

**Minutes of the 324<sup>th</sup> COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2021 (by videoconference)**

PRESENT:	Dame Yve Buckland (Chair)	
	Professor Alec Cameron	Ranjit Dhindsa
	Dr Melanie Gibbs	Professor Gill Nicholls
	Dr Sue Noffke	Dr Rob Perrins
	Dr Vij Randeniya	Neil Scott
	Harry Sheppard	Professor Paul Topham
	Dr Jason Wouhra	Dr Mike Wright
APOLOGIES:	Dr Hannah Bartlett	Professor George Feiger
	Professor Anthony Hilton	Toby Lewis
IN ATTENDANCE:	Professor Ruth Ayres	Richard Billingham
	Professor Simon Green	Professor Sarah Hainsworth
	Saskia Loer Hansen	Gary Hughes
	Rachel McIntosh	Mark Smith
	Scott Trim	John Walter (Secretary)

**STUDENT PANEL**

**WELCOME**

20/108 RESOLVED:

To join the Pro-Chancellor in welcoming the following Aston students who formed a panel established by the President of the Students' Union to respond to questions and comments from Council members: Jawad Ahmad, Temitayo Bakare Akinbinu, Eleanor Barton, Ann Bennett, Paige Dawson, Lois Gaskell, Annas Mazhar, Maya Patel and Michael Pritchard.

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

20/109 NOTED:

The Pro-Chancellor reported that the Covid-19 pandemic had caused Aston, along with universities across the world, to shift rapidly to online teaching, learning, assessment and ways of working whilst dealing with a range of challenges in supporting the needs of students and staff. She invited the students to comment on their individual experiences over the last 12 months in terms of what they found had worked positively for them and of the specific challenges they had faced and how the University had responded to their needs. Each member of the student panel reported their experiences to Council and responded to Council member's comments and questions. Jawad Ahmad, SU Vice-President Education also gave a short presentation summarising feedback from some recent student focus groups to elicit their views on their experiences over the last 12 months, including good practice, challenges, and the services provided by the University and the SU.

20/110 RESOLVED:

- i) To thank the students for their valuable and insightful contributions to the panel discussions.
- ii) That the discussion with the student panel should be recorded in a separate report and that the University should respond to the points raised by the students.

- iii) That members of Council had found the Student Panel discussion to be helpful and informative, and that it would be useful to hold similar student-led sessions going forward.

**ACTION:** *DVC Engagement, PVC Education and COO to ensure that the points raised by the student focus groups and from this Council meeting feed into the development of the Education Strategy the Digital Strategy, and the student support services.*

#### **PRESIDENT OF THE STUDENTS' UNION REPORT**

20/111 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/51, the SU's Report to University Council together with an oral report from the SU President, noting that the elections for next year's SU Executive had been completed and the following Sabbatical Officers had been elected: Balraj Purewal as President, Yesmeen Singh as VP Education, Paige Dawson as VP Welfare, and Annas Mazhar as VP Student Activities.

#### **GOVERNANCE MATTERS**

##### **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

20/112 NOTED:

That members of the Executive and the Director of Governance were members of the USS pension scheme which was discussed under Minute 20/134.

#### **MINUTES**

##### **MINUTES**

20/113 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 323<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Council, held on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

##### **MATTERS ARISING**

20/114 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/64 being a report on matters arising from the minutes of the 323<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Council.

#### **Review of the Strategic Risk Register and Risk Appetite (Minute 20/84)**

20/115 NOTED:

That the Strategic Risk Register and Risk Appetite were currently scheduled to be reviewed in the light of significant changes to the operating environment in a Council/Executive workshop (7.5.21).

**ACTION:** *Chief Operating Officer*

#### **Senate Effectiveness Review (Minute 20/87)**

20/116 NOTED:

That the Senate had established a Steering Group (comprising the Vice-Chancellor, PVC Education, PVC Research and Secretary to Senate) which had met to discuss the development and implementation of an action plan for delivery of the recommendations

from the Effectiveness Review Report. An operational Task and Finish Group would be established to complete the necessary detailed work. The project was on track to complete the actions for full implementation from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2021. ARC would continue to monitor progress with the implementation of the actions and report thereon to Council

#### **Council Member Access to On-Line Teaching and Resources (Minute 20/90)**

20/117 NOTED:

That examples of asynchronous learning could be made available to any Council members who wished to view them. They were invited to contact the Secretary who would liaise with the PVC Education in arranging access to the materials.

#### **Progress with Workforce Developments (Minute 20/91)**

20/118 NOTED:

That the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee (23.3.21) had received a report from the Executive Director of HR and Organisational Development on progress in taking forward a range of workforce developments (refer to Minute 20/140).

#### **Flyer for Council Members (Minute 20/96)**

20/119 NOTED:

That a flyer highlighting key facts about the Knowledge Exchange Strategy for use by Council members as a prompt when representing and promoting Aston was in preparation and would be made available for the Council/Executive away day.

### **STRATEGIC ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION AND APPROVAL**

#### **2021 ESTATES STRATEGY PROPOSAL**

20/120 RECEIVED:

A presentation on the Estates Strategy Version 2.0 (ES2.0) from the Chief Operating Officer, which outlined the current Estates Vision, reported on progress with the implementation of the 2018 Estates Strategy including ongoing projects, and then addressed Aston's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and how this had influenced the development of the proposed ES2.0 to support a sustainable future for the University. The following points were noted:

- FIC (22.3.21) had considered a presentation from CBRE Ltd on options for the redevelopment of two potential sites on the North and the South Campus on the University's estate. FIC had agreed the following principles:
  - That the two sites were surplus to University requirements and were available for development.
  - That there was no urgent need to dispose of the sites. Development opportunities should therefore be given very careful consideration to ensure they were exploited to Aston's best advantage.
  - The development of the two sites could be undertaken separately and at different times, with the South site likely to be developed first for residential and commercial development. The North site would be more suitable for medium-longer term development with a partner(s) likely to provide more synergistic development opportunities.
  - The University should explore opportunities to leverage national and regional government funding for possible joint venture(s).

- Aston's long-term sustainability faced two significant structural financial challenges. Aston's income was increasingly volatile whilst its costs were difficult and costly to flex. The University needed to explore new ways to address these financial and structural challenges. For example, re-engineering Aston's processes and operating model to become more efficient so that resources could be diverted to increasing the quality of the student experience and of research, as well as to the exploitation of new revenue streams. This should involve a review of Aston's major 'fixed' costs, notably estates. After payroll costs Aston's estate was its largest area of expenditure. Buildings were expensive to build and maintain. Since the adoption of Aston's current estates strategy, in 2018, the Covid-19 pandemic had significantly changed the way universities delivered provision for students and the way staff worked, particularly the use of digital technology to deliver on-line teaching and assessment, and to support remote working for staff. The University had prepared a Covid-19 budget and deferred major estates investment projects for two years to maintain balance sheet strength. The University, through the DigitalAston strategy, was already investing in a digitally enabled future. Covid-19 had accelerated Aston's digital investment plans, including the roll-out of laptops and the implementation of a Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (investment of £4 million between March and September).
- The ES2.0 was an evolution of the existing strategy which sought to reflect and embed these changes to support transformed working and learning environments and enhance the student experience. It would support:
  - o A more flexible and blended approach to Learning and Teaching (as proposed in the new Education Strategy). The design of teaching and learning space had been student-led, via focus groups, and the SU President and SU COO sat on the working group overseeing the design process.
  - o A more flexible approach to staff working (reflecting a new Dynamic Working strategy). Staff were consulted and actively engaged in the design process for the dynamic and digitally enabled working spaces.
  - o A significant saving in future space requirements which would deliver lower: future capital expenditure, ongoing estates costs and energy usage and carbon emissions.
- The proposed Estates strategy 2.0 recommended the adoption of a sector-leading approach to space efficiency and effectiveness; with a focus on quality not quantity and a future where buildings underpinned delivery of the University Strategy rather than driving budgets. ES2.0 would deliver space savings of 13,200 meters (20%), with its focus on rebalancing space away from offices towards students and research. This reduction would be delivered by the demolition of end-of-life buildings and would NOT require the construction of a new building. This new strategy would reduce future capital expenditure by c. £60 million, when compared with the current estates plan. The savings in construction and ongoing running costs, associated with a smaller estate, would potentially reduce annual estate costs by c. £6 million. These funds could be diverted to invest in people, the student experience and technology.
- Future growth would potentially require additional spaces. Aston would need to define its growth aspirations and evaluate space demand. These future increases should be addressed through more flexible supply that avoided large capital outlays, for example shorter-term lease arrangements or joint ownership.
- The Executive and FIC had supported the proposals, particularly the focus on enhancing the quality of space over quantity, which would entail addressing the historical

20/121 NOTED the following points raised by Council members:

- That each of the Colleges would have different needs in terms of space, for example EPS and HLS would continue to require high quality specialist laboratories/facilities.
- That although the Estates Strategy Version 2 properly concentrated on meeting the needs of Aston's Beneficiaries, it would also need to meet to provide appropriate high quality space to meet the needs of its staff if it wished to continue to attract and retain high quality staff.

20/122 RESOLVED:

To endorse the proposed Estates Strategy Version 2.0.

**ACTION:** *COO and FIC to proceed with developing and implementing the Estates Strategy Version 2.0*

#### **ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY UPDATE**

20/123 RESOLVED:

To defer consideration of the Engagement Strategy Update (Paper CO/20/66) to the Council/Executive Away Day (11/12.5.21).

#### **STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY AND GRADUATE OUTCOMES**

20/124 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/67, on Student Employability and Graduate Outcomes presented by the DVC Engagement and Rachel McIntosh, Director of Employability. This provided an overview of Aston's strong performance in the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS). It highlighted the transition from the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey to GOS and reflected on the key factors that had influenced the positive performance. The paper presented some of the challenges facing Aston in relation to GOS moving forward and set out the mitigating actions to minimise the impact on future results (in particular for the 2020 and 2021 graduating cohorts). It also gave a context to the work that would be taking place on the new Employability Strategy. The following points were noted:

- The 2021 Times/Sunday Times Good University Guide indicated that 81.3% of Aston's graduates were in positive destinations, giving a ranking of 30<sup>th</sup> in the UK. This was 7.2% above the sector average of 74.1%. and an improvement of 22 places from 52<sup>nd</sup> in 2020.
- The 2021 Guardian Annual University Guide indicated that 83% of Aston's graduates were in positive destinations, giving a ranking of 31<sup>st</sup> in the UK. This was 5% above the sector average of 78% and an improvement of 20 places from 51<sup>st</sup> in 2020.
- This exceptional graduate outcomes result was the culmination of several factors and work over a two year period including: an increase in placement numbers (over 70% of undergraduate students undertook an integrated work placement at Aston, pre-Covid); annual investment of £50,000 in targeted work with graduates under the umbrella brand of "Aston and Beyond" (a dedicated team supporting unemployed and underemployed graduates struggling to secure a role with a full range of skills workshops, one to one support, employment opportunities and targeted interventions); and a University wide Graduate Outcomes Group (set up to oversee a smooth transition to the new GOS and maximize positive outcomes, and which would remain in place to work collaboratively to maximise survey response rates going forwards). Council members agreed that the "Aston and Beyond" initiative appeared to have provided an excellent return on investment in terms of the students assisted to find graduate level employment but also in enhancing Aston's reputation for employability.
- The challenging labour market and the reduction in placement and graduate recruitment as a result of Covid-19, suggested that Aston, along with most other HEIs, would struggle to maintain the pre-Covid placement and employment rates. The Institute of Student Employers (ISE) had released data that suggested graduate level jobs were down by c 12% and on average jobs board postings had reduced by 45-55% in the West Midlands. Aston was heavily dependent on the regional economy for placement opportunities, good graduate outcomes and Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) statistics, with nearly 50% of the intake being locally domiciled, and a similar percentage going onto work within the region. Other factors that had had an impact on graduate outcomes were the tariff entry level of students and the student

demographic. There were strong links nationally between entry standards, student demographics and poorer graduate outcomes. As the proportion of BAME students at Aston has increased by around 10% since 2014 and entry tariffs reduced in the 5 years following 2014, Aston could expect it to become more challenging to maintain such a strong graduate outcomes performance against the sector.

- In response to this challenging external context the University had developed an action plan to support placement students and graduates to continue to benefit from employability opportunities and to deliver Aston's mission to develop employable graduates. An agreed investment package of £285,000 would enable the delivery of the mitigating actions, including a funded internship programme (30 opportunities) for 2020 graduates to upskill and undertake internal opportunities at Aston, and a new flexible placement model designed and implemented to maximise placement take-up, enabling students to gain the best experience possible, ultimately to support long-term graduate outcomes. A new outreach initiative would target 2020/21 final year students categorised 'at risk' by either not undertaking a placement or having the experience terminated or cut-short. Careers Consultants would reach out through a variety of communication channels such as direct text messaging, personalised emails and telephone calls to offer a suite of support options.
- The new Employability Strategy was in the final stages of development and would be rolled out over the coming months. A holistic approach to embedding employability across the curriculum and assessment, not as a bolt on but as central to curriculum design was a key feature of the Strategy. This would involve linking with other University strategies but in particular working in partnership with the PVC Education and the Education team to connect the Education and Employability Strategies, particularly the further embedding of employability within the curriculum and building on the placement success.
- Council members highlighted the potential for student placements within the NHS and in social care within the West Midlands, including a range of non-clinical roles, which might be developed via the new Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System (ICS).

## **RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK 2021**

20/125 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/68, a report from the PVC Research that the University had completed its preparations for REF 2021, with the final submission uploaded prior to the deadline of 12<sup>th</sup> March 2021. Aston had submitted to seven units of assessment; this included a total of 435.76 FTE staff, 1065 outputs and 36 impact case studies. The submission was the culmination of a great deal of work over several years by colleagues across the institution. The REF subject panels would begin the assessment phase after Easter 2021, with the results expected to be published around Easter 2022. Although panel members are nominated by subject associations and not HEIs, Aston was proud that seven of its Professoriate were serving on panels – more than ever before. The census period for the next REF had already begun, and there were several learning points to consider, principally around processes, data and management. These would be considered at the final meeting of REF Management Group, and by Research Committee and Executive thereafter.

20/126 RESOLVED:

To thank the PVC Research and all staff involved in preparing Aston's REF submission and to wish them well for successful outcomes in the REF.

## REPORTS AND RETURNS

20/127 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/68, which invited Council invited to consider and approve the following Reports and Returns on recommendation from the Senate and/or the Executive:

### **Access and Participation Plan Annual Monitoring Return 2019/20**

20/128 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/69a which provided information on a new process and timelines for preparation and submission of the Access and Participation Plan (APP) Annual Monitoring Return (AMR) 2019/20, as well as a comprehensive update on progress against 2019/20 targets and milestones. The revised process included a new impact report which was more focused on narrative, alongside the usual data submission, and a new independent student submission, also focussed on narrative and the provider's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This report and the AMR had been considered and endorsed by the University Executive (1.1.21) and Senate (10.3.21).

The Council's HE Advisor had discussed the AMR with the DVC Engagement and had emphasised the importance of ensuring that the report narrative identified any areas where the University would need to revise targets contained within the original APP. The AMR (which was included in the Resources and Background Material for this meeting) did make reference to the fact that the University was aware that its ambitious target for 100% of its eligible student population to undertake a work placement experience or study abroad experience would be more challenging to meet in 2020/21 due to the restrictions created by the Covid-19 pandemic and that more international students had decided not to do a placement year and focus on the new Graduate Route visa and work opportunities after study. The University was still committed to its graduate outcomes target and aimed to ensure it met this by:

- Focusing its placement and study abroad activity on students from widening participation background who benefit most upward social capital
- Working with undergraduate students at an earlier point in the student life cycle to highlight the benefits of postgraduate study and PhDs.
- Enhancing careers and placements support on CV creation and interview skills.
- Offering a broader approach to peer mentoring to encompass alumni already in established careers.
- Working closer with organisations based in the region and beyond, to offer careers talks and opportunities to highlight graduate schemes.

Aston intended to submit a variation request to this APP target at the appropriate time.

20/129 RESOLVED

To approve the Access and Participation Plan (APP) Annual Monitoring Return (AMR) 2019/20 for submission to the OfS.

### **Integrated Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (iCAS)**

20/130 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/69b which outlined the competitive advantage for Aston in issuing an integrated Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (iCAS) in collaboration with CEG in the context of an Embedded Academic Centre (EAC), explained how the University would manage this process and mitigate any associated risks and invited Council to approve this approach. Issuing an iCAS would enable students to obtain one visa to cover their study in

the EAC and subsequently in Aston University. This would be a very useful student recruitment tool, and would enhance the commitment of CEG students to study at Aston if they met the required standards to progress from the EAC to the University. Concurrently with seeking internal approvals, the University and CEG had submitted an application to UKVI (UK Visas and Immigration) for permission to issue an iCAS, adding this to each of their Student Sponsor Licences. UKVI had responded very quickly and permission to use the iCAS was received on 8 February 2021. The University Executive (28.1.21) and the Senate (10.3.21) had approved the proposed approach of using an iCAS. A more detailed paper had previously been considered by the Collaborative Provision Strategy Group (25.1.21) and the University Learning and Teaching Committee (16.2.21) and they had recommended its approval by Senate subject to some conditions contained within the paper. The Council's HE Advisor had discussed the proposals with the DVC Engagement and the Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor International.

20/131 RESOLVED

To approve the proposed approach to using an iCAS.

#### **Report on Aston's Compliance with Consumer Protection Law**

20/132 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/69c which provided a summary of actions taken by Aston University to ensure compliance with Consumer Protection Law in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The report had been prepared in response to a general request from the OfS (14.1.21 and 5.7.21) for all HE providers to undertake a review of their compliance with consumer law. The Executive (15.2.21) reviewed the report and confirmed that it was satisfied that the University had complied with consumer law in relation to arrangements put in place for the teaching, learning and assessment of all taught provision during the Covid-19 pandemic, in line with OfS requirements. Council was asked to accept the Executive's recommendation in this regard.

20/133 RESOLVED:

To endorse the Executive's recommendation that the University had complied with consumer law in relation to arrangements put in place for the teaching, learning and assessment of all taught provision during the Covid-19 pandemic, in line with OfS requirements.

#### **STRATEGY REPORTS FOR DISCUSSION AND NOTING**

##### **VICE-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT (CONFIDENTIAL)**

20/134 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/70 together with an oral report from the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, noting:

##### **Executive Dean of College of Health and Life Sciences**

- Following a rigorous external search, Professor Anthony Hilton had been appointed as Executive Dean and Pro-Vice-Chancellor for the College of Health and Life Sciences.

##### **Covid-19 Position and Road Map**

- As of 14 March, c 1000 students were permitted to have face-to-face teaching under the Government's Covid-19 guidelines. These students were undertaking courses which had a practical element, generally in Health or Engineering, which required access to laboratories or clinics. The current advice was for staff to continue to work from home

unless their role required their attendance on campus. Covid-19 cases among staff and students remained very low. All staff and students who were on campus were required to take lateral flow tests twice per week. On campus testing was being carried out by Biomedical Science students, providing them with valuable professional work experience. The Government would decide in mid-April if and when the remainder of students would be able to return to campus - a road map for further return of operations to campus was being developed. Discussions and consultations on plans for educational delivery and university working post-Covid were ongoing. In principle, the University was keen to retain aspects of the last 12 months which had worked well for staff and students, while recovering those aspects of our education, student experience and working life, that have been most missed during the pandemic.

#### **Student Recruitment and Budget Preparation for 2021/22**

- The recruitment position for 2021/22 entry remained strong. Applications were ahead of target and ahead of the sector average, with acceptances also up 1.4% on this time last year. Virtual visit days had been well attended. The only negative aspect was that PGT applications were behind target, particularly from China, which was reflected across the sector. Applications from India and Nigeria were up on last year, but did not cover the deficit, but did help to spread the risk. This was being monitored and work was being done to try to improve this position.
- The recruitment forecast provided the revenue envelope for the budget preparation for the next financial year (August-July). The initial outlook was a revenue forecast for 2021/22 of the order of £186 million compared to a forecast revenue for the current year of £176 million (an increase in revenue of 5.7%). This year's operating surplus forecast was 6.2%, well above the agreed breakeven budget. Assuming an operating surplus of 5% (Aston's long-run target) for 2021/22, this would enable total expenditure of £177 million, an increase of 8.8% on this year's forecast expenditure, providing a good funding base to maintain standards and pursue new initiatives in the Colleges and centrally.

#### **Reduction of Disciplines in the Humanities**

- Council members and attendees of the meeting were asked to treat this matter as strictly confidential, as consultations with the staff concerned were ongoing. Consistent with the strategic plan to focus Aston's offerings in the areas of Health, Engineering and Business, the Executive proposed to withdraw disciplines which were not aligned with these domains, and which did not support the University's growing reputation as a technical university. The disciplines which had been identified for discontinuation were History and Modern Languages, which had also been struggling to achieve sustainable enrolments in a declining market. Appendix A to the Vice-Chancellor's report detailed the context and the proposal. The plan was to cease to recruit students to programmes in these areas post the September 2021 intake and to reduce staff in these areas as the students were taught out over the subsequent four years. Approximately 50 students were recruited per year into programmes in affected areas, and the University would ensure that its commitments to enrolled students were fully met until the end of their studies. 23 staff had been identified as being affected by this change, however these roles would reduce over a four-year period, through a combination of (in priority order) redeployment, natural turnover, voluntary redundancy and compulsory redundancy. Consultations with trade unions and staff were in train. The University would then review the need for compulsory redundancy, ongoing consultation/selection and the need and timing of a Redundancy Committee. Council (16.6.21) via Workforce and Remuneration Committee would be asked to approve implementation of any redundancy proposal, consultation and selection methods.

#### **HE Sector Developments**

- Over the last two months, the Government had released a suite of policy proposals and consultations relating to Higher Education. Appendix B to the Vice-Chancellor's report, provided background information for Council members on the following:
  - The Skills for Jobs White Paper.
  - Interim Conclusion of the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding.

- Consultation on whether to adopt a Post-Qualifications Admissions (PQA) system.
- The new Turing scheme.
- Clearer expectations on harassment for universities.

#### **University Superannuation Scheme**

- The University Superannuation Scheme (USS) position continued to deteriorate, and had been discussed recently by ARC, FIC and RWSC. The current USS contribution rate of 30.7% of salary (21.9 % of salary by employer and 9.1% of salary by employee) was set to rise in October 2021, as agreed as part of the 2018 valuation, to 34.7% (23.7 % of salary by employer and 11% of salary by employee). The USS pension scheme trustees had recently written to all members providing an update on the 2020 USS valuation. The update set out three scenarios for how the contribution rates would increase depending on how much reliance was placed upon the employer covenant strength; including a move to covenant support measures to provide a ‘strong’ employer covenant, as opposed to the ‘tending to strong’ covenant currently in place. All three scenarios would result in significantly higher contribution rates (ranging from 42.1% of salary to 56.2% of salary). UUK and the CUC had publicly responded that the prices put forward by the Trustee for current benefits were unaffordable for employers and, given the current opt out rate of eligible members across the sector of c20%, increasingly for employees. Before the end of March, UUK will be consulting employers on:
  - What covenant support and commitments can the Trustee depend upon in concluding the 2020 valuation?
  - What overall and specific benefit structure do employers wish to offer to their workforces in future?
  - What level of contributions do employers and members wish to pay to allow for those benefits to be provided?

The Executive would prepare a draft response to the consultation and circulate this to the members of FIC and RWSC before its submission to UUK.

- The University had taken legal advice regarding the requirement to offer USS exclusively to all eligible employees. The legal advice had confirmed that this was the case where individuals were employed directly by the University. However, in the case of subsidiaries of Aston University there was no obligation imposed by the Deed of Accession or subsequent Amendments to offer USS as the pension scheme to employees of that subsidiary. This would be given further consideration and a report prepared for RWSC and Council.
- The University was preparing an internal communications campaign to inform USS members about the valuation position and to gather employee’s views. As firm proposals were developed, the University intended to proactively communicate its position and views to USS members and endeavour to ensure that they were fully informed about the choices and consequences involved (ie that increased contribution levels would inevitably lead to a reduction in the workforce if the University was to maintain a balanced budget). The University would maintain its efforts to raise the urgent need for reform of the USS with relevant external bodies such as the UUK and CUC.

***ACTION: University Officers to continue to lobby UUK, CUC and other external bodies about the urgent need to reform USS. Secretary to circulate analysis of financial impact of the USS 2020 Revaluation to Council members.***

#### **Aston Strategy Review and Refresh, and Council/Executive Away Day**

- The Executive were proceeding with the ‘review and refresh’ of Aston’s strategic plan, including to:
  - a) Review Aston’s quantitative and qualitative performance against the goals that were set three years ago, and the perceived causes of divergence (external and internal).
  - b) Refine the strategy based on performance to date, and also how the context (opportunities and threats) had changed due to Covid-19.

The Executive were being assisted by the Nous Group on this project and the resulting findings and proposals would be presented at the Council-Executive Away Day, scheduled for the evening of Tuesday, 11 May and the day of Wednesday, 12 May.

- In line with the Government’s Covid roadmap, it would not be possible to hold the Away Day in person, and hence it would be an on-line event. The proposal was to hold a (virtual) dinner with a speaker on the Tuesday evening. It was proposed that a hamper would be provided to attendees to consume at home while attending the dinner online and listening to the speaker. The agenda for the Wednesday( scheduled to run from 9am to 3:30pm) was proposed to address the following agenda under the framework of the strategy review and refresh:
  - Findings and proposals from Strategy ‘Review and Refresh’
  - Aston’s (New) Education Strategy
  - People, Values and Culture
  - The Business Model of Aston (post-COVID)
  - The Engagement Strategy Update
 Council members endorsed the proposals for the Away Day.

## **PRO-CHANCELLOR’S REPORT**

20/135 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Pro-Chancellor, noting:

- that, on recommendation of the FIC, she had given authorisation on behalf of Council for the Vice-Chancellor to sign off the final OfS Financial Return and Commentary for 2019/20.
- that the Pro-Chancellor, on behalf of Council, thanked the Executive and the Senior Management Team for the excellent leadership they had shown through the Covid-19 pandemic, and the staff of the University for the speed, agility and care they had shown in rapidly changing delivery and work practices to support the needs of students at a very challenging time.

## **REFERENCES FROM COMMITTEES**

### **Report from the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)**

20/136 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/71 which summarised issues considered at the ARC meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021. Issues discussed by ARC included:

- ARC had approved the Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) Return 2019/20 for sign off by the Vice Chancellor and submission to OfS by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.
- ARC endorsed revised terms of reference for the Committee which reflected the latest CUC Audit Code of Practice template. They also made provision for ARC, in liaison with the Senate, to periodically check the effectiveness and assurance provided by the systems and processes for academic governance, quality and standards. Council approved the revised terms of reference (these were included in the Resources and Background Material).
- ARC received a presentation from Helen Blaikie, Director of Data and Analytics, on the University Data Strategy which set out the institutional vision, aims and scope for managing data and was designed to underpin Aston’s beneficiary led Strategy.
- ARC received a report from the Director of Governance, on Aston’s framework to demonstrate compliance with the 23 OfS Conditions of Registration. A draft detailed risk and assurance template, owned by an executive lead and an operational lead, has been completed for each of the 23 conditions. Covid-19 had presented challenges in demonstrating compliance with conditions, particularly those relating to consumer protection legislation, and the OfS has recently issued new requirements and guidance as a result of Covid-19. This was therefore very much work in progress and the final

version of the compliance framework would be submitted to ARC in June 2021. Going forward the Executive would review the framework biannually and the ARC would receive an annual report. Periodically the internal auditors would be asked to review compliance with individual conditions of registration.

- ARC received a Report on Ethics Framework Metrics for 2020, noting that a relatively low level of ethical breaches had been reported. One material fraud case relating to an EU Horizon 2020 RISE project had been brought to the attention of ARC during the course of the year, and the member of staff concerned had been subject to disciplinary proceedings and was no longer employed by the University.
- ARC had discussed the proposed programme for the Review of Strategic Risk Register Workshop (7.5.21).
- ARC considered the following internal Audit Reports and requested the Executive to ensure that the proposed management actions were implemented:
  - Internal Audit Progress Report
  - Payroll
  - Health and Safety
  - Treasury and Cash Management
  - Strategic Planning, Performance and Risk Management (review undertaken in 2019/20)

ARC requested that the scope for the internal audit review of Management of Staff Performance be circulated to members for comment as soon as possible.

- ARC members had recommended that the University review the effectiveness of management controls and working practices in the light of the experience of operating under Covid-19 restrictions, with a view to identifying good practice, learning points and potential control weaknesses.

#### **Report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee (FIC)**

20/137 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Chair of FIC summarising issues considered at the FIC meeting held on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2021, including:

- The potential serious financial impact of the USS Pension 2020 Valuation (refer to Minute 20/134).
- FIC considered a revised 2021 Estates Strategy to support a sustainable future for the University and a presentation from CBRE Ltd on the potential redevelopment of surplus land at the North and the South Campus on the University's estate (refer to Minute 20/120).
- Under delegated authority, FIC approved the proposed £1.5 million expenditure for the redevelopment of the former Executive space into a student informal learning area. This sum was contained within the current five-year capital investment plan.
- FIC received a high level concept proposal for the redevelopment of Main Building ground floor which had been developed to realign this high profile space as student facing and was in line with the policy to relocate appropriate teaching spaces to the lower floors of academic buildings to increase accessibility and reduce travel around the Building. FIC endorsed the addition of £5 million to the estates capital plan to provide a provision for this potential project, which would subsequently be further developed for review and approval by the Committee and Council.
- FIC received an update on the implementation of various aspects of the Campus Vision, Masterplan and Estates Strategy. FIC received a progress report on current capital projects, and on the Estates Capital Programme and 10-year Capital Plan.

## Management Accounts 2020/21 at 31st January 2021

20/138 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/72, the Management Accounts 2020/21 for Period 6, which showed a £10.8m favourable variance versus budget, principally due to a £10.1 million favourable variance on academic tuition fees (student recruitment in September and January had been ahead of budget).

### Report from the Nominations and Governance Committee (NGC)

20/139 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Chair of NGC summarising issues considered at the NGC meeting held on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2021, including:

- NGC had noted that the relationship with the Mallory Partnership in the search for of a new independent member of Council and Chair of ARC, and an associate member in the role of digital Advisor had been terminated as it has not resulted in an appointment.
- NGC recommended to Council appointment of Dr Matthew Crummack, Aston Alumni and Honorary Graduate, and former Group CEO, GoCo Group plc (GoCompare) 2016 – March 2021, as an independent member of Council for a 3-year term commencing on 1st August 2021. NGC had unanimously agreed that Dr Crummack would offer a positive range of skills and expertise including wide ranging and demonstrable digital skills at a very high and strategic level (CEO x2 of digital businesses), consumer digital experience, business acumen and experience, demonstrated ability to combine executive career with non-exec appointments at a plc, and recent connections with the University – alumnus and advisor. Council formally approved Dr Crummack's appointment.
- NGC reviewed the membership of Council for 2021/22 and 2021/22 and the terms of office, roles and Committee memberships held by independent members; and a record of Council members' attendance. It was noted that there was a need to identify a Chair for ARC from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2021. It was agreed that the Pro-Chancellor would meet with Council members due to complete terms of office on 31<sup>st</sup> July 2022.
- It was noted that a vacancy had arisen for an *ex officio* member in the role of Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor. NGC agreed that it would be appropriate to revise the relevant Statute (which would require Council's approval and that of the Privy Council) to allow for a more flexible specification of the composition of the Council membership, which would give the Council more discretion to make changes without reference to the Privy Council. It was suggested that this would enable the potential appointment of a tenth independent member who could also fill the role of ARC Chair. Members felt that it should be possible to identify suitably qualified candidates (preferably a recognised accounting or financial qualification and/or relevant senior financial experience) for the role from Aston's alumni and networks. It was agreed that the Secretary should arrange a meeting with the Chairs of Council and NGC and the Vice-Chancellor to progress this work.
- NGC approved revised Council Operational Guidelines which now included the governance values and objectives recommended in the CUC's revised HE Code of Governance. The Guidelines would be issued to new and existing Council members.
- NGC received a progress update on the action plan to address the recommendations from the independent Council Effectiveness Review, noting that this was on track to complete all actions by the end of the 2020/21 academic year.
- NGC received a report on a range of ongoing governance initiatives, which were on track for completion this academic year.

## Report from the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee (RWSC)

20/140 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Chair of RWSC summarising issues considered at the RWSC meeting held on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2021, including:

- The potential serious financial impact of the USS Pension 2020 Valuation (refer to Minute 20/134).
- RWSC considered a report on the CUC's HE Senior Staff Remuneration Code, including recommendations for HEIs. RWSC agreed a proposal that a specific page be provided on the Aston website, accessible from the homepage, giving full details of annual senior remuneration arrangements including details of the Vice Chancellor's emoluments that were currently published annually in the Statement of Accounts. This webpage would also be used to publish other remuneration-related information, policies and procedures. RWSC also agreed to undertake a formal self-assessment against the HE Senior Staff Remuneration Code including an update and review of the existing Senior Pay Policy at its June meeting.
- RWSC received a presentation from the Executive Director of HR and Organisational Development on workforce developments including:
  - Contractual Terms: agreement had been reached with trade unions in relation to a reduction from the current 4 years pay protection to up to 2 years on a sliding scale where there was a need to redeploy an individual to a post at a lower grade. Agreement had also been reached on a two-year qualification period for entitlement to pay protection. Negotiations around the calculation of redundancy pay had not yet led to an agreement.
  - Consultancy Policy: agreement had been reached with the trade unions for a reduction in the academic staff entitlement from 50 to 20 consultancy days. A new on-line system for approval of consultancy by the Executive Dean and Line Manager had been introduced.
  - A report on the removal of Modern Languages and History programmes from 2022/23 which would impact on 23 staff (refer to Minute 20/134).
  - Three staff surveys had been undertaken over the last 12 months to gain insight into how staff were adjusting to working under lockdown as the pandemic progressed. A positive response rate was achieved for the surveys. Generally, the results were positive with staff feeling connected to their manager, teams and colleagues. Staff also reported feeling more informed about actions taken to support students, staff and the wider community. Staff were hopeful that the University would perform strongly despite the pandemic and believed the University was taking the right actions to address issues caused directly or indirectly by Covid 19.
  - Pay Negotiations: 0% increase had been offered by employers in the 2020/21 pay round. The employers had offered 1.5%-2.0% cost of living increases for 2021/22, with the largest increases focused on lower scales.
- RWSC considered the Aston Staff Equality Report 2021 which summarised a good deal of data relating to staff with protected characteristics and included an update on the Gender Pay Gap. A number of groups had been established to help and support colleagues with protected characteristics. The Diversity and Inclusion Plan included a wide range of activities to enhance inclusive practice across the organisation. Council agreed that it should consider this report at a future meeting.

**ACTION:** *EDHROD to present the Aston Staff Equality Report 2021 and associated Diversity and Inclusion Plan to a future Council meeting*

- Aston was signed up to the Race Equality Charter and was planning its first Bronze submission for 2021/2022. A survey had been undertaken of staff and students which had yielded some interesting results. The University was working with the SU in addressing some issues raised and in communicating effectively with the various groups.

- Aston currently held a range of Athena SWAN awards and was working towards next level submissions. Aston was currently one of only 18 University Silver award holders; there had been no Gold University awards to date.
- An online system for declarations of Interest and Fit and Proper Person statements had been implemented for Executive members as a pilot and would now be rolled out for Council members.
- RWSC had reviewed its annual schedule of business.

### **Report from the Senate**

20/141 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/73 which summarised issues considered at the Senate meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021, including:

- “Working arrangements post-Covid” was the theme of the Senate’s “in depth discussion” starting a dialogue around principles that would apply in determining appropriate post-Covid working practices.
- Consideration of the Access and Participation Plan Annual Monitoring Return 2019/20 for submission to OfS (refer to Minute 20/128).
- Consideration of the use of an integrated confirmation of acceptance for studies (iCAS) in collaboration with CEG for students studying in the embedded academic centre (refer to Minute 20/130).
- A report that the REF 2021 submission would be submitted on time and this was a huge achievement following a lot of hard work over a long period of time across the institution. Following the REF submission it was time to reflect and learn lessons as the process has started for the next one (refer to Minute 20/125).
- Senate had reviewed and endorsed the Senate’s Annual Report to Council on Academic Governance, Quality and Standards 2019/20 (refer to Minute 20/142).
- Under delegated authority from Council, Senate approved changes to Ordinance 2.4.5(v) concerning the composition and terms of reference of College Learning and Teaching Committees.
- Work to implement the recommendations of the Senate effectiveness Review by 1 August 2021 was underway and a small task and finish group had been established to oversee this process.
- Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) was reviewing the Annual Programme Evaluation process with a view to moving towards continual monitoring and enhancement.
- The Research Ethics Education Task and Finish Group had identified the need for two strands of training: generic ethics training and training specific to Aston’s processes. Content and delivery methods were being finalised.
- Received a report on the University’s first Knowledge Exchange Strategy which would aim to serve the needs of Aston’s three main beneficiary groups.

### **Senate’s Annual Report to Council on Academic Governance, Quality and Standards 2019/20**

20/142 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/74 which summarised the Senate’s Annual Report to Council on Academic Governance, Quality and Standards 2019/20 (the full Report was contained in the Resources and Background for the meeting as paper CO/20/80). The Report was intended to provide evidence to support Senate’s recommendation to Council that Aston had in place effective systems and processes for ensuring that the University was meeting those of its conditions of registration as an HE provider relating to academic quality, reliable standards and positive outcomes for all students. This was the last Annual Report in this format as the Senate

Effectiveness Review had recommended its form and focus be reviewed and amended going forward to provide greater focus and clarity of decision making.

20/143 RESOLVED:

To approve the Senate's Annual Report to Council on Academic Governance, Quality and Standards 2019/20.

**Referred by the Executive**

**Quarterly Report on Health and Safety**

20/144 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/75, a Report on Health and Safety (Autumn Term 2020), noting that there no current issues of concern with regard to health and safety, fire safety or business continuity. Council member observed that the report had not mentioned fire drills and asked if any had been undertaken. Scott Trim, the Director of Health and Safety and Business Continuity, reported that regular drills had been successfully carried out with improved response times, despite the much lower levels of occupancy in buildings and the residences.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

20/145 NOTED:

The Council/Executive Away Day would take place at 6:00-8:00 pm on Tuesday, 11<sup>th</sup> May and 9:00am-3:30pm on Wednesday, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2021. The next normal Council meeting would be held at 1:30 pm on Wednesday, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

**REVIEW OF 324<sup>th</sup> COUNCIL MEETING**

20/146 NOTED:

That the Chair invited members to submit any suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of Council meetings to herself or the Secretary.

JGW/30.3.21