

Minutes of the 309th COUNCIL meeting, Thursday, 21st June 2018

PRESENT:	Dame Yve Buckland (Chair) Professor Alec Cameron Professor Helen Higson Dr Fiona Lacey Dr Sue Noffke Dr Vij Randeniya Professor Surinder Sharma	Stuart Doughty Professor Alison Hodge Dr Toby Lewis Reema Quessou Neil Scott
APOLOGIES:	Amanda Allen Dr Melanie Gibbs Dr Rob Perrins	Lance Doughty Professor Kevin Morley Dr Mike Wright
IN ATTENDANCE:	Amna Atteeq David Farrow Ian Oldacre* * For minutes 17/241-242	Alan Charters* Saskia Loer Hansen** John Walter (Secretary) **For minutes 17/243-244

GOVERNANCE MATTERS

Declarations of Interest

17/230 NOTED:

That Toby Lewis was the Chief Executive of Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust which was a potential commercial supplier of services to the University, and that there were no other new declarations of interest from Governors, or from those in attendance, with respect to any agenda items.

Membership of Council and its Committees for 2018/19

17/231 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/112, the membership of Council and its Committees for 2018/19.

Schedule of Meetings for the University Council and its Committees

17/232 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/113, a schedule of meetings for the Council and its Committees for 2018/19.

MINUTES AND UNIVERSITY NEWS

Minutes

17/233 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 308th meeting of the Council, held on 14th February 2018.

Matters Arising

17/234 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/114, a report on matters arising from the minutes of the 308th Council meeting.

Capital Projects (Minute 17/208)

17/235 NOTED:

- i) [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]
- ii) [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

Collaboration with Cranfield (Minute 17/210.vii)

17/236 NOTED:

- i) That Aston's successful bid, with Cranfield University, for a HEFCE Catalyst grant (worth £800k to Aston) to develop new curriculum and pedagogy would provide an opportunity for both institutions to develop new delivery models, including accelerated degrees, for use on campus and elsewhere.
- ii) That Cranfield had been selected as the lead of the feasibility phase for Milton Keynes University (MK:U) which would focus on STEM and related subjects.
- iii) That good progress was being made with joint Transnational Education activity in Oman with the new University of Muscat, with consideration currently being given to extending the initiative to further subject areas. A joint meeting with Cranfield was planned for 12th July to discuss these initiatives.
- iv) That research collaboration with Cranfield was actively being pursued and a number of collaborations were in train, including a joint submission to EPSRC for a Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT).

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

17/237 [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

New Higher Education Regulatory Framework (minutes 17/218-219)

17/238 NOTED:

That the University had submitted, prior to the deadline of 30th April 2018, an application to register with the Office for Students (OfS) as an HE Provider within the Approved (Fee Cap) category, which would provide eligibility for OfS public grant funding; UKRI public grant funding provided by Research England; Research Council funding; student support funding and fee limits; and application for Tier 4 sponsorship licence (subject to Home Office rules). The OfS had undertaken to provide a formal response to the University's application to register by July 2018.

Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive's Report

17/239 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/115 and an oral report from the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, noting the following points:

i) University Strategy

- The implementation of the new Aston strategy was being taken forward via a portfolio of strategy implementation projects, and through major University processes, notably the budget. Significant strategy implementation projects included reviews of taught programmes, research strategy, and business engagement, and a new international strategy. A report on the governance and status of the projects was included as an addendum to the Vice-Chancellor's report.
- Members of Council emphasised the need for urgency in progressing the implementation of the new Strategy. It was noted that it was important for the University to be mindful of the need to meet external deadlines (eg UCAS deadlines), which if missed could result in delays in implementation. Expedient completion of the review of the Estates Strategy and the capital development plan was also necessary to ensure that the infrastructure and resources were in place to enable the Strategy implementation.

ACTION: *Progress with the Strategy Implementation should be a standing item at future Council meetings.*

ii) League Table Rankings

- Aston's ranking had recently risen in the Complete Universities Guide from 49th to 45th, and in the Guardian from 51st to 43rd. This was in spite of recent efforts with academic staff recruitment not yet having had impact on the ranking, and was primarily due to excellent results last year in the NSS. Aston continued to do better on 'output' measures than 'input' measures.
- In one of the main international rankings, QS, Aston's ranking had fallen from 373 to 381. The major issue in this case was the 'academic reputation survey' (a survey of academics, distributed globally) was not effectively utilised to Aston's advantage – it was important for all Schools to nominate academic experts who had an appreciation of Aston's strengths and would be likely to recommend the University in the QS survey. On the positive side, there was an improvement in Aston's "employer ranking" measure in this survey.
- The latest version of the Government's Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) which considered graduate salaries five years after graduating had recently been published. Pleasingly, Aston had been ranked in the top 15 in the country, and in company with the most reputed universities. Aston was placed even higher in some of the subject level rankings. Given that Aston's key value proposition was employability and earnings, this was a very important result that would feature heavily in future marketing and recruitment campaigns.

iii) HEFCE/OfS Assurance Review

- A HEFCE Assurance Consultant had visited the University on 24th May as part of Aston's five-yearly HEFCE Assurance Review (HAR). The Assurance Consultant had met with several members of Council and staff to test and validate the processes which inform and assure Aston's formal annual submissions to HEFCE. The Vice-Chancellor had received oral feedback from the Assurance Consultant at the end of the HAR visit. Aston was given a completely clean bill of health with no conditions or recommendations and there would be no need for submission of further information or visits. The Pro-Chancellor thanked members of Council, the Executive and senior staff who had contributed to the HAR and helped to achieve such a positive outcome.

President of the Students' Union's Report

17/240 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/116, and a report from the current President and the President-elect of the Students' Union which highlighted the achievements of the Union over the academic year.

The following points were noted;

- Implementation of the new SU Strategic Framework to 2020 was progressing well. One of the key strands within the Framework was for the Union better to represent the academic interests of Aston students. Work towards this strand had included the establishment of a Student Voice department, strengthened support for societies and wider support for Student Representatives.
- Construction of the new SU building was on track for completion in February 2019.
- Student engagement in the Union's democratic processes had improved, with more candidates standing and more votes being cast in elections. A total of 182 nominations were received across the 10 categories for Academic Awards (run in partnership with CLIPP) with 64 for student representatives and 118 for academics.
- The SU's Advice and Representation Centre (ARC) has been rated by students in the University's student survey as the best service on campus.
- The Union had taken up with the University a range of student concerns, including: insufficient space in the Library at its busiest times; the impact (or perceived impact) of the UCU strike action, particularly for final year students; dedicated study space for Postgraduate Research students; the need for areas for students who do not live on campus where they could spend time between lectures, without feeling pressure to spend money; too many examinations held on Saturdays owing to insufficient examination rooms; and meeting the demand to speak to an advisor in the Advice and Representation Centre.
- Council members suggested that the Union give consideration to extending the terms of office of Sabbatical Officers to add value to and enhance the continuity of the service they provide.

ACTION: *CFO and Provost to prepare a paper on the provision of flexible study and social space and the student demand for more space in the Library for consideration by the Finance and Infrastructure Committee.*

STRATEGIC ISSUES

Estates Strategy Review

17/241 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/117, a progress report on the ongoing Estates Strategy Review, presented by Alan Charters, Chief of Operations and Estates, and Ian Oldacre, Director of Estates. The intention of the Review was to align more closely investment plans with the priorities of the new University Strategy. Of particular importance was the need to co-locate and connect the Schools both to address fragmentation and to promote cross-disciplinary collaboration, together with an increased focus on the needs of key beneficiaries and the need to remove the least sustainable buildings. A range of options had been evaluated and the emerging preferred option (Option 5) on which further consultations were planned included the following key developments:

- A new building to accommodate both ABS and LSS
- Consolidation of Professional Services (back office and Executive functions) in released accommodation in the ABS Building
- Co-location of AMS, EAS and LHS in the Main Building
- Replacement of the South Wing with an atrium to provide improved vertical circulation in the Main Building and which would also allow the North Wing to be demolished
- The programme of works would be an extension of the current capital plan and build on projects already planned in the Main Building including schemes designed to provide all student-facing services on the Ground Floor

- The programme would entail the demolition of North Wing, South Wing and Vision Sciences building.

Further detailed work on the preferred option was underway to identify and resolve implementation issues, with a view to a final plan being presented to the FIC by 31st July 2018.

17/242 NOTED the following points:

- Council members generally agreed that the preferred option 5 was a strong starting point for a new Estates Strategy. This could provide the basis for a cost-effective plan to enable the co-location of cognate schools to facilitate collaboration and the demolition of buildings with a shelf-life of less than 10 years. Consideration should be given to any potential unintended consequences of proceeding with this option.
- Council members highlighted the fact that Aston was competing globally for students, academics and funding, and would need to develop digital capabilities to retain its market share and capabilities. They asked if the Estates review had taken into account the radical impact that IT and associated digital technologies was likely to have on the ways that staff and students operate and how they could be used to drive efficiencies and value for money: both of which could impact significantly future estate requirements. They also asked if the Aston's IT investment plans had been reviewed in the light of the new University Strategy. It was noted that the University was in the process of reviewing its IT Strategy, including capital expenditure requirements, and that a report on this would be made to the FIC and Council in the autumn.
- Members queried if the continued use of cellular offices for academic staff had been reconsidered and challenged in the interests of ensuring the efficient and effective utilisation of space and to reflect new working practices enabled by digital technologies which were increasingly employed across the public and private sectors. It was reported that the preferred option would result in a 30% (2,600 m²) reduction in the amount of academic staff accommodation and in spite of the planned growth in staff numbers.
- Members suggested that an alternative option should also be provided for Council to consider, probably for a smaller estate (eg with more emphasis on the impact that IT investment could have).
- Members asked whether use of the new building for an ABS/LSS facility was the right option and suggested that perhaps the more demanding needs of the engineering/science/medical laboratory facilities would be better accommodated in the new build. It was reported that the scale of the new building would need to be greatly enhanced to accommodate the needs of engineering/science/medical laboratories, whereas their current locations in the main building already had the infrastructure for science-based activity. The alternative option with LHS/AMS using the new build, costs of providing science-based provision would incur £40m additional cost.
- Members queried whether it was really necessary for all activity to take place on a single campus. It was suggested that the University could review the need for some (eg back-office) professional support services to be delivered off campus. It was noted that some staff had expressed the view that the Executive should be located on campus.
- Members asked whether the alternative new site option at £300m+ should be considered to help deliver Aston's stretch ambition, given that the preferred option would cost £225m in any case. It was noted that the current Aston campus had the advantage of being an urban campus with excellent city centre and travel connections and a cost-effective new site would probably not enjoy such a location and access to facilities.
- The preferred option could increase borrowing from £30m to £80m. The trade-off between ambition, cost and risk would need to be considered through the phased implementation of the programme of works.

- Three task and finish groups (Learning Space; Staff Accommodation; and Laboratory Sharing) had been established and had yet to complete their work. Their findings would inform the implementation of the Estates Strategy.
- Council members emphasised the need for urgency in agreeing the estates and IT strategies to inform the development of a new capital plan. This could facilitate a systematic evaluation and prioritisation of all potential projects and enable the University to identify financing/borrowing requirements. The University Strategy implementation projects (eg portfolio reviews for programmes and research) should be fast tracked as their outcomes could impact significantly on future estates and IT requirements.

ACTION: *The Executive would present recommendations to FIC and Council in the autumn 2018*

International Strategy Update

17/243 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/118 and a presentation from Saskia Loer-Hansen, Pro-Vice-Chancellor International, outlining the key elements of the new International Plan. The paper provided the headline vision, goals and objectives of the International Plan on a single page; emphasised the urgency of the need to focus on international recruitment to build a more sustainable revenue base for the University; suggested a number of KPIs for international activity; and proposed the use of projects and initiatives to drive outcomes.

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

17/244 NOTED the following points:

- Members supported the approach and plans to progress the International Strategy.
- A set of international KPIs were under development.
- [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]
- The Council would be provided with regular progress reports on international activity.

University Key Performance Indicators

17/245 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/119 presented by the David Farrow, Executive Director of Marketing Strategy and Communications, which reported progress against the University's Key Performance Indicators (KPI), and outlined the actions planned to address those KPIs which were below target or were moving in the wrong direction. This was the last occasion that this particular set of KPIs would be presented to Council as they related to the previous University Strategy; a new set of KPIs for the new Strategy was under development.

Strategic Risk Management

17/246 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/120, presented by the Chief Financial Officer, which included an updated Strategic Risk Policy, including a Risk Appetite Statement that had been revised to reflect the University strategy and comments received from the Executive, Audit Committee and Council, and advice from PwC, the Internal Auditors. The format and content of the University risk register had also been reviewed and the risk profile now included six current strategic risks and three future potential strategic risks to the University, and a number of potential catastrophic or material operational risks. The risk register was currently "work in progress" as it was being developed in line with the work associated with implementation of

the University strategy and some details, including action dates, had still to be determined. The Audit Committee had endorsed the Strategic Risk Policy and had invited the Executive to review the risk appetite statement in the light of the new University Strategy.

Aston Medical School (AMS)

17/247 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/121, presented by the Professor Helen Cameron, Dean of Medical Education and Chair of Medical Education, which reported progress with implementation of AMS including: accreditation by the General Medical Council (GMC); governance; curriculum and assessment development; staff recruitment and training; estates matters; and student applications for 2018.

17/248 NOTED the following points:

- The GMC New School Visit (4th May 2018) has raised no 'serious concerns' and they had commented on the substantial work completed since the last visit in June 2017. Areas that could be improved included support for the small team to deliver the models of learning including technology enhanced learning, completion of an adequate real estate infrastructure as soon as possible, careful monitoring of the clinical placements to ensure capacity is not overstretched, considerable training required for the personal tutors, and further clarity about medical representation on Fitness to Practise panels required on the School's policy.
- [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]
- The MBChB Programme Specification had received full approval for delivery starting in 2018, and this included the assessment strategy, which was based on the Leicester curriculum.
- [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

ACTION: *The University should ensure that the remaining issues to be addressed are completed in time for the student intake in 2018/19. The contingency plan should be in place in the event that a higher intake should enrol.*

Financial Matters

Period 9 Management Accounts

17/249 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/122 containing the Management Accounts 2017/18 for the period ending 30th April 2018, together with an oral year-to-date update from the Chief Financial Officer (CFO). The forecast surplus for the year had increased from £7.8m to £13m. Lower than forecast tuition fee income of £5.9m had been offset by forecast underspends on pay £4.6m (currently 73 vacancies), student support £1.9m, non-pay £1.1m, £0.7m depreciation and £0.5m interest payable. This was largely explained by lower than planned recruitment to Aston On-line. The full year capital plan was now forecast at £23.8m, £11.5m below budget. The forecast included £4.4m of slippage from 2016/17 into 2017/18. This was offset by £11.4m estates projects and £3.3m of equipment projects from 2017/18 that had slipped into future years, reduction in contingencies £1.0m and other in-year adjustments of £0.2m. The forecast year end cash position had been increased to reflect the reduction in capital spend and £2.5m received for the transfer of rights relating to the sale of the CEAC building, which had not been included in the budget. A £5m loan from EIB and a £250k Salix loan were repaid in January and a £30m EIB loan planned for drawdown in November had not been drawn down.

2018/19 Budget and Strategic Financial Plan

17/250 RECEIVED:

Papers CO/17/123, the Draft Budget for 2018/19 and CO/17/124, the Five-Year Financial Forecasts 2018/19 to 2022/23. The CFO reported that the strategic financial model had been updated to reflect the latest forecast for 2015/16, Draft Budget 2016/17 and a review and roll forward of strategic planning assumptions through to 2020/21. It was intended that the draft Budget and Five-year Financial Forecasts would be submitted to the OfS as part of the University's Annual Assurance Returns. The submission would highlight that the Estates plans were under review and capital expenditure might change. The paper also addressed the regulatory context, trends in the UK and global HE market, recent sector financial performance, Aston's strengthened financial position, and risks and sensitivities.

17/251 NOTED the following points:

- the Budget and Financial Forecasts reflected the new University Strategy, and included a robust development of income targets which would diversify income away from reliance on UK undergraduate students to a more balanced portfolio.
- [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]
- the original capital expenditure budget had been re-phased on the advice of the FIC, to show a more realistic pattern of expenditure, although it was recognised that this would need to be changed in the light of the new Estates Strategy to be approved by Council in October 2018.
- that the most significant risk was the achievement of target income from student recruitment in a very competitive environment. This was mitigated by the increased diversity in the sources of potential students, so that if one area was underperforming there should be scope to increase recruitment in other areas.

17/252 RESOLVED:

To approve, on the recommendation of the Executive and the FIC, the draft Budget for 2018/19 and the Five-Year Financial Forecasts 2018/19 to 2022/23 and their submission to OfS.

ACTION: CFO

Academic Staff Recruitment 2017/18

17/253 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/125 and an oral report from the Provost on progress with academic staff recruitment, noting that 48 additional staff were in post compared to last year. 88 further positions were currently being recruited for the next academic year. The work force planning review had resulted in significant improvements in the HR recruitment processes. Some delays in recruitment were still occurring because of a less than optimal interface between HR and the School offices - this was currently being addressed. The University was committed to the provision of equality of opportunity, and ensured diverse short and long lists in terms of gender and ethnicity, and also that interview panels had appropriate representation in terms of gender and ethnicity.

STRATEGY REPORTS

References from Committees

Report from the Audit Committee

17/254 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/126 which summarised issues considered at the Audit Committee meetings held on 22nd March and 6th June 2019 (the full minutes of which were contained in the Resources and Background Material).

17/255 NOTED:

That Audit Committee had requested the Executive to ensure that all internal and external audit recommendations were addressed by the 17th October meeting of the Audit Committee. An explanation should be provided if any of the actions could not be completed by then and a realistic deadline of when the work would be completed should be specified or (for the very old actions) that the actions had been superseded or were no longer relevant and would be closed.

Report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee (FIC)

17/256 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/127 which summarised issues considered at the FIC meeting held on 4th June 2018 (the full minutes of which were contained in the Resources and Background Material).

17/257 NOTED:

That FIC had emphasised the urgent need for the completion of the ongoing reviews of the Estates and IT strategies to inform the development of a new capital plan. Such a plan was necessary to enable the systematic evaluation and prioritisation of potential projects and to enable the University to identify financing/borrowing requirements. Capital projects had a long lead time and delays arising from such debates could impede their delivery which could impact on the effective and timely delivery of the University Strategy. FIC had recommended that the Vice-Chancellor and CFO should be more personally involved in maintaining the impetus in this arena.

Report from the Nominations and Remuneration Committee (NRC)

17/258 RECEIVED:

An oral report from Vij Randeniya, NRC Chair, on the first meeting of the new Committee held on the morning before the Council meeting.

17/259 NOTED:

- That the NRC had requested Innecto, external consultants, to review Aston's senior staff remuneration arrangements in relation to the HE, public and private sectors. They had led a discussion with NRC on the scope, parameters and metrics to be used for their ongoing review. They had presented some initial findings which indicated that the current V-C's salary was broadly in line with the median for the sector. Recent changes to the governance arrangements around remuneration had helped to bring Aston into line with the CUC remuneration code of practice

- Innecto had agreed to lead a similar discussion with the Executive.
- There were a number of policies and procedures around remuneration that needed to be reviewed and strengthened considerably (eg pay structure, performance review, bonuses, severance, redundancy, etc).

17/260 RESOLVED:

To approve on recommendation from the Nominations Committee the reappointment of Kevin Morley for a second term ending 31st July 2020 and his appointment to the Audit Committee.

Report from the Senate

17/261 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/17/128 which summarised issues considered at the meetings of Senate held on 14th March and 30th May 2018 (the full minutes of which were contained in the Resources and Background Material).

Annual Report on Health and Safety for 2017

17/262 RESOLVED:

To approve Paper CO/17/129 comprising an executive summary of the Annual Report on Health and Safety for 2017 (the full report was contained in the Resources and Background Material)

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

17/263 [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

17/264 NOTED:

That the next Council meeting was scheduled for 17th October 2018.

REVIEW OF 309th MEETING

17/265 NOTED:

That members had engaged positively in consideration of matters of strategic importance to the University, and independent members had the opportunity to seek further information from and to challenge the Executive. Members felt that some of the papers were far too long and encouraged the Executive to ensure that future papers were more concise and focussed on the key areas for consideration by Council.

VALEDICTORY REMARKS

Professor Surinder Sharma

17/266 RESOLVED:

To join the Chair in thanking Surinder Sharma for his outstanding service to the University, Council and the Audit Committee who would be leaving Council on completion of this second

term of office. Surinder would continue to provide advice to the University on equality, diversity and ethics issues. Surinder was to receive an honorary degree at this year's degree ceremonies.

Alan Charters

17/267 RESOLVED:

To join the Chair in thanking Alan Charters for his excellent service to the University and Council, as he would be leaving Aston on 31st July. Alan had been with Aston for over eight years, firstly, as Director of Capital Development, and for the last four years as Chief of Operations and Estates. In this time he had accomplished much, including oversight of the significant redevelopment of the Aston campus. Alan was to receive an honorary degree at this year's degree ceremonies.

Staff and Student Representatives

17/268 RESOLVED:

To join the Chair in thanking the following Council members for their contributions to the work of Council and the University:

- Professor Alison Hodge who would be standing down as the Academic Assembly Representative on Council on 31st July. Senate had agreed unanimously to appoint Alison as an Emeritus Professor on her retirement from the University.
- Dr Fiona Lacey who would complete her first term of office as the Senate representative on 31st July.
- Reema Quessou who would complete her term of office as the Students' Union President.

JGW/26.6.18