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**Minutes of the 332<sup>nd</sup> COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2022 in Room 3, Conference Aston and by videoconference**

PRESENT: Dame Yve Buckland (Chair)  
Dr Hannah Bartlett\*  
Ranjit Dhindsa\*  
Professor Gill Nicholls\*  
Dr Sue Noffke  
Dr Vij Randeniya  
Professor Paul Topham  
Balraj Purewal

Saskia Loer Hansen  
Dr Melanie Gibbs\*  
Dr Matthew Crummack\*  
Dr Jason Wouhra\*  
Neil Scott  
Dr Mike Wright

APOLOGIES: Dr Rob Perrins

IN ATTENDANCE:

Professor Ruth Ayres  
Professor Anthony Hilton  
Professor Simon Green  
Professor Stephen Garrett  
Atul Rana

Richard Billingham  
Mark Smith  
Gary Hughes  
Liam Nevin

Daniel Locke- Wheaton (for agenda item 4.4 only)

\*indicates member of Council present on Teams

**Governance Matters**

21/125 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Dr Rob Perrins.

21/126 Declarations of Interest

Dame Yve Buckland declared an interest in agenda item 5.3 (Appraisal of the Pro-Chancellor and proposed extension to term of office) and advised that she would leave the room for this item.

**Minutes**

21/127 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 330<sup>th</sup> and 331<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Council, held on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2022 and 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022 respectively.

21/128 **Matters Arising**

Paper CO 21/65 was received and noted.

**STRATEGY REPORTS (for discussion and noting)****President of the Students' Union Report**

21/129 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/129 together with an oral report from the SU President which summarised the key activities of the President and the Student Union officers over the course of the year

21/130 RESOLVED:

That the President of the Student Union and the Student Union officers be congratulated on their successful term of office and their constructive engagement with the Council.

**Vice- Chancellors Report**

21/131 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/67 together with an oral report from the Vice- Chancellor, and a supplementary Paper CO/21/68 concerning the management of risk in Internationalisation. The following points were noted:

- That the NSS results had been published during the course of the morning and the initial analysis was positive, demonstrating a 1% increase in satisfaction with the results placing Aston higher than other Birmingham Universities. Further analysis of the detail was being undertaken
- The University was in a strong position with recruitment for the 2022/23 cycle with the highest recorded volume of undergraduate and post graduate applications received.
- The University had responded to DfE consultation on higher education reform and proposals for the Lifelong Loan Entitlement.
- Actions had been implemented to manage the security related risks in internationalisation with a focus on due diligence processes, access to buildings and facilities on campus, travel risk assessments and communication about security related risks. The Vice-Chancellor undertook to ensure that the Education Portfolio was represented on the Partnerships Relation Committee.
- Professor Ian Wong had been appointed as Regius Chair and his internationally recognised expertise as a pharmacoepidemiologist would enable the College to build capacity in health analytics.
- The Safeguarding Policy had been updated and safeguarding training had now been made compulsory for all staff with student-facing responsibilities.

**Pro-Chancellor's Report**

21/132 RECEIVED:

Being an oral report from the Pro-Chancellor in which it was noted that the Pro-Chancellor would continue to hold discussions with the Vice-Chancellor designate in order to ensure an orderly transition into the role.

**STRATEGIC ISSUES (for discussion and approval)****Research Excellence Framework**

21/133 RECEIVED:

Being a paper providing a summary and initial analysis of Aston's outcome in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021

21/134 NOTED:

Aston had largely succeeded in its primary objective of growing its research power through its increased staff submission. However, it was clear that performance across the sector had improved, and this presented a challenge with respect to Aston's quality ranking and its relative position within the sector.

It would be necessary to consider the strategic position of research within the University portfolio and this would be an important focus for the strategy review to be led by the Vice-Chancellor designate over the autumn of 2022.

21/135 RESOLVED:

That Council:

- Note the analysis and discussion of Aston's REF results
- Support the recommendation to consider the implications of REF 2021 in the next iteration of Aston's strategy.

### **University Budget 2022/23 and Financial Projections**

21/136 RECEIVED:

Being a paper summarising the budget and planning process for 2022/23 to 2026/27 incorporating the matters noted by the Finance and Infrastructure Committee and the Vice-Chancellor designate.

21/138 RESOLVED:

Noting the comments of the committee and the Vice-Chancellor designate as summarised in the report, and upon the recommendation of the Finance and Infrastructure Committee, Council approve the following:

- The proposed 2022/23 revenue budget, including the target of a 5% surplus.
- The proposed financial projections for 2023/24 -2025/26 noting the implicit cost efficiencies required to deliver a 5% surplus and the risks to the assumptions used, notably cost inflation of greater than 2%
- The 2022/23 -2025/26 capital expenditure plan noting this does not give approval for capital projects, which will be subject to approval as defined in the financial delegations, but it does provide a capital planning framework against which to consider those specific projects.

### **KPI Targets: Review of Performance and Approval of Targets 2022/23**

21/139 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/71 being a paper summarising performance against the 15 KPIs adopted by the University and proposing beneficiary KPI 2022/23 targets.

21/140 NOTED:

- That the structure of KPI reporting had been effective but it was an opportune time to review performance reporting as part of the strategy refresh.
- That work would be undertaken on the development of an integrated performance report to support the delivery of the strategy and the targets would be reviewed as part of this process.

21/141 RESOLVED

- That Council noted the University beneficiary KPIs for 2022/23 and the intention to review these as summarised in the preamble to this minute.

### **Annual Health and Safety Report**

21/145 RECEIVED

- Paper CO/21/73 being the annual health and safety report for 2021/22.

21/146 NOTED

- Accident rates had remained low during the period with the student incident rate per 100,000 at risk significantly below the sector average and staff incident rates slightly above the sector average.
- There had been 35 unplanned fire alarm activations. West Midlands Fire Service had undertaken a number of inspections and no deviation from fire safety standards had been identified.
- A full review of chemical storage had been undertaken following an incident of concern in January 2022. This had resulted in additional training being given to technical staff and a new software solution to manage chemical inventories.
- Four external audits had been undertaken covering laser safety and ionising and non-ionising radiation, with no significant findings identified.

21/147 AGREED

- The Director of Health, Safety and Business Continuity be commended for his leadership.
- That further development of the reporting arrangements be undertaken to reflect the matters raised by Council members and summarised below, and that the Chair of Audit and Risk Committee be consulted for this purpose.
- Mental health and well-being of staff and students should be incorporated into the report with data sets to identify stress and anxiety as causes of absence.
- Details of reported incidents and near misses should be summarised.
- Trend analysis should be incorporated into the report.
- Compliance with University wide health and safety requirements such as training and completion of risk assessments should be reported.
- External validation or peer review should be sought and summarised in future reports.
- Consideration be given to the reporting arrangements through to Council in relation to health and safety assurance.

21/148 RESOLVED:

- That Council note the contents of the paper and endorse the next steps as summarised in the preamble to this minute.

### **REFERRALS FROM COMMITTEES**

#### **Report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee**

21/149 NOTED:

The report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee was noted.

#### **Network Infrastructure Upgrade**

21/150 NOTED:

Report CO/21/75 being the report of the Finance and Infrastructure Committee recommending the investment of £8 million to fund the upgrade of the campus network infrastructure. The investment would be funded from the Digital Aston 5-year capital allocation of £7.5 million with a further £500k to provide additional wireless coverage and throughput.

21/151 RESOLVED:

- That Council approve the proposed investment of £8 million for the Network Infrastructure Upgrade.

#### **Report from the Audit and Risk Committee**

21/152 NOTED:

- Amongst the positive assurances Council's attention was drawn to the remedial work to correct the outstanding errors on the ESFA record in relation to degree apprentices as a result of which it was expected that the provision in the accounts could be released.
- The wider executive attendance at the meeting was a positive development and this would be formalised in the amended terms of reference.

21/153 RESOLVED:

- That the amended terms of reference for the Audit and Risk Committee be approved.

#### **Report from the Nomination and Governance Committee**

Being a verbal report from the Chair of the Nomination and Governance Committee.

The Pro-Chancellor having declared an interest left the room for the discussion and resolution of minute 21/155.

21/154 NOTED:

- The Senior Independent Director had conducted the annual review of the Pro-Chancellor and areas of focus for the next twelve months were discussed. The views of independent members of Council had been sought and there was strong support for, and appreciation of, the leadership and performance of the Pro-Chancellor.
- The Senior Independent Director had also consulted the independent members of Council on a proposed extension of the term of office of the Pro-Chancellor and the Committee had discussed and endorsed an extension to the term of office for three years. This would allow for the appropriate support to be provided to the new Vice-Chancellor and the development of an orderly transition plan for the Pro-Chancellor's successor.

21/155 RESOLVED:

- That the term of office of the Pro-Chancellor be extended to the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2025

The Pro-Chancellor re-joined the meeting at this point.

21/156 NOTED:

- That the committee had undertaken interviews for independent members in light of the vacancies arising on Council and it was recommended that Gill Nicholls, Tim Pile and Phil Popham (whose CVs had been circulated separately) be appointed.

- It was noted that with the retirement of Dr Mike Wright a vacancy would arise for the position of Senior Independent Director, and it was recommended that Dr Sue Noffke assume this role.

21/157 RESOLVED:

- That Gill Nicholls, Tim Pile and Phil Popham be appointed as independent members of Council with effect from the 1<sup>st</sup> August 2022 for a term of three years.
- That Dr Sue Noffke be appointed as the Senior Independent Director

#### **Report from the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee**

21/158 RECEIVED:

A verbal report from the Chair of the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee. Issues considered by the committee included:

- A review of the People Strategy which summarised progress with the delivery of the strategy and the significant challenges that were emerging from changes in the external environment.
- The Annual Health and Safety report which was a matter considered by Council as a separate agenda item.

#### **Report from the Senate (for noting)**

21/159 RECEIVED:

The report from the Senate was noted.

#### **GOVERNANCE**

#### **Council Workplan 2022/23**

21/160 RECEIVED:

The Council workplan for the academic year 2022/23 it being noted that the Pro-Chancellor had asked the Council Secretary to consider best practice and make recommendations on any changes arising from that.

#### **Terms of Reference – Chairs Committee**

21/161 RECEIVED:

Paper CO21/79 being the proposed terms of reference of the Chairs Committee

21/162 RESOLVED:

- That the terms of reference of the Chairs Committee be approved.

#### **Any Other Business**

21/163 The Pro-Chancellor reported that a special meeting of Council would be arranged for between late September and early October in order for the Vice-Chancellor to share first impressions with Council.

It being the final meeting for Dr Mike Wright, Dr Melanie Gibbs and Ranjit Dhindsa valedictory remarks were made in respect of their significant and valued contributions to the work of Council.

Council expressed its appreciation for the work that Saskia Hansen had done as the Interim Vice-Chancellor and looked forward to a continuing productive working relationship in her substantive role.

**Date of Council's Next Meeting**

21/164 The schedule of Council meetings for the academic year 2022/23 was noted.