

Minutes of the 325th COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday 16th June 2021

PRESENT: Dame Yve Buckland (Chair)
Dr Hannah Bartlett
Ranjit Dhindsa*
Toby Lewis
Dr Sue Noffke
Neil Scott
Professor Paul Topham
Dr Mike Wright
Professor Alec Cameron
Dr Melanie Gibbs*
Professor Gill Nicholls*
Dr Vij Randeniya
Harry Sheppard
Dr Jason Wouhra *

APOLOGIES: Dr Rob Perrins

IN ATTENDANCE: Professor Ruth Ayres*
Dr Malcom Crummack*
Professor Simon Green*
Saskia Loer Hansen *
Gary Hughes*
Balraj Purewal
John Walter (Secretary)
Richard Billingham*
Professor George Feiger *
Professor Sarah Hainsworth*
Professor Anthony Hilton*
Victoria Mee*
Mark Smith*

* On-line via Teams

WELCOME

20/147 RESOLVED:

To join the Pro-Chancellor in welcoming Dr Matthew Crummack, who would be joining the Council as an independent member from 1st August 2021; Balraj Purewal, the President of the Students' Union elect who would also be joining Council; and Victoria Mee, University General Counsel, who would be acting as interim Secretary to Council following John Walter's retirement.

GOVERNANCE MATTERS

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

20/148 NOTED:

That members of the Executive and staff attendees were members of the USS pension scheme and therefore had a pecuniary interest in this item, which was discussed under Minute 20/160.

SCHEDULE OF COUNCIL AND COMMITTEE MEETINGS FOR 2021/22

20/149 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/81, a draft Schedule of Council and Committee meetings for 2021/22, noting that it had been agreed that as this year's virtual meetings of the Nominations and Governance Committee and Remunerations and Workforce Strategy Committee had worked effectively it would be appropriate to continue with virtual meetings next year. This would mean that it would no longer be necessary to hold them on the same day as Council, so the meetings could be rearranged a week or two before the scheduled meetings of Council to allow time for written upward reports to be prepared.

ACTION: Secretary to rearrange NGC and RWSC meetings in 2021/22 and reissue meetings Schedule

SCHEDULE OF COUNCIL BUSINESS FOR 2021/22

20/150 RESOLVED:

To approve the proposed Schedule of Council Business for 2021/22, noting that this was intended to be a working document that would evolve in the light of changing circumstances and Council's priorities.

PROPOSED CHANGE OF MEMBERSHIP OF COUNCIL AND ASSOCIATED CHANGE TO A UNIVERSITY STATUTE AND ORDINANCE

20/151 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/83 containing a proposal to move most of the content of University Statute 4, concerning the membership of Council, to a new Ordinance 1.10 in which some of the original wording from the Statute has been amended. This proposal had been revised in the light of feedback from members of Senate and had subsequently been endorsed by the Senate (2.6.21) and by the NGC (16.6.21). The revised wording for the composition of Council in the new Ordinance, would allow Council the flexibility to vary the number of independent members (ie between eight and 11) without needing to gain approval from the Privy Council which was normally a time consuming and burdensome process. This would be particularly valuable when onboarding new independent members to allow an overlap period with an experienced member due to stand down during which time they could familiarise themselves with Aston and HE governance. The proposal also allowed some flexibility in the number of Senior University Officers who were members of the Executive nominated by the Vice-Chancellor and appointed by Council (either one or two). If approved by Council, the proposed changes to the Statute would need to be submitted to the Privy Council for informal endorsement, before a formal resolution could be made by Council at its October meeting, which would then need to be submitted to the Privy Council for formal approval.

20/152 RESOLVED:

To approve the proposed changes to Statute 4 and the new Ordinance 1.10, including revised content relating to the membership of Council, for submission to the Privy Council for comment and endorsement.

ACTION: *Secretary*

MINUTES

MINUTES

20/153 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 324th meeting of the Council, held on 24th March 2021.

MATTERS ARISING

20/154 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/84, a report on matters arising from the minutes of the 324th Council meeting.

Student Panel Discussion (Minute 20/110)

20/155 NOTED:

That a report on the issues raised in the discussion with a Panel of Aston students was attached as Appendix 1. Professor Ruth Ayres and Saskia Loer Hansen were to provide an oral report on the University response to the issues at today's meeting; refer to minute 20/164.

Review of Strategic Risk Register and Appetite (Minute 20/115)

20/156 NOTED:

That the Pro-Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor agreed that the workshop on the University's Strategic Risk Register and Appetite scheduled for 7th May should be postponed, pending further consideration as to how this work should best be taken forward. The review of the Risk Register and Appetite was discussed by ARC at its 9th June meeting; refer to minute 20/172.

Senate Effectiveness Review (Minute 20/116)

20/157 NOTED:

That ARC was to receive a progress report on the action plan for delivery of the recommendations from the Senate Effectiveness Review at its October 2021 meeting.

Estates Strategy Version 2.0 (Minute 20/122)

20/158 NOTED:

FIC would be overseeing the implementation of the Estates Strategy Version 2.0 and would provide Council with regular progress updates going forward.

Access and Participation Plan (APP) Annual Monitoring Return (AMR) 2019/20 (Minute 20/129)

20/159 NOTED:

That the University's APP AMR 2019/20 had been submitted to the OfS by the submission deadline.

STRATEGIC ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION AND APPROVAL

VICE-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT (CONFIDENTIAL)

20/160 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/85 together with an oral report from the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, noting:

Covid-19 Position and Road Map

- With the easing of Covid-19 lockdown arrangements in May, all university students in England were permitted to receive face-to-face tuition on campus, although social distancing restrictions remained in place. The limit on the size of indoor gatherings and the spacing requirements meant that large group lectures continued online, but most other forms of tuition (laboratories, clinics, tutorials and seminars) and some central student support offers (library, well-being, careers and placement sessions) were made available to students in person. Asymptomatic testing continued to be offered on campus for staff and students. The University assessment period was now underway, with the standard assessment mode being on-line and assessment-based (rather than examinations held in halls).
- Looking forward to September, fewer limitations were anticipated with regard to social distancing. The University was planning to offer a blended model with experiential and smaller group activities held in person on campus, with large group lectures being conducted mainly on-line. While this delivery model was more Covid-19-safe than

arrangements prior to March 2020, Aston's offer was primarily motivated by pedagogical considerations and was consistent with the University's education strategy to support more of a 'flipped classroom model' with content delivery in an asynchronous, on-line mode, and in-person activities focussed on engagement and interaction.

Student Recruitment and Budget Preparation for 2021/22

- The home undergraduate recruitment position for 2021/22 entry remained strong. Following the UCAS deadline for applicant decisions on firm and insurance choice on 10th June, Aston was 15.9% ahead compared to last year in terms of Firm Acceptances and 13.9% ahead in terms of Insurance Acceptances, and was ahead of the sector and the region with regard to growth. It was expected therefore that the University would achieve its targeted enrolment numbers for the 2021 intake, and would be less reliant on Clearing to achieve these numbers. Given that grades would be determined by teachers' assessments this year, there was expected to be some grade inflation, with more students achieving their conditional offers. In this case, Aston's higher numbers of accepted offers this year were likely to lead to even higher confirmed offers, and fewer places required at Clearing. Some high demand programmes were already full and closed to further applications, with other being nearly full.
- It was anticipated that Aston would be able to reverse the slippage in average entry tariffs this year because of this strong recruitment position, and in turn this could help improve Aston's performance in league tables.
- The strong recruitment position was felt to be related to much enhanced recruitment activity by the team led by Gary Hughes, the new Executive Director of Marketing Recruitment and Communications, and to recent accolades awarded to Aston such as the Guardian University of the Year.
- Whilst PGT recruitment had generally been slower and more erratic compared to UG recruitment, Aston was in a reasonably strong position for acceptances, and was 25.7% ahead year on year for acceptances. It remained a challenging, volatile and highly competitive environment for postgraduate students; around 40% of Aston's PGT acceptances were from students in what were currently red list countries and the University was working on options to facilitate and support their arrival to the UK.
- The application process for PGT starts in January 2022 had opened well and 184 applications had been received as at 14th June 2021.
- The recruitment forecast had informed the positive revenue envelope for the next year's budget, which was addressed later in today's meeting.

Organisation change relating to History, Languages and Translation Studies

- The University had undertaken a consultation regarding the proposal to discontinue several disciplines which were not judged to be aligned with Aston's disciplinary consolidation around Health, Engineering and Business. The disciplines identified for discontinuation were History, Modern Languages and Translation Studies. Twenty-four staff positions were identified as being redundant based on this proposal.
 - Following consultation with affected staff, and representations from many interested parties, the University had accepted arguments in favour of the retention of the current offerings in History and Translation Studies, but Modern Languages would be discontinued. Eight staff positions would consequently be retained, while sixteen would be lost. While the loss of staff positions was keenly felt by those directly affected, the process was judged by almost all stakeholders to demonstrate a genuine consultation, which had listened to arguments cogently put, and arrived at a good outcome overall.
- Vice-Chancellor, COO and EDHROD to obtain legal counsel advice on exiting the USS scheme and an assessment of Section 75 costs. A meeting of Council and Committee Chairs to be arranged to discuss the legal counsel advice and the assessment of Section 75 costs, prior to a report being circulated to Council members.***

ACTION

Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE) report

- The University had received the Annual Statement from the OIA, which was part of its publication scheme to ensure transparency and to increase public scrutiny of complaint

handling in HE providers, and to increase student confidence in complaint processes. The annual statement benchmarked Aston University against the median of its 'band' (comprising 30 other providers of similar student population) and looked at how many Completion of Procedures letters Aston issue, how many complaints were judged justified, partly justified, settled, not eligible, not justified and withdrawn.

- OIA stated that Aston had engaged well with them and their processes in 2020. Most providers took an average of 30 days to reply to their requests whereas Aston, on average, took 24. The Statement also noted that Aston took part in webinars that they presented and they were grateful for the University's positive engagement with them.
- Overall, the statement confirmed that Aston's procedures were working as they should. The proportion of 'complaints/academic appeals' progressed to the OIA was low compared to how many Completion of Procedures letters were issued by the University, which meant that Aston was able to justify to its students the decisions it had made in a way that satisfied their concerns.

ACTION: *DVCE to ensure security risk is included in the Strategic Risk Register*

Technical Universities update

- The Vice-Chancellor had previously circulated to Council Members a paper on Truly Modern Technical Education, which was a joint initiative between Aston University and London South Bank University, supported by Public First. The intent of this publication was to make the case with political and policy stakeholders, regarding the contribution of Universities of Technology, in contributing to some of the challenges of the UK economy and its regions, particularly as the country sought to rebuild post-COVID. This narrative would be an important theme for the positioning of Aston within the sector, with the intention of bolstering its position in the light of a funding outcome in response to the Augar review, expected to be delivered in the Autumn within the Government's comprehensive spending review.

League Table Rankings

- Aston was ranked 43rd in the Complete University Guide (published on 8th June) for the second year in a row. In terms of the detailed metrics, Aston performed really well in terms of Employability. Aston was ranked joint 21st in the UK for 'Graduate Prospects – Outcomes', with 80% of its students in professional level work or further study 15 months after degree completion. In addition, the CUG had used one of the satisfaction questions from the Graduate Outcomes Survey; the question to which respondents agree with the statement 'My activity fits with my future plans'. For this new metric, named 'Graduate Prospects – On-Track' Aston was ranked joint 12th in the UK with 75% agreement.
- The QS Global Rankings results for 2022 had just been received. The hard work of many colleagues across the University had made a difference, and Aston was now back in the Top 500, ranked joint 485th. Colleagues would need to continue the hard work in the year ahead as the aim was to return to the Top 400. It was necessary to further improve Aston's reputation scores in the Academic Peer and Employer surveys and colleagues from across the University would work hard to make this happen. This year's improvement was linked with an improvement in citations and hopefully this positive trajectory would continue in the future.
- Further analysis would be undertaken in the days ahead to understand Aston's performance relative to competitors in the UK. A presentation would be provided to the Senior Management Group including the identification of priority actions in terms of getting Aston back into the top 400 position, which was a requirement for more effective competitive positioning for Aston in a global HE marketplace.

20/161 NOTED:

The following points raised by Council members arising from the above report:

- Council members asked if students might be disappointed on returning to campus to learn that some of their lectures were going to be delivered online and question

whether they were receiving value for money for their tuition fees. The PVC Education reported that next year's curriculum and blended modes of delivery were carefully planned and designed to provide a high-quality educational experience for students based on sector best pedagogic principles and practice. Online lectures were best for use in delivering content to students and as they were recorded, could be accessed by students repeatedly and at times best suited to their learning needs. Physical attendance would be required for and was best suited to collaborative activity, laboratory/clinical work, building soft skills, work simulation, employability, etc. Council members stressed that efforts should be made to ensure that students really appreciated the educational rationale behind this blended approach, and this it was not a cost saving exercise.

- Council members were pleased to learn about the continuing good performance in relation to student recruitment. They asked if the University would need to review the constraints on additional recruitment to popular programmes that were already full. The Vice-Chancellor reported that the University was not currently planning to significantly increase Undergraduate students numbers but instead aimed to diversify income streams. Constraints on recruitment to particular programmes (such as laboratory/clinics capacity, government funding of student places, Professional body requirements, availability of placements/clinical placements, limits on graduate employment prospects for example limited opportunities in the legal profession etc) were not entirely within the University's control. Council members stressed that Law degrees should not be seen as leading to careers entirely within the legal profession, and Law graduate successfully entered a wide range of graduate professions.
- Members of Council who had recently been involved in chairing University Student Complaints Committees, expressed concern that the current complaints procedure appeared to be unwieldy, inefficient, difficult for students to follow and protracted. It was reported that the University had recognised these problems and a thorough review of the Complaints Procedure had been undertaken, including the involvement of students and the SU, which would result in a much less complex, speedier and more user-friendly process for students to be introduced at the start of the next academic year. An in-depth report was to be made on the complaints process to the October meeting of ARC. Council requested that this report be made available to the full Council.

ACTION: *Secretary/DVC to provide report on student complaints to the next Council meeting*

- Members of Council indicated that some staff at the Council/Executive Away Day had indicated that they found online delivery to be less satisfying than physical delivery, for example it was not always possible to observe the reactions of students to the content and style of delivery and it could be more difficult to promote student engagement in discussions. The PVC Education reported that two pilot initiatives had been held in BSS and EPS which aimed to identify what had worked well for students and for staff within hybrid delivery, and it was intended to roll out the learning from these pilots across the University.

PRO-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT

20/162 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Pro-Chancellor, noting:

- That the Pro-Chancellor had met several times with the Vice-Chancellor in the new executive suite in the ABS Building, which provided an excellent professional and technical working environment that was operationally flexible and efficient. There was a need for a corporate boardroom facility big enough and technically equipped to accommodate blended Council meetings

- That the University and its staff and students would need to be vigilant in maintaining appropriate social distancing and hygiene measures in the face of the rapid spread on the New Delta Covid-19 variant and its prevalence within the region.
- That in view of the fact that international student recruitment within the UK could be impacted by a significant under capacity in terms of authorised quarantine places, the Pro-Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor were exploring the possibility that the University could seek approval as an authorised quarantining centre, which should facilitate Aston's international student recruitment efforts.
- That Aston continued to be held in high regard within the City of Birmingham, particularly in terms of its success in widening participation and promoting social mobility. This reputation needs to be leveraged in taking advantage of opportunities that were arising for collaboration with the Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System (ICS). The ICS included all health and social care partners, commissioners and the Local Authority, and its purpose was to support partnership and drive improvement, and had a budget in excess of £4 billion.
- That a report on the action and learning points from the Council/Executive Away Day was being produced and would be circulated to members.

ACTION: *Vice-Chancellor and Secretary to produce and circulate a report on the Away Day Outcomes*

PRESIDENT OF THE STUDENTS' UNION REPORT

20/163 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/86, the SU's Report to University Council together with an oral report from the SU President which summarised the work and achievements of the Union over the academic year.

ISSUES RAISED IN STUDENT PANEL – UNIVERSITY RESPONSE UPDATE

20/164 RECEIVED:

An oral presentation from the DVC Engagement and the PVC Education detailing the University's response to the issues raised in the Student Panel held on 24th March 2021. Several of the comments made by the student panellists were picked up immediately after the Council meeting, including directing students to information about study space, clarifying questions in relation to assessments, and meetings with the Director of Estates and Head of Campus Safety to address the safety concerns raised at the meeting.

A student mental health and well-being Call Centre was launched on 2nd March which ran for twelve weeks. During this time, 15 Voluntary Placement Student Callers reached out to 5726 students with an overall response rate of 56% (3195 students). Key themes continued to be loneliness and a sense of disconnection with the University, but in the main, most students appeared content. Student responders seemed generally appreciative of calls, with scores for self-reported perceived helpfulness averaging around 3.8 out of 5. Over 500 students had attended 'Look After Your Mate' training this year including at least one representative from each SU club and society. Whilst demand for counselling services currently remained around 25% below the same period prior to lockdown, Counsellors and student clients reported very positive outcomes from on-line and phone sessions, with student clients on average needing fewer sessions to achieve a positive outcome. It was difficult to gauge potential demand for Counselling and Mental Well-Being Services in 2021/22 and the University would continue to monitor the resources required to meet this. It was anticipated that more students would seek bereavement support on return to Campus, and additional training was being arranged for Counsellors and chaplains via the bereavement charity CRUSE next term. A mental health practitioner had been appointed with experience in working with young people with autism,

which would provide a higher level of expertise locally within the University, although formal diagnosis would continue to need to be undertaken via the NHS.

The other actions relating to placements, the placement tutor policy, and digital accessibility were now all embedded and being addressed within regular work being taken forward within the context of the implementation of the Employability strategy and the Education Strategy.

20/165 NOTED the following points raised by Council members:

- That Council members applauded the University's initiative to contact nearly 6,000 students by phone to enquire about their mental health and well-being. There had been a 56% response rate which was very positive with most respondents being first year and placement students, but Council members suggested that the students who did not respond might include some with mental health problems. The University was continuing to offer professional counselling services and it was anticipated that these services would be used more heavily when students returned to campus.
- That Council members asked what safeguards were put in place in relation to the 'Look After Your Mate' training and what would happen if confidentiality was compromised. The DVCE reported that this was an informal initiative to help students to be more aware of mental awareness generally and where advice and support could be sought if they felt a colleague was experiencing difficulties – it was not intended to replace professional support services.
- That Council members noted that the personal tutoring policy had been reviewed and that more formalised touch points and proactive conversations would be expected through the academic year. Members asked if new staff returning to campus would be inducted and made aware of the help, advice, services and new materials that were available to support them in their roles, including that of personal tutor. Staff members of Council indicated that some staff tended to be much more successful as personal tutors than others and would be proactively sought out by students, and asked if this important role would be valued in terms of workload and promotions criteria and good citizenship. The PVCE reported that the promotions criteria were in the process of being reviewed for the next cycle of promotions. The issue of workload would be reviewed over the summer with the Deans and the Executive Academic Group.
- That the Pro-Chancellor thanked Harry Sheppard and the other SU sabbaticals for organising the Student Panel and the University colleagues who had responded to the issues raised. A further student panel was scheduled for 9th February 2022 Council meeting. It was intended to organise similar panels for beneficiaries and staff.

ACTION: *Secretary of Council and appropriate Executive members to organise beneficiary panels*

2021/22 Budget and Strategic Financial Forecasts for 2021/22 to 2024/25

20/166 RECEIVED:

- i) Paper CO/20/87, which summarised the budget and planning process undertaken for 2021/22 to 2025/26 and the resultant budget and financial projections. This year's planning process had followed the standard process, unlike last year where the emergence of Covid-19 had created significant uncertainty. There remained some uncertainty, particularly in relation to international recruitment and commercial activity. The financial models reflected the University's strong performance in 2020/21 and aimed to deliver a financial structure that could maintain the financial sustainability of the University whilst planning for the longer term and investment in new opportunities, notably people and infrastructure improvements.
- ii) An oral report from the Chief Operating Officer setting out the context and process for the preparation of next year's budget and the financial forecasts, which had been discussed in detail and endorsed by the FIC. In view of the projected increased EBITDA and revision in the capital plans generated increased net cash balances, FIC members

suggested that this provided an opportunity for the University to invest in strategic developments and innovation that would help to achieve its mission and secure its financial sustainability. The University should continue its efforts to reduce costs and enhance efficiency. It was suggested that the University should return to a net £10 million cash position over the plan and to use the excess funding to invest in transformational strategic plans (eg research initiatives, business links, new academic programmes, new entities, etc). The University should also continue to invest in the student experience, digital services and ensuring the campus is a great place to work, study and visit.

20/167 NOTED: the following points raised by Council members:

- Learning from the Covid-19 experience suggests that it would be prudent to retain a war chest of cash to deal with potential unforeseen events.

20/168 RESOLVED:

- To approve, on the recommendation of the Executive and the FIC, the draft 2021/22 Budget and Strategic Financial Forecasts for 2021/22 to 2025/26 and their submission to OfS.
- To review the financial position of the University in the light of student recruitment at the 20th October 2021 meeting.

ACTION: *COO to take forward the implementation of the Budget and financial forecasts and to submit them to the OfS. The Vice-Chancellor and COO to draw up a list of priorities for capital development for consideration by FIC and Council going forward*

RESEARCH STRATEGY UPDATE

20/169 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/88, an update on the University Research Strategy, which was presented by Professor Simon Green, PVC Research. This highlighted the critical importance of Research to the University in terms of: the provision of research-led teaching and PhDs for its student beneficiaries; Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), collaborative and translational research with industry, plus policy engagement, for its beneficiaries in business and the professions and within the region and society; being Aston's second largest income source (in 2020/21, grants and contracts plus funding body grants would provide ca £28 million with the aim being for research grants and contracts to provide 15% of income); and being a key driver of Aston's external reputation.

Achievements since 2018 included: doubling research awards from £15 million (2013/14) to £30 million (2019/20); attaining a higher proportion of research funding from UKRI/ Research Council awards and KTP activity which included overheads and thereby had significantly improved Aston's research sustainability (from 20% to 25% contribution); Aston had prepared the best possible submission to REF 2021, with staff volume more than doubled whilst also increasing quality; four University Research Institutes (URI) had been accredited in Photonics, Bioenergy, Health/Neurodevelopment and Forensic Linguistics which were Aston's flagships and prioritised for research capital investment going forward; and the research environment had been restructured to underpin the quality of Aston's research in the long run, including looking ahead to REF 2028, including highly effective working relationships between RKE, Colleges, Finance, HR, Library and General Counsel.

2020/21 had been a particularly challenging year for research, principally due to the impact of Covid-19 which had: impacted on the capacity of staff to undertake research and to prepare funding bids (around one fifth lower than 2019/20); resulted in UKRI funding calls and decisions being delayed; decreased the capacity for industry and especially charities to

support research; and a fall in expected research income because of difficulties to spend during the pandemic.

20/170 NOTED: the following points raised by Council members

- Members asked to what extent the University as a research-focussed institution was able to apply its own research in improving its organisational effectiveness. Colleagues in the College of Business and Social Sciences undertook research into organisational effectiveness and where appropriate they did contribute to the development and implementation of the Aston People Strategy.
- Members noted that details of the Government's approach to funding of research and innovation were to be announced in the next comprehensive spending review, but it was clear that the emphasis would be strengthening the UK's global position in research and innovation to tackle such challenges as achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050. They asked if Aston was in a position to compete successfully for these new funding streams against the UK's most prestigious research-focussed universities. The PVCR indicated that the creation of the four accredited URIs enabled the University to focus resources to achieve distinctive, world leading and globally recognised research, and to develop strong international partnerships, and thereby to compete for such funding, particularly in the context of the levelling up agenda.
- Members asked how the University determined what research it would undertake and what it would not. The PVCR indicated that the University had developed systems for research ethics and due diligence which helped to ensure that all research undertaken was in accord with appropriate ethical and health and safety standards and the University's values and mission. Research proposals were developed either by URIs, research centres, groups of researchers or individual researchers.
- Members asked if the University ever decided to buy in research capability rapidly to achieve strategic research goals. The PVCR reported that the University tended to appoint individual staff to strengthen and broaden research teams, rather than to acquire new complete research teams since this approach had not previously necessarily worked to the University's advantage. It was anticipated that some of the current research centres or groups could develop the capacity to become URIs in future.
- Members asked if the University permitted unfunded research to take place and, if so, how this was reflected in the workload model for staff. The Executive Deans reported that unfunded research was generally conducted by early career researchers in order to develop proposals that could potentially attract funding. Unfunded research tended not to attract recognition within the workload model unless it was likely to result in publications (which counted towards the REF), impact case studies or enhanced the University's academic environment and reputation eg with presentations at international conferences.

20/171 RESOLVED:

To thank the PVCR for his helpful and interesting presentation.

STRATEGY REPORTS FOR DISCUSSION AND NOTING

REFERENCES FROM COMMITTEES

Report from the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)

20/172 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/89 which summarised issues considered at the ARC meeting held on 9th June 2021, including:

- ARC approved a Schedule of Business for ARC in 2021/22, noting the importance of ensuring that an update was received by ARC on progress with delivery of the action plan in response to the Senate Effectiveness Review at its October 2021 meeting.
- ARC approved the internal audit plan and fee for 2021/22. ARC members asked if sustainability should be included in the internal audit plan, with a view to assessing the extent to which the University was responding to the challenges of climate change and sustainability that were facing the HE sector, the region and society. Current school students were very much interested in these issues and this was likely to be a differentiating factor in their choice of potential university going forward. The Chief Operation Officer had indicated that reports would be made to the October meetings of FIC and Council on Aston's past performance in reducing Carbon emissions and its potential roadmap to the UK Government's 78% reduction target by 2035 prior to carbon neutral by 2050 (as recommended by Universities UK).
- ARC had endorsed PwC's proposed approach to supporting the development and enhancement of University's risk management arrangements. ARC members suggested that learning from the way that Aston had responded so quickly and positively to the Covid pandemic (which had not then been included on the risk register), it would be necessary for the University to retain and develop the agility, resilience, determination and horizon spanning in order to identify and deal effectively with future unanticipated events.
- ARC approved the External Audit plan for the Financial Year ending 31st July 2021. ARC resolved that BDO and the Executive should conclude negotiations over the external audit fee for 2020/21 as soon as possible
- ARC received a report on Managing Security Related Risks in Internationalisation which set out the actions being taken to best protect Aston University and its community of students and staff from international security related risks. (refer to Minute 20/160).
- ARC received an updated report on the University's compliance with the 23 OfS Conditions of Registration, noting that the University was currently compliant with all of the conditions of registration. There was a continuing risk of non-compliance against which the University had taken and was taking mitigating actions, and the Executive would continue to receive biannual reports on ongoing compliance and an annual report would be provided at the November meeting of ARC. Colleagues from PwC indicated that the report provided an example of sector good practice.
- ARC received a report setting out the legal compliance model in place at the University namely: i) compliance with applicable laws; and ii) compliance with legally binding arrangements. The University's legal authority was delegated in accordance with the Council's scheme of delegation and the Financial and Contracting Policy.
- ARC received a report on the outcome of the OfS Prevent Accountability and Data Return which was that, following its review of the information Aston had submitted, the OfS confirmed that it had no further queries about this submission.
- ARC considered reports of internal audit reviews of Procurement (rated as Needs Improvement), Information Governance Framework – Remote Working (rated as satisfactory with exceptions) and Student Services and Academic Registry - SLC Funding (rated as satisfactory). ARC requested the Executive to respond to the recommendations from these reports.

Report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee (FIC)

20/173 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/90 which summarised issues considered at the FIC meeting held on 8th 2021, including:

- The potential serious financial impact of the USS Pension 2020 Valuation (refer to Minute 20/160). Given the potential financial implications of addressing the USS deficit, plus other external factors such as more difficult international recruitment and the

Augar proposals for tuition fees, FIC members stressed that it was important for the University to expedite its efforts to develop a more flexible cost base.

- Following a detailed discussion of the proposals, FIC recommend that Council approve the draft Budget for 2021/22 and Strategic Financial Model Financial Projections for 2021/22 to 2025/26 be approved and used as the basis for the return to OfS in July 2021. The University's financial performance should be reviewed in the light of student recruitment in September/October 2021. The increased EBITDA and revision in the capital plans generated increased net cash balances. It was suggested that the University should return to a net £10 million cash position over the plan and to use the excess funding to invest in transformational strategic plans (eg research initiatives, business links, new academic programmes, new entities, etc). The University should also continue to invest in the student experience, digital services and ensuring the campus is a great place to work, study and visit (refer to Minute 20/166).
- FIC approved the budget of £2,265,810 to fund the design and implementation of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system using Microsoft Dynamics, subject to the licence fees being checked to ensure that they were the most competitive available.
- FIC approved a new Financial and Contracting Policy. The Financial Regulations, Financial Authority Limits and Bank Mandates documents had been consolidated within the new Policy, with the aim of improving the clarity, efficiency and effectiveness of the processes that relied on these documents.
- FIC received the Management Accounts 2020/21 for Period 9 (refer to Minute 20/174).
- FIC received a presentation on Fundraising/Development and Alumni Relations Office activities. FIC members had been impressed by the new 5-year Strategy which aimed to deliver value to Aston alumni through a clear commitment to their personal and professional development, while engaging their support in a focused way with Aston and its beneficiaries. A presentation by the DARO team was scheduled to be made to the 20th October Council meeting.

Management Accounts 2020/21 at 30th April 2021

20/174 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/91, the Management Accounts 2020/21 for Period 9, which showed a £15 million favourable variance versus budget, principally due to £15.1 million favourable variance on academic tuition fees. The full year forecast operating surplus before exceptionals was now £13.6 million, versus £9.5 million as forecast at P4. Cash balances were £17.8 million favourable to budget at P9 largely due to the favourable year to date EBITDA position (£25.6 million versus budget of £11.0 million), and slippage on the capital programme. No further drawdown of the HSBC loan was planned during 20/21. Cash at year end was forecast to be £18.3 million higher due to the increase in EBITDA and a lower level of in-year capital spend.

Report from the Nominations and Governance Committee (NGC)

20/175 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Chair of NGC summarising issues considered at the NGC meeting held on 16th June 2021, including:

- NGC had considered the membership of Council for 2021/22 and the roles and Committee memberships held by independent members. In this context it had considered the Council skills matrix updated with details for Matthew Crummack and Jason Wouhra. It had decided to undertake a review at its next meeting of the skills matrix in the light of the Council's current requirements and priorities.

- NGC was in the process of seeking a new independent member of Council and Chair of ARC. One promising candidate had been approached but unfortunately she was not in a position to take on the role at this stage. Further strong candidates were under active consideration. It might prove necessary to appoint an interim Chair from the current membership of Council until the new appointment was made and embedded.
- NGC had recommended to Council the approval of the proposal to move most of the content of University Statute 4, concerning the membership of Council, to a new Ordinance 1.10 with some amendments to the original wording which would provide a higher degree of flexibility to Council in determining the size of its membership, for submission to the Privy Council for approval (refer to Minute 20/151).
- NGC received a progress update on the action plan to address the recommendations from the independent Council Effectiveness Review, noting that this continued to be on track to complete all actions by the end of the 2020/21 academic year. NGC also approved a Summary Report on the Council Effectiveness Review to be published on the Aston website.

Report from the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee (RWSC)

20/176 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Chair of RWSC summarising issues considered at the RWSC meeting held on 16th June 2021, including:

- The potential serious financial impact of the USS Pension 2020 Valuation (refer to Minute 20/160).
- RWSC approved a substantially revised Senior Pay Policy which was now better aligned with the CUC's HE Senior Staff Remuneration Code and reflected the recommendations of the independent review of the Code published in January 2021 which had been commissioned by the CUC. The updated version provided further detail which addressed the requirement for clarity and transparency on the approach that had been adopted by the RWSC to the review of Executive salaries. It also detailed other changes that had been made by RWSC since the adoption of the original policy, eg ceasing the automatic application of the National Pay award and the ending of the previous Executive Bonus Scheme.
- RWSC received a presentation from the Executive Director of HR and Organisational Development on the Aston People Strategy, which focussed on building workforce capabilities and enabling effective people practices that were aligned and integrated with wider University strategies. The People Strategy included five main work streams which were to be delivered over the next three years:
 - Focused and effective leadership development to achieve strong leadership commitment and competence that delivered accountability and consequences for behaviours
 - Improving whole employee lifecycle planning in order to achieve a more flexible workforce model aligned to the University's operating model that delivered the right people with the right skills at the right cost
 - Building an inclusive Aston environment where equality and diversity practices delivered a distinctive environment with compassion and empathy. The Aston Staff Equality Report 2021 and Diversity and Inclusion Plan has been discussed at the previous RWSC meeting and was included as an agenda item for the Council meeting later today.
 - Building core employee and University capabilities to enable better ways of delivering with a constant focus on improvement, innovation and change to drive better beneficiary experience
 - Dynamic, agile, and progressive working practices to support new ways of working and better ways of delivering for beneficiaries

It was intended to provide in-depth reports on each of the individual workstreams to future RWSC meetings.

Report from the Senate

20/177 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/92 which summarised issues considered at the Senate meeting held on 2nd June 2021, including:

- Senate recommended to Council the approval of a proposal to move most of the content of University Statute 4, concerning the membership of Council, to a new Ordinance 1.10 with some amendments to the original wording, for submission to the Privy Council for approval (refer to minute 20/151).
- Senate had noted the productive partnership between the University and the Students' Union during this difficult year and the outgoing sabbatical officers were thanked for their excellent work in this regard.
- Senate received and discussed the College Research Strategies.
- Senate noted that work to implement the recommendations of the Senate Effectiveness Review for the start of next academic year was progressing well
- Senate received a report that the consultation on the proposal to close History, Language and Translation programmes had been concluded. Some suggestions received to align Translation and History with the strategic direction of the University had been accepted and the proposal had been updated accordingly.
- Senate received an update on the University Strategy review and refresh conducted by Nous
- The Education Strategy was presented to Senate for consideration ahead of the final proposal being considered by the University's Learning and Teaching Committee (ULTC) for final consideration and approval on 23 June
- ULTC were reviewing and enhancing the University's approach to academic integrity, working with the Students' Union and focussing on three main areas: positive reinforcement for students; assessment design; and a review of the University's regulatory processes in this domain.
- University Research Committee (URC) was reviewing the REF process for lessons learned to inform policy and practice moving forward.

Referred by the Executive

Aston Staff Equality Report 2021 and Diversity and Inclusion Plan

20/178 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/93, the Annual Staff Equality Report 2021 which summarised a wide array of data on staff equality and diversity characteristics, including the Gender Pay Gap, noting:

- Aston's had 1895 members of staff of which 47% were academic staff (benchmark 49.3%) and 53% were professional and support staff (benchmark 50.7%). Amongst academic staff, 60% were UK nationals (benchmark 69.2%) and 40% were non-UK nationals (benchmark 30.8%). Amongst professional and support staff, 90% were UK nationals (benchmark 89.5%) and 10% were non-UK nationals (benchmark 10.5%). For both academic and professional and support staff, there was an overall trend for the proportion of females to decrease as grade increased. For academic staff, 32% of those employed at grade 10 or above were women (benchmark 36.1%). For professional/support staff, 47% of those employed at grade 10 or above were women (benchmark 49.7%).
- Mean and median 2020 pay gap data showed the lowest gap since pay gap publication began in 2017, with both measures falling below 20% for the first time but there was

still room for improvement. The main reason for the gender pay gap was the much higher proportion of women recruited to posts in cleaning and catering, which were often part-time and lower paid. Recruitment data showed little bias between the proportion of female applicants and appointees across the institution.

- The proportion of BAME staff at Aston (24%) was significantly higher than benchmarks, but lower than the proportion of BAME people in the Birmingham population (42%). The proportion of staff identifying as BAME was also significantly lower than the proportion of Aston undergraduate students (75%). For academic and research staff, the proportion of white staff increased with grade; the same trend was shown for professional and support staff. The disparity between the ethnic makeup of the student and academic staff populations, which was partly due to the national and international recruitment pool for such staff, highlighted the importance of the University ensuring the students from BAME communities were provided with appropriate role models.
- This trend was reflected in Aston's 2020 ethnicity pay gap data, which showed higher mean and median hourly rates for white staff by 18.6% and 17.7% respectively. Regarding recruitment, there was a consistent pattern across the University for proportionately fewer BAME appointees compared with applicants. This suggested some bias within the process. Positive action was being taken to increase the representation of BAME people within Aston's staff cohort, particularly at senior levels, and to address the recruitment bias towards white individuals through fair recruitment practices, including improved wording of advertisements, more accessible websites, anonymous recruitment processes, diverse panels and training for panel members. Development of a pipeline was being achieved through a mentoring and coaching scheme, particularly for early career researchers.
- Overall, the data showed a lack of female and BAME representation at senior levels within the institution. Diverse senior role models were important for staff and students, and diversity in leadership was shown to impact on inclusive culture within organisations. It was also important that students, staff and stakeholders were represented in Aston's marketing materials, online activity, and within its curricula. 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.
- 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 yielded some interesting results and raised some issues. The University was working with the SU in addressing the issues raised, in communicating effectively with the various groups, in challenging inappropriate behaviours, and in providing safe spaces and a "report and support" initiative.
- Aston currently held a range of Athena SWAN awards and was working toward next level submissions. Aston was currently one of only 18 University Silver Award holders; there had been no Gold University Awards to date.

20/179 NOTED:

That Council members applauded the progress that had been made to-date in promoting equality and in addressing the various pay gaps. However, they suggested that the University's Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan should be more explicit about the equality targets and timescales for achieving them.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

20/180 NOTED:

The next normal Council meeting was scheduled for 1:30 pm on Wednesday, 20th October 2021.

VALEDICTORY REMARKS

20/181 RESOLVED:

To join the Chair in thanking the following retiring members for their outstanding service to Council and the University:

- i) **Toby Lewis**, who would be standing down at the end of his term of office on 31st July. To record the grateful thanks of members to Toby for his outstanding contributions to the University, particularly in support of the implementation of the Aston Medical School, and for the unstinting and dedicated service that he had given whilst a member (from 2017) and as Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee (since 2018). Members also extended their best wishes to Toby when he takes up his new role with the King's Fund in London where he would be undertaking research and policy work on health inequalities and poverty.
- ii) **Harry Sheppard**, who would shortly be completing his one-year term of office as the Students Union President. Harry had made an excellent contribution to the SU and the University, particularly in relation to the high profile and level of support provided by the SU generally for students and their welfare and engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. Harry had established excellent working relationships with members of Council and the Executive, and his confident contributions had continued to bring the student interest to the heart of Council meetings. Members wished Harry well when he returns to his final year of studies at Aston.
- iii) **John Walter**, who would be retiring from the University on 30th June from his role of Director of Governance and Secretary to Council and Senate. John was first appointed as Head of Registry and Planning Services in October 1995, was promoted to Academic Registrar from 2005 and then to Director of Governance from 2012. The Senate had awarded John the Senate Gold Medal for his meritorious service to the University.

JGW/21.6.21