that the Chair would be meeting with Independent Member Justin Sullivan shortly as he continued to send his apologies.
- 25.334 This was the first meeting of Council in the Brunel Engine Shed; members' feedback would be welcome.
- 25.335 A warm welcome was extended to the new student and staff members. It was noted that Council was still awaiting the nomination of the Senate Representative to complete its membership.
- 25.336 The Chair advised Council that she had recently met with the Students' Union (SU) Sabbatical Officers for 2025-26 and was pleased to report that they had strongly agreed that they felt heard by the University and that they had a voice, which was very different from what the Chair had heard from previous Officers. The Chair complimented the team on the outstanding Freshers' Fair. The SU President reported they had had over 1,000 students on campus for the Fair and that he had received reports that enrolment was very busy.
- 25.337 The Chair reminded Council that they had previously received the welcome news that the outcome of the Office for Students' (OfS) investigation into Business and Management was that the OfS would not take any regulatory action against BNU despite having concluded that there had been a historical breach of the B2 Condition of Registration, and also noted that a recent WonkHE article had stated that BNU had been proactive throughout. The Vice-Chancellor would shortly inform Council of further positive news from the OfS. It was a tribute to the Vice-Chancellor and the University Strategy Group (USG) that BNU was achieving such positive outcomes from the OfS and that the media narrative was turning, evidenced by some recent positive pieces in *The Times Higher Education*. Although the Chair and members of the USG had been asked to meet with the OfS later in the week, the letter from the OfS requesting the meeting had thanked the University for its recent constructive approach.

Declaration of conflicts of interest

- 25.338 The Chair of Student Experience Committee declared a conflict of interest in relation to the sale of Missenden Abbey as she socialised with members of the Walled Garden charity.

Minutes of the previous meeting

- 25.339 The Open Minutes of the meeting on 8 July 2025 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting subject to the amendment of the wording for the update on action 25.114.

Action: Clerk to Council and Head of Governance and Compliance

Matters Arising / Status of Actions

- 25.340 Council noted the status of the actions as outlined on the action sheet.
- 25.341 The Chair thanked members for their feedback on the length of Council's meetings. It was agreed that these would remain as 2.5 hours, but the Chair reserved the right to extend the meeting if the agenda was full.

Chair's Actions

- 25.342 Council noted the chair's actions taken to approve *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* as a new partner (10 July 2025) and to approve the updated Freedom of Speech Code of Practice (31 July 2025).
- 25.343 It was agreed that the Clerk to Council would provide a report upon the conditions set by Council for *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* at Council's meeting on 28 May; how these had been

completed; and how many members of Council had approved or not approved *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* as a partner following July's meeting.

Action: Clerk to Council and Head of Governance and Compliance

Vice-Chancellor's Report

25.344 Council received the report from the Vice-Chancellor who highlighted the following points:

- a) the University had recently been informed by the OfS that following their investigation into *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]*, who BNU had now terminated as a partner due to concerns at the University that were similar to those about *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]*, the OfS had found BNU had historically breached Conditions B2 and B4 but again would not take any regulatory action against the University. The Vice-Chancellor noted that every other university who had been found to have breached conditions by the OfS had been fined. The University of Greater Manchester also partnered with *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]*, but BNU did not know their outcome from the OfS yet. The Chief Impact Officer added that the OfS had given BNU until the end of October to make representations, but none would be made so communications would come out shortly
- b) USG suspected that the OfS would also conclude that there had been a historical breach of conditions in relation to the *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* and would have to await the outcome if that was the case
- c) BNU would meet its budget recruitment target. It was awaiting *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* and a few other's numbers, but USG was continuing to be very prudent about the budget
- d) bids for Missenden Abbey would be received by Wednesday, and any preferred bids would come to Council to make a final decision on a possible sale. There had been over 100 interested parties. There was still some concern from one local resident due to a rumour that the Abbey would be turned into an asylum seeker's hotel, but the University had responded directly to the resident. The Chair of Missenden Abbey Board added that she had been asked about this whilst at a recent conference in Spain. In response to a query about the Walled Garden charity, Council was advised that the University met with the charity monthly and, as the charity was aware, had asked all purchasers to build into their plans that they would continue to be accommodated on the site. The Chair added that the aim was to leave the charity in situ, but if this was not possible the University would help them relocate. It was agreed that the Clerk to Council would discuss the required actions of the Missenden Abbey Limited Board with the Chair of the Board after the meeting. Legal advice taken by the University had indicated that there was no legal requirement that the Board approved the sale of the Abbey as Missenden Abbey Limited did not hold a lease from the University for the site

Action: Clerk to Council and Head of Governance and Compliance

25.345 The Chair informed Council that she had advised the Vice-Chancellor at a recent one-to-one that while she was pleased BNU would reach its budget target for September 2025, she wanted more Home full-time undergraduate students recruited. The Vice-Chancellor had agreed. The Chair's belief was that this would be achieved: the Big Deal was a powerful recruitment tool, especially with parents, and the University's reputation would become stronger and the work around the University's brand would also have an impact. Nonetheless, Council felt some disappointment around Home recruitment, while acknowledging this was partly due to Russell Group universities lowering their tariffs. The Vice-Chancellor commented that some universities with a standard offer of 3 As had reduced it to 3 Cs during Clearing, but BNU had also neglected its Home student recruitment, brand and marketing over the past few years. The new team led by the Chief Impact Officer, which would include a new Director of Brand and

Marketing, would help rectify this situation. Council was advised that there had been 100 applicants from multiple sectors for the new Director role.

25.346 Council congratulated the University on its two nominations in *The Times Higher Education* (THE) Awards for its estate (the High Wycombe development) and its inclusive staff recruitment practices. Council noted that BNU's inclusive practices were sector-leading and had narrowed recruitment gaps. The THE had recognised this.

25.347 In response to comments and queries from Council, the Vice-Chancellor commented that

- a) Council's comments about the importance of involving parents in recruitment, for instance by inviting them to visit BNU, were valuable and aligned with the type of activity BNU should undertake. Parents' main concerns were finance and wellbeing. BNU offered better wellbeing and financial support than most providers, but this was not visible in its marketing
- b) increasing BNU's accommodation capacity was not as urgent as Council had previously been advised: BNU would not fill the 1,200 additional rooms Council had previously been told BNU needed. The acquisition of Thame House had added 140 rooms which would be rented on short-term leases. Regarding Hughenden Student Village, BNU was no longer working with them the previous developer BNU had been engaging with. The site was good, but the University needed to develop it in the right way. The Chief Finance Officer (CFO) added that Alexandra House was also being developed and included twin rooms which was a different offer alongside Thame House, and BNU was taking 14 rooms to market as a trial now. Once the University understood the appeal and impact of this offer and aligned it with what the University accommodation team needed, the University would revisit what it would do at Hughenden. Council noted that sharing rooms could halve students' accommodation costs.

25.348 The Vice-Chancellor requested Council's views on BNU's membership of sector interest groups. BNU was a member of Universities UK and GuildHE. GuildHE was a mission group for small and specialist institutions who at the beginning of 2025 had admitted *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* as a new member, and they also already included *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]*. The Vice-Chancellor was considering joining MillionPlus who represented vocational, post-92, medium and large universities. BNU was medium sized and MillionPlus therefore seemed a better fit for BNU. It was noted that the University did not have to be a member of any mission group, although it was worth being involved with Universities UK.

25.349 Council recognised that membership of these groups was the Vice-Chancellor's decision. In response to queries from Council, the Vice-Chancellor explained that all the groups lobbied government, with limited impact, although it was a means to discover the government's current views on higher education. They also ran some good research groups in some instances. They were useful for networking, for example to consider how providers could share back-office services. There would be no negative impact from withdrawing from GuildHE. One member queried if BNU could join University Alliance; the Vice-Chancellor would have meetings with all potential groups but felt that MillionPlus was likely to be the right group.

25.350 The Chair thanked the Vice-Chancellor for the written update he had provided to Council in September.

OfS and Partnerships Update

25.351 Council received an update from the Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations) (PVC) on the University's partnerships arrangements which included the University's new Partnership Improvement Strategy; New Partnerships Conditions Log; the *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* exit strategy; and a report outlining the OfS's BNU – *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* 2023-24 student data audit. Council's attention was drawn to the following key points:

- a) the teaching sites in Nottingham and Oxford for *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* students who had transferred to BNU were now open. All former *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* students who were considered genuine and wanted to remain with BNU had now transferred. BNU had originally had 2,400 *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* students, and around 300 students had transferred to BNU. Some had chosen not to continue due to the changes. BNU was now also offering its own Digital Marketing and Accounting and Finance courses at Nottingham. *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* was no longer a partner organisation, but was disputing the financial settlement as BNU had deducted the costs of the transfer as it was entitled to do under clause 23.1 of the contract. The University's lawyers were confident that there was no basis to *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* claim
- b) Council was aware that BNU had already terminated its partnership with *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* in Sri Lanka. BNU was now also going to terminate the *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]*, *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* sister company based in the United Arab Emirates, for material breach due to two major issues BNU had uncovered at the end of September. *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* had tried to claim £1.5m compensation from BNU because they argued BNU had prevented them enrolling a cohort; at the same time *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* had attempted to enrol a cohort of the same size. BNU's *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* partner tutor had travelled to Dubai to help invigilate an exam that *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* had assured BNU would be held on 6 September but found their campus closed. It had been closed by the Dubai authorities at the end of July, but *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* had not told BNU. *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* had also admitted that their recent cohort was being taught in Sri Lanka with *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* and not with *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]*. BNU was now investigating whether it could also terminate *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* for a material breach which would end the partnership immediately. This would require BNU to teach out the course which would be done by transferring it online. The PVC had already discussed this with the Law team
- c) no new partners were going through the due diligence process at the moment as BNU had paused development of any new partners. Council had approved 7 new partners during the summer, although two of them would not have any intakes until September 2026. The other five would start programme delivery shortly and BNU had created a bespoke site for them with all teaching and contractual materials, admissions procedures, and Registry procedures accessible at any time to support them. The site contained videos and webinars. BNU was also holding a bespoke new partner induction day in November which had already been delivered to BNU's partner in Pakistan.
- d) *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* Pakistan already had Islamabad and Karachi sites approved by BNU for teaching. They had now signed an agreement with the local development agency Ravi Urban Development Agency (RUDA) to build a bespoke campus for them in Lahore by October 2027 and they wanted to deliver BNU courses from that site. It was an opportunity for BNU as BNU could tell them what needed to be on the site. It would also be beneficial for BNU's strategic aim of supporting the local community, and would make BNU less dependent on partners who delivered business courses
- e) the OfS had completed an initial audit on data relating to 160 BNU students taught at *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* in 2023-24, but BNU did not know what their next actions would be. The auditors had found issues relating to admissions, attendance monitoring and discrepancies between the data held by *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* and by BNU. BNU held the correct dataset for student loan purposes, which meant *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* data appeared to be incorrect for some reason. The OfS had told BNU they would be conducting the investigation very differently if BNU had not already terminated *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* so the PVC believed the OfS would look at different data at BNU than they did at *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]*.

25.352 Council held a robust discussion of the update. The PVC clarified that

- a) there were lessons that could be learned from the *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* / *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* situation in relation to due diligence. The Academic Registry had been raising concerns about *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]*, but the former Head of Partnerships had not addressed them. Council was never told or warned of concerns and *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* had usually been RAG-rated as green on the Partnerships Risk Register. Members of the former University Executive Team had not been made aware of the issues
- b) KPMG had completed a report on the new *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* campus in Pakistan for BNU which offered assurance around the funding available to build it: RUDA was building a new city in Lahore and wanted it to contain several universities. The PVC would share the report with Council

Action: Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations) / Clerk to Council and Head of Governance and Compliance

- c) *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* new campus would include accommodation which would potentially give more Pakistani women the opportunity to go to university. There was a significant Pakistani community from the Lahore region in High Wycombe and the *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* partnership was a valuable way of connecting the local BNU community with BNU's international community. It was a good demonstration of how BNU now wanted to make impact, rather than only undertaking partnerships activities for income
- d) the new Partner Improvement Strategy would help ensure BNU delivered better transnational education (TNE)
- e) if the two BNU courses offered in Nottingham, which were weekend courses for mature students, were a success BNU could consider offering more courses outside its current campuses
- f) there was a 2–3-year lag on continuation and completion data which would continue to show the negative impact of some of BNU's previous partners, but BNU's dataset for attendance monitoring should now reveal much more quickly if there were issues with partners. Some students would show as not completed, but some would show that they had completed with exit awards rather than the full award
- g) the University was investigating extending the current six-month contract for support services staff at Nottingham and Oxford and determining the nature of the ongoing support offer. The same would apply with the SU services offered at those sites.

25.353 In response to two members' concern about the risks of being involved with overseas partners, with one noting that the PVC's paper detailed recent overseas partnerships that had not succeeded, the PVC acknowledged it was a risk but noted that TNE was very well established in the UK: other universities had branch campuses overseas, while BNU was only establishing a couple of sites. The key factor in ensuring the partnership was successful would be keeping in close contact with *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* so BNU staff would visit frequently and work closely with *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* staff. BNU's aim was for the partnership to have a societal impact. *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* were also experts in delivering online distance learning courses as they delivered courses for girls in remote areas of Pakistan who could not travel in order to undertake further study so *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* was advising BNU about what its online offer could be as *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* staff had pedagogical skills in this area.

25.354 A Council member who had formerly been a governor at Oxford Brookes University advised Council that Oxford Brookes delivered a lot of TNE and had not had any reputational issues while he was a governor; the member noted BNU was approaching TNE cautiously and was a long way behind other providers.

- 25.355 In response to a query regarding the jurisdiction of the OfS, the PVC commented that the OfS could not visit TNE partners to investigate them, but the B Conditions of Registration still applied as the partners offered BNU's awards. The University needed to ensure academic quality and would still have to work with TNE partners on quality. The jurisdiction of the other Conditions was less clear: some of the E Conditions might not apply, and the government had stated that the E6 Condition on the prevention of harassment and sexual misconduct did not apply. Council was assured that the OfS had been informed about the new partners and was kept regularly informed about all TNE and UK partner activity.
- 25.356 One member queried how BNU would ensure staff in Pakistan were safe during visits. The PVC advised that she had visited three times in 12 months and had felt safe as the partner arranged everything, and had never gone anywhere alone. Staff only stayed in Western-company hotels and only travelled from the hotel to the locations they needed to. They did not travel outside cities or to areas considered risky. Risk assessments were completed and sent to Zurich, the University's travel insurance provider: if Zurich would not cover it the staff would not go on the visit. The Council member asked to understand how the risk assessment was carried out. He had been travelling to Pakistan for two decades and was concerned that travel advice came from the partner as the situation could change rapidly. The PVC asked to meet with him as his advice would be invaluable.

Partner Improvement Strategy

- 25.357 Council received the strategy which had been written by a member of staff who was also an Ofsted and OfS inspector. It detailed how partners were managed and supported. It would enable BNU to better manage risk and to clearly identify partners in need of greater levels of support and intervention. If a partner was deemed to have reached tier 2 it would trigger a step-in and priority improvement planning. The University Collaborations Committee would monitor this: if a partner was RAG-rated amber and deemed at risk of moving through the tiers to tier 2, it would be flagged early on, and BNU would send a team in to improve them. The Head of Partner Quality Improvement would lead a bespoke compliance team who BNU could deploy when a partner seemed to be going offtrack.
- 25.358 In response to queries, the PVC advised that the strategy was being fed into the University's Anywhere platform project led by the Transformation team and that it was sector leading. It drew on Ofsted improvement practices for schools. The Deputy Chair noted it needed to be tested and kept under review. The PVC confirmed it would be kept under review and had also been submitted to the OfS and the Department for Education (DfE) who would be informed about its efficacy as part of BNU's demonstration of its commitment to improvement.

Partnership Quality Framework

- 25.359 Council considered an amendment to paragraph 72 of the Framework which outlined the controls set by BNU around partners' use of recruitment agents, which the previous iteration of the Framework had prohibited.
- 25.360 Council was advised that BNU had discussed the use of recruitment agents with the DfE, but they had not yet given a definitive ruling on the issue. BNU had clauses in its partner contracts that stated if partners were going to use agents BNU must approve those agents and would now enforce that clause.
- 25.361 In response to a query from the Chair, the Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations) confirmed that she could categorically assure Council that the amendment to allow the use of agents did not break the regulator's or the DfE's rules and guidance. If BNU was told by the OfS or DfE that the use of agents was prohibited, the Framework would be updated again to reflect this.

25.362 Council approved the amendment subject to the University checking the OfS's position on the use of agents. If the OfS did not provide a response, the amendment would be taken forward but kept under review.

Action: Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations)

25.363 The Chair queried if the recent report on BNU's partnership arrangements by the University's internal auditors had been considered by Audit Committee. It was confirmed that Audit Committee had reviewed the report and had requested an update on progress in meeting the report's recommendations at its meeting in November.

Recruitment Trends

25.364 Council considered a presentation on recruitment trends for 2025-26. The Director of Marketing and Student Recruitment advised Council that all data was for BNU-taught programmes only, excluding partners and Magna Carta College provision. BNU had almost achieved its Home full-time undergraduate (FTUG) budget target and had exceeded other targets apart from for part-time postgraduate provision. BNU had more than doubled its number of international students from 315 to 652, of whom 80% had already enrolled which was far ahead of the previous enrolment rate for the September intake. BNU had therefore passed the Home Office's new enhanced Basic Compliance Assessment requirements. The majority of students were young, although Home FTUG recruitment was struggling due to Russell Group universities' actions during Clearing, but the extent of the issue was masked by International recruitment.

25.365 It was a varied picture regarding whether FTUG or full-time postgraduate recruitment had been better in each College. Engineering had recruited well, as had Postgraduate Nursing and Hospitality.

25.366 Nationally, it had been a record A Level results year, which had led to a record number of acceptances of offer holders on Results day, and acceptance of offer holders at higher tariff universities. 17,000 students had been placed in the first twenty-four hours of Clearing which was also a record.

25.367 The sector had seen growth in Engineering, Maths and Law as well as significant growth in China. The mature student market continued to decline which BNU might want to consider when developing new courses.

25.368 In response to queries the Director of Marketing and Student Recruitment and the Head of Admissions clarified that

- a) International student numbers had risen from 315 to 652, while Home student numbers had fallen by 120 acceptances
- b) the data presented involved a like-for-like comparison with September 2024 as 2024 had been the first time BNU had held enrolment in person since the Covid-19 pandemic
- c) while areas like Performing Arts were declining, recruitment for Computing had helped boost the size of the College of the Creative Arts, Technology and Engineering
- d) while the national trend for international recruitment was a 3% increase BNU had seen a 400% rise as BNU was progressing from a low base: six years ago, BNU had 38 international students and it now predicted it would have 1,500 students in 2025-26. UCAS did not have many international applications coming through it
- e) every International student was interviewed in person on Teams in English and each year the English standard was improving. BNU also now had more postgraduate International students who had a better standard of English. Students were required to achieve an IELTS score of six for undergraduate programmes. Not every student took an IELTS test as they could obtain a waiver from BNU if they held another English qualification that BNU accepted, but the University benchmarked every qualification it

accepted to make sure it was the equivalent of a six in IELTS. BNU was also reviewing the English qualifications it would accept

- f) there were still several courses that did not offer placements. Nursing was very popular because students got placements, and students could see it would be a career
- g) providers could expect a 20% conversion rate of applicants to enrolled students if they were doing well as they were only 1 of 5 options applicants could choose. BNU did not see where applicants ranked it: BNU might be their insurance choice which would mean they might not come to BNU. The focus needed to be on conversion in order to change this. If an applicant received an offer from a Russell Group university, parents and schools would encourage them to go to that provider. Anecdotal reports heard by Council that local schools advised their students not to apply to BNU as they could get always get in through Clearing were accurate.

25.369 The Academic Member informed Council that he had seen improvements in English language amongst International students over the years since he joined BNU. The Professional Services Member agreed. The Academic Member suggested BNU could ask all international students to take an IELTS test to save the resource spent on interviewing them.

25.370 The Student Member commented that International student numbers doubling was very encouraging but queried how this would affect teaching and support services for them, and integrating them as there could be a divide between Home and International students. The Vice-Chancellor responded that BNU had underinvested in support for International students in the past, but it was now part of budget planning: there would be additional professional services staff to support International students. The Learning Enhancement and Academic Practice team would also help as a different type of pedagogy was needed for International students. The USG would keep this area under review.

Student Outcomes

25.371 Council received a report that outlined the latest student outcomes published by the Office for Students. These were indicators of academic performance used for regulatory purposes, specifically the OfS Condition of Registration B3. The National Student Survey (NSS) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) results and recent league table outcomes were also summarised. The Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) (Pedagogy and Practice) informed Council that BNU was progressing well in terms of improvements and now had the deepest understanding of that improvement and how it could be achieved since the PVC had joined BNU. The Vice-Chancellor's focus on first attempt pass rates and average marks was the right focus.

25.372 For BNU-taught provision, BNU was above benchmark for all themes in the NSS apart from Learning Resources and one other, which aligned BNU with the criteria for a Teaching Excellence Framework Gold award, so the University just needed to keep working on further improvements. An area for future focus was Apprenticeships as this area had dropped below benchmark for BNU-taught students, but this could be easily addressed as they were a small group. In the PTES, BNU was above benchmark for all areas apart from Learning Resources.

25.373 For the B3 Condition, BNU had seen a 13% year-on-year improvement in continuation in the 2022-23 data, based on a one-off poor performance in 2021-22. It was on course to return to meeting the minimum regulatory threshold of 80%. BNU's forecast for the 2023-24 cohort indicated it was on the same track. BNU was above the minimum numeric threshold for most subjects and would undertake some rapid improvement work on subjects that were not. For completion, BNU was below threshold by 0.5%. For progression, BNU was well above the 60% threshold and sector average.

25.374 The League Tables highlight was that BNU had sustained its performance in *The Guardian*. In some others BNU did less well on degree attainment due to partner data being included, but *The Guardian* did not

include partner provision so was a better barometer for BNU taught provision. BNU-taught degree attainment was 75% but at partners it was 35%.

- 25.375 One member noted that Learning Resources seemed to be below threshold on a repeated basis. The member had just had a tour of the campus which showcased state of the art equipment, but queried if BNU was too focused on the most advanced resources. The Chair commented she often heard that projectors did not work. The PVC commented that Learning Resources was one area where improvements were slower. The NSS questions focused on IT and Library, so this had to be a focus for BNU. The PVC's experience of the NSS was that it was essential to talk to students about their library and IT experience. The USG had discussed communication with Digital and Technical Services – where there was poor feedback focus on those areas and the understanding of why there was a problem – and often found BNU had either not communicated available services well or had not acted on student feedback.
- 25.376 The Vice-Chancellor agreed that BNU had severely underinvested in learning resources historically. The University would spend the next year focusing on the campus. The PVC added that upgrading the Virtual Learning Environment to the most recent model was the most important step the University could take.
- 25.377 The Student Member added that it was not necessarily always that the learning resources were not there, but knowing what resources were available. Focusing on letting students know what they could access and how was important.
- 25.378 Council was advised that the NSS results for Apprenticeships would not have any immediate impact on BNU being able to recruit apprenticeships as it was a satisfaction indicator only.
- 25.379 The Chair welcomed the benchmark data, but asked that Council also received top quartile data so Council could know what BNU was aiming for. The PVC advised this was possible while noting that quartile performance might be helpful for league tables but comparisons of subject areas between universities was critical.
- 25.380 One member asked what 'good' would look like in terms of league table performance. The PVC welcomed Council's feedback on this as all the tables had different methodologies. The assumption might be that top quartile should be the aspiration, and BNU already was for some areas like assessment and feedback but was this the right focus. The Vice-Chancellor noted that BNU was a Widening Participation institution and lower tariff; it could raise its entry tariff, but he had seen that happen in other universities and it had severely damaged the institution.
- 25.381 One member asked which partners were doing worse than 35% in degree attainment. The PVC commented that most partners needed improvement: *[redacted: commercially sensitive information]* was at 19%. The PVC felt that the way the sector was heading there might be a separation between taught and partner provision, which the PVC suspected would fuel improvements.
- 25.382 The SU President queried what support would be provided to students as BNU expanded its placements into level 5 and 6. Council was advised that BNU was holding future-thinking groups about placements to get student feedback. On-course placements of 30-40 hours per week were not necessarily compatible with paid work. BNU was also planning to work with UniTemps to offer a professional job service for students offering more temporary and paid work, and also looking at other opportunities that were less disruptive to learning such as internal placements at BNU. The PVC felt that making placements part of teaching and learning was the way forward; payment would not be the focus. Another member commented that they had heard concerns about travel costs and travelling to placements. The PVC commented that the University might have to look at support such as bursaries for this, but would also look at in-house placements or virtual placements. Placements were a national challenge.

University Brand Strategy

- 25.383 Council considered the University's plans to develop a new brand strategy, working with brand transformation consultancy Firehaus. Firehaus was meeting with staff and students across the University to understand the differentiators that the University was not promoting enough.
- 25.384 Firehaus explained that they had completed a brand audit over the summer and were now at the end of exploratory focus groups held to listen and to understand how staff and students perceived studying and working at BNU. They would then run some student and national surveys to see how BNU was perceived. At end of October, Firehaus would propose a brand strategy narrative which would then come back to Council for consideration, before presenting a refined version in February 2026.
- 25.385 The Chair of Missenden Abbey Limited asked what 'brand' covered and whether this was a new name, a new logo or a new strapline; what the driver was and what the end goal was. The Chief Impact Officer confirmed the University would not be seeking to change its name or logo, but did want to identify its differentiators from other universities such as the Big Deal and how these were articulated in marketing and other materials. The University might refresh its colour palette, but nothing would be expensive. Firehaus added it was about refining down: there had been a lot of agreement about what BNU was in every focus group.
- 25.386 The Chief Impact Officer also advised Council that the new brand strategy would completely inform the University's new strategy. BNU needed to agree its purpose and what it did differently. Applicants for the new Director of Brand wanted to work with BNU on its differentiators.
- 25.387 Council then divided into two different groups to consider the following questions from which some of the following themes emerged:

Why do students choose BNU?

- being close to home and the Big Deal; facilities on courses; vocational aspects (entry into a job, not just a degree certificate, or an industry); support for students with disabilities was excellent; lower tariff; student potential was maximised – value added; financial support e.g. bursaries

What makes a real different to students' experience?

- BNU felt like a family – students could find belonging. BNU students might not have had linear lives, or a perfect start, but they felt and loved the sense of community.

What was it about the experience that was different – what made it a community?

- Being a smaller university; the attitude of staff, easy to communicate, easy to get help. Students felt like they belong and come from same background even if they have religious, ethnic differences. BNU did not need to work on the sense of belonging as it already had it but could use it as a selling point – a 'home away from home'. Inclusion – trying to have intercultural dialogue whether about faith, class etc. We're all in it together
- Local, small, friendly, supportive – High Wycombe was not a big city so you could get to know it and it felt safe and secure. It was a diverse area so diversity in the University was just accepted

What works well here and what holds you back as far as student experience is concerned?

- Most people in High Wycombe did not know there was a university in High Wycombe or what it offered, it was never described as a university town. The University was a mirror of the demographics in High Wycombe but never advertised that
- BNU allowed people to come back into academia after perhaps a bad experience / start somewhere else that enabled them to go into a profession

- BNU students were individuals and seen as individuals with something that added value to BNU – it offered a climbing frame of opportunity not a ladder of progression. Students were carers or parents; BNU should be proud it offered that sense of opportunity.
- BNU provided not just courses but a direction for people: students who were planning to come to university did not just look at the course but the experience they would have and where they could go after university, which should be a marketing focus
- BNU offered ‘life’ courses not just academic courses – an experience that allowed students to mature and grow as well.

What do you think BNU stands for today and how clearly is that communicated?

- Community: a chance to grow emotionally and be part of a family, but BNU was not good at articulating this

What do you believe makes BNU distinctive from other universities?

- The Big Deal (BD): it is a £1.6m subsidy from the University each year into the SU / students, but it was money well spent and could be marketed more. It marked BNU as unique. Students did not know about the BD until they enrol

What aspects of BNU culture should be built on to strengthen position and purpose?

- The family theme.
- It is a place where students will succeed. If BNU accepted them, it had a moral duty to do everything it could to get them to the next step in their lives
- BNU cares about your success

Is ‘family’ a problematic word from some people?

- It could be. ‘Home’ is another word but could again also be problematic.

Was there anything else about BNU culture or behaviours that was distinctive?

- BNU was not afraid to do things differently; it was not a traditional university
- The individual was unique and had strengths, and would be enabled to achieve their goals – they wouldn’t get in anywhere else in the first place

What do you need to let go of to move forward with more clarity and confidence? What would you do less of?

- BNU needed to be about great delivery for students and on research, not about things that look good but don’t produce outcomes for students.

25.388 Council was advised that it would receive a summary of the overall feedback, and what the overall brand narrative and vision would look like at its next meeting. The Chair noted that Council was being involved formatively and being kept up to speed. At its Away Day it would endorse the vision for the future,

KPMG contract extension

25.389 Council noted that Audit Committee had considered and recommended that BNU extended KPMG’s contract for a year while it tendered for new external auditors. Council approved the one-year contract extension for the 2025-26 audit.

Date of the next meeting

- 25.390 The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 2 December 2025. The meeting pack would be large, but the accounts would have been reviewed at several meetings prior to Council. The Chair apologised for the meeting having to be moved but she had a clashing event that could not be changed.
- 25.391 In response to a query about when the University would seek to appoint a new Chancellor, the Chair advised that this had been postponed until 2026 as having a Chancellor was not essential and the new vision needed to be refined.
- 25.392 It was clarified that the University had moved Graduation to September as it enabled BNU to graduate more students during the academic year in which they had completed their degree.
- 25.393 Council felt that the meeting had been more energised due to the cabaret layout and that the venue could be suitable for the Away Day. There were problems with the acoustics which occasionally made it difficult to hear sometimes. The Chair noted that the venue was an example of BNU doing something that worked for the civic realm, but the University might not make the same decision if it revisited it.