
Minutes of the 317th COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday, 18th March 2020 (by teleconference)

PRESENT:	Dame Yve Buckland (Chair)	
	Professor Alec Cameron	Ranjit Dhindsa
	Danielle Gallagher	Dr Melanie Gibbs
	Professor Helen Higson	Dr Fiona Lacey
	Toby Lewis	Dr Kevin Morley
	Professor Gill Nicholls	Dr Sue Noffke
	Dr Rob Perrins	Dr Vij Randeniya
	Neil Scott	Professor Kate Sugden
	Dr Mike Wright	
IN ATTENDANCE:	Richard Billingham	Professor Simon Green
	Saskia Loer Hansen	Andrew Harris
	Mark Smith	John Walter (Secretary)

GOVERNANCE MATTERS

Change in Format and Content of the Council Meeting in the light of the Coronavirus Pandemic

19/119 RECEIVED:

A report from the Pro-Chancellor that in view of the advice from the government to reduce social contact in order to slow the spread of the coronavirus, it had been decided to hold this Council meeting by teleconference focussing on the actions being taken by the University in the light of the coronavirus and the associated advice from the government. The University would be developing technology to provide a teleconference facility for future Council and committee meetings. The other papers circulated with the agenda pack would be taken as read and only discussed if members raised any questions or comments.

Declarations of Interest

19/120 NOTED:

That there were no new declarations of interest from members of Council or from those in attendance with respect to any agenda items.

STRATEGIC ISSUES

Implications of the Coronavirus Pandemic

19/121 RECEIVED:

The Vice-Chancellor and members of the Executive led a discussion on the implications for the University of the coronavirus pandemic and the government's action and advice to slow its spread and to mitigate its impact, and the following points were noted:

General Business Continuity

- The coronavirus had rapidly emerged to be the dominant global issue, and would materially impact on the University's operations and finances, both in the short-term, and with potential longer-term consequences. Currently 43 staff and students were self-isolating, but no confirmed cases had yet been reported.
- The likely immediate impact on the University, with expected effect in the next month, were:
 - A level of community infection leading to a share of Aston's students and staff being afflicted by the disease;
 - A level of community transmission leading to public health advice to shut public activities (including schools and perhaps universities) to reduce the rate of transmission;
 - Challenges with students completing their current studies (both in terms of education and assessment) for the current semester, with particular consequence for final year students;
 - Issues for Aston students on placements in highly-infected regions, leading to their discontinuation of these activities. Also, for some international students, a desire to return home in the face of the epidemic.
 - Challenges for staff with regard to (international) travel restrictions, and managing funded research projects;
 - Cancellation of University events, including graduations, Admissions Open Days (to be held virtually this year) and other public engagement activities; and
 - Loss of prospective international students due to inability to conduct international recruitment activities, or for students in highly-affected regions (notably China) being unable to finalise their schooling, or complete other requirements including English-language testing and visa requirements.
- In summary, there were no areas of the University that would not be affected, particularly if the rate of infection continued to climb as predicted.
- The longer-term consequences, which could persist after the crisis had passed, included:
 - Reduced enrolments in 2020/21 due to above recruitment challenges in the current round, with significant impact on Aston's revenue for the next budget year, and some pipeline effects into subsequent years;
 - A reduction in future global demand for international education, with prospective students (and their families) feeling safer staying close to home; and
 - New models of delivery of university activities and operations (for example, an increased take-up of on-line and in-company education), developed in response to short-term need, but demonstrating their utility beyond the current situation.
- The University's Critical Incident Response Team (CRT), chaired by Richard Billingham, was meeting daily, with subject-matter expertise on this issue being provided by Scott Trim, the University's Director of Health and Safety and Business Continuity. The University Executive received regular reports from the CRT. Aston's established business continuity procedures, structures and responsibilities were being followed.
- Plans were being developed across the University to seek to mitigate the effects on the people and activities of the University. Students and staff were very concerned about their safety when attending face-to-face classes, meetings and other gatherings. From today programme delivery and assessment of students would be entirely virtual and the campus would be closed in the next week for normal operations. Regular communications on the arrangements were being issued regularly to students and staff.
- A decision had been made to cancel Aston's Spring graduation ceremonies scheduled for early April. This decision was based on expectations that the situation would be much worse in several weeks' time, and that there was a likelihood that public gatherings would be inadvisable (if not prohibited) at that time. In this circumstance, it was felt best to make an early decision so that graduands and their families could plan accordingly. Graduands would have the option to graduate in July, or next year.
- With the exception of Conference Aston (for some 'key workers') and the University nursery (for children of 'key workers'), all buildings, including the Library and Sports Centre, would be closed next week to staff, students (including research students) and

visitors. Access would be restricted to a small number of staff required to maintain essential building services and research facilities. In line with latest government guidance, all staff, including PhD students, were being required to work from home unless they fell into the category above.

Academic Delivery and Assessment

- To mitigate the impact on the recent strike action and the coronavirus, colleagues across the University had developed a number of initiatives to support students' learning and to ensure that they could achieve the set learning outcomes to the best of their abilities. A number of extra study support and employability sessions had been arranged. Instructions on the use of Panopto (Aston Replay), Skype, webinars and the use of other technologies to communicate and support students off campus were being provided to staff. The Learner Development Centre and the Education Team were working on-line to provide support to students and staff. Digital Services had implemented a new on-line help facility, Solve, which would provide advice and assistance to staff and students on working from home. Key staff were being issued with laptops to enable them to work from home. The number of VPN (Virtual Private Network) licences had been increased to 10,000 which would also facilitate home working. Microsoft Teams was being rolled out to facilitate virtual team working and communication. Digital Services were also working on providing solutions for a number of international students who were experiencing technical issues when attempting to access some of Aston's on-line resources from overseas. Arrangements were being put into place to support students without access to technology to enable them to continue to study and submit work for forthcoming assessments.
- Senate had recently approved a series of additional mitigation actions and regulatory changes to reduce the effect of the strike action and Coronavirus implications on student progression and graduation. Face-to-face examinations would not be held this year, to minimise social contact. A range of alternative forms of assessment were being developed by the Schools with advice and assistance from the Education Team, which would be deployed after the Easter vacation. A central team was reviewing the proposals from the Schools to ensure that consistent approaches and principles were being applied across the University. The requirements of professional bodies were being taken into account to ensure that learning outcomes were properly developed and assessed, with perhaps some clinical/laboratory work and assessment being deferred to the next academic year where necessary. The proposed regulatory arrangements aimed to enable Boards of Examiners additional flexibility when dealing with students who were not able to complete all their assessments, and to enable students to progress or to graduate. The Boards of Examiners would review the range of assessment grades and apply moderation in the light of the performance of previous cohorts and of the individual students. Whilst the Boards would assess students in a way which maintained academic quality and standards, they would also strive to ensure that no student was disadvantaged. External Examiners were being informed of the assessment modifications and asked to approve them or to raise any concerns. Students affected in this way would be given the option to return to take formal assessments at a later date. The HE Advisor to Council reported that Aston was taking similar mitigating action to other universities of which she was aware, and that she was impressed with the academic leadership being provided by the Provost and DVC Engagement.
- Students' personal examination timetables were to be published next week on MAP (Aston's student portal) which would provide the schedule of their modified examinations and assessments. Students were being advised via Blackboard of the details of modified assessments and what they need to do to complete these assessments - including how to upload submissions or engage with online interactive assessments. The University was experienced in arranging examinations for students located across the world and in dealing with time zone issues.
- The SU President reported that students had asked if dissertation deadlines could be extended in view of limited access to supervisors during the strike and as a consequence of the coronavirus. The Provost reported that the Extenuating Circumstances Procedures would be relaxed in relation to the deadlines for submission of coursework,

including dissertations. Supervisors would be encouraging their students to contact them by Skype, Teams and telephone.

- The SU President reported that students had asked how the assessment of group work would be managed if it had been impacted by the strike or the coronavirus. The Provost reported that Module Tutors would attempt to support students to achieve their learning objectives where possible through these difficult circumstances. Examinations Boards would take into account such circumstances when awarding grades.

Student Support including Placements and Recruitment

- The Careers and Placements Team had issued/would continue to issue tailored communications to specific groups of students on placement and where they could obtain advice and support. Students on international placements were being advised to return to the UK, but some were facing travel restrictions and the University was providing advice and support to them – in some cases it might be necessary to provide financial support. Colleagues from AMS would be liaising with NHS partners to assess the risks arising from clinical placements and how these could be mitigated.
- The Omani government had recently closed all public institutions and relaxed a previous restriction on on-line teaching, which meant that Aston could provide on-line tuition and assessment for students at the University of Muscat.
- The University was liaising with employers over the delivery and assessment of degree apprenticeships and executive education – feedback from employers about Aston’s approach to the coronavirus had been very positive to-date.
- The Hub and the Counselling and Mental Health Wellbeing Service would continue to provide on-line help and support to students experiencing stress and anxiety through this challenging time. Support and advice would be provided for international students with Tier 4 visas and to help them to ensure they comply the various legal requirements. A comprehensive set of Frequently Asked Questions had been developed which was helping to reduce the load on frontline staff. Colleagues were responding to a large number of individual queries and concerns via email and telephone calls. The SU President emphasised the need to advertise and promote the counselling services and mental health support (including the Big White Wall) available to students.
- It was anticipated that secondary schools and colleges would shortly be closed and that A Level, BTEC, GCSE and other qualifying examinations would not be held this year – it was not yet clear how the examining boards would deal with this situation and whether alternative forms of assessment would be deployed. Senate members had highlighted the general lack of confidence in predicted grades and hoped that the examination boards would utilise a more evidence-based approach to awarding grades to students. The timing of the UCAS confirmation and Clearing processes could be impacted. All recruitment activity would need to be on-line, including virtual visitor days. Master classes would be arranged for international students in different markets.
- The success of the ongoing website development project would be critical to the recruitment efforts in this increasingly on-line environment. The project was on track and on budget to deliver content-rich, CMA compliant, attractive and distinctive course pages by May 2020, allowing for robust testing ahead of Clearing 2020. In addition, the in-house Digital Marketing team were working on preparing images and video content for the new pages.
- Given the likelihood that postgraduate recruitment in October would be reduced considerably, a Task Force had been established to develop alternative provision (eg postgraduate programmes to start in January 2021 for the benefit of international students who were unable to enrol in the autumn term, on-line provision, in-company provision and accelerated degrees). This work was being undertaken at pace, but efforts would be made to ensure that Aston’s quality and standards were maintained at all times.
- The SU President confirmed that she had rapid access to the Provost, the DVC Engagement, Chief Operating Officer and/or the Vice-Chancellor to raise any pressing concerns from the student body. The SU was closed, but was continuing to provide on-line services and support, including on-line social activities.

Finance, Infrastructure and Regulatory Issues

- The impact of coronavirus on research would need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis and the Principal Investigators would be asked to undertake a risk assessment and develop a mitigation plan. It was not yet known whether the REF would be proceeding.
- The Office for Students had announced that in this unprecedented environment it would not be appropriate to continue to operate the regulatory system as it would in normal times and that it would be adapting its approach to support providers as they sought to protect the interests of their students.
- Council members asked if universities were coordinating a common approach to issues such as examinations, hardship, appeals, visa compliance and brokering accommodation. The Vice-Chancellor reported that Aston was liaising with other universities and organisations, such as Universities UK, DfE, UCAS and Birmingham City Council, with a view to identifying and sharing good practice, as well as lobbying the government where appropriate.
- Council members suggested that the University was nearing the point at which it would need to decide whether or not there would be a viable intake of international and postgraduate students in October 2020. As the coronavirus was spreading rapidly around the world, markets which the University hoped to develop further (eg India and Africa) might not deliver the anticipated numbers. Even the home undergraduate recruitment position was not clear. Modelling in the NHS suggested that the pandemic could have three peaks which could impact on University operations well into the next academic year. The University's income from commercial activities (eg catering and conferences) was also likely to be heavily impacted. Accordingly, they strongly recommended that the Executive should undertake some scenario planning to model the potential impact on revenue, expenditure and cashflow for the next year to 18 months. In this context, a review of the capital expenditure programme and priorities should be undertaken, including the minor projects scheduled for the summer vacation. This modelling could also take account of opportunities to expand on-line and other modes of delivery. Council members suggested that the priority for investment in the short term should be on delivery of the digital strategy to support innovative, flexible and more efficient ways of working and attractive new products and services.
- Council members asked if this crisis could be seen as an opportunity i) to offer businesses extra (online) training whilst workers were unable to perform their usual tasks; ii) to make some radical changes to the way the University operated; and iii) to streamline some of the University processes. The Vice-Chancellor reported that the business engagement team was liaising with employers and where appropriate would provide additional on-line/in-company programmes as required. The University had already moved rapidly to providing tuition and assessment on-line. Professional services staff were operating remotely to provide services to students, colleagues and other beneficiaries. A number of process improvement projects were well underway which would facilitate the implementation of more flexible and efficient ways of working.
- Council members asked, in the context of car makers being asked to make ventilators, how could Aston reframe its considerable skills and resources across all three Colleges to support the country's fight against the coronavirus. The Vice-Chancellor thanked members for this prompt and agreed to discuss with Executive colleagues how this could be taken forward in liaison with appropriate organisations and employers in the region. Other suggestions included how the University might help the NHS in areas such as clinical practice training, medical equipment/supplies, imaging and testing. The University was already making carparking spaces available to NHS staff from local hospitals.
- Council members advised members of the Executive to maintain social distance and to refrain from face-to-face meetings as soon as possible. The Vice-Chancellor reported that all meetings would be virtual from next week.

19/122 RESOLVED:

- i) To thank members of the Executive for the comprehensive report on the actions being taken in the face of the coronavirus pandemic and for the strong leadership they were showing in these challenging times. Council members asked Executive members to express to their teams the Council's appreciation for their efforts and hard work in support of the University, including maintaining and developing new enhanced services for students and staff in such difficult circumstances and within a very constrained timeframe.
- ii) That a Sub-Group, comprising the Pro-Chancellor, Deputy Chair and the Chairs of the Council Committees, should be given delegated authority to take action in the coming months if it was not possible to hold a formal meeting and there was a need to take urgent decisions - provided that such action was supported by the Vice Chancellor, and that Council members were canvassed in advance where possible or informed as soon as possible following the action. The Secretary of Council should be notified when Sub-Group action was taken so that it could be formally recorded and reported to the next Council meeting. The Chairs of Committees were also given similar delegated authority to act within the purview of their respective committee's terms of reference.
- iii) That a special meeting of the FIC should be arranged to discuss some planning scenarios modelling the impact of the coronavirus on levels of income, expenditure and cashflow over the short to medium term. A review of the capital programme and priorities should be undertaken in this context.

ACTION: Chief Operating Officer and Secretary

MINUTES AND UNIVERSITY NEWS

Minutes

19/123 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 316th meeting of the Council, held on 22nd January 2020.

Matters Arising

19/124 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/19/54 being a report on matters arising from the minutes of the 316th Council meeting.

Chair of the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) (Minute 19/85)

19/125 NOTED:

That unfortunately due to the coronavirus, Chris Sayers and John, Rushforth, Chair and Secretary of the CUC, were unable to attend this meeting of Council to discuss the new CUC HE Code of Governance and the new HE regulatory framework. Efforts would be made to rearrange this for a future meeting later this year.

Prevent and Safeguarding Training (Minute 19/87)

19/126 NOTED:

That additional face-to-face governance training will be provided during the course of the Council/Executive Away Day, currently scheduled for 12-13 May 2020.

Access and Participation Plan Monitoring Return to the OfS 2018/19 (Minute 19/89)

19/127 NOTED:

That the Pro-Chancellor and the Chair of Nominations and Remuneration Committee signed off the Access and Participation Plan Monitoring Return by the submission deadline of 28th February 2020.

Appointment Process for Senior Officers (Minute 19/90i)

19/128 NOTED:

That appointment process for University senior officers as set out in the Ordinances had been reviewed by the NRC (18.3.20) and members had decided that the current arrangements were appropriate and always included an independent Council member in appointment panels.

Annual Performance Review of Council Members (Minute 19/93)

19/129 NOTED:

That the new process for annual review of Council members has been implemented. This included a 360-degree review for the Pro-Chancellor conducted by the Deputy Chair, in which all Council members were asked to provide feedback via an on-line form. Individual members had been asked to complete a self-review form for discussion in one-to-one meetings with the Pro-Chancellor which were in train. A summary report on the outcomes of the review will be made to the next Council meeting (17.6.20).

Strategy Reports from the Executive Deans (Minute 19/96)

19/130 NOTED:

That the PVC and Executive Dean of the College of Business and Social Sciences was scheduled to present the College strategy to the Council/Executive Away Day.

Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive's Report

19/131 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/19/59 and an oral report from the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, noting the following points:

- i) University Reorganisation
 - Following Council approval (27.11.19), implementation of the academic restructuring into three Colleges was proceeding well and was on track to be in place for the start of the next academic year.
 - Professor Ruth Ayres had been appointed as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and Professor Anthony Hilton as Interim Executive Dean of the new College of Health and Life Sciences. Associate Dean job descriptions were being developed and would be advertised by the end of March; the Executive Academic Group had endorsed Head of Department Job descriptions, recruitment, training and support. The Directors of Operations were developing proposals for the professional staff structure within Colleges which would be presented to the Executive for approval.
- ii) Strike Action by Members of the UCU and Mitigating Action
 - The UCU had completed an additional fourteen days of strike action. The strike appeared to have been less well-supported than the previous two strikes, although there was no data yet available on how many staff had participated. Disruption had

been concentrated in a few areas, as previously. The University was concerned about the impact of the strike action on the National Student Survey which was underway. There remained no evident pathway to resolution of the dispute. Please refer to minutes 19/121-123 above concerning actions intended to mitigate the impact of the strike and coronavirus on the outcomes of students.

Pro-Chancellor and Chair of Council's Report

Briefing for Independent Members

19/132 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Pro-Chancellor that feedback from the annual performance review of Council members suggested that some independent members would appreciate a regular briefing from her on topical issues facing the University. She intended to provide such briefings at the end of each meeting, including today's meeting.

STRATEGIC ISSUES

Strategy Papers

19/133 RECEIVED:

The following strategy papers for information, with an invitation to raise any comments or queries arising from them with the relevant Executive lead:

- i) Student and Academic Services: Coronavirus Challenges (presentation) in Paper CO/19/56.
- ii) University Key Performance Indicators in Paper CO/19/57.
- iii) Strategy Implementation and Transformation Update in Paper CO/19/58.
- iv) Estates Strategy in paper CO/19/in Paper CO/19/64.
- v) Management Accounts for 2019/20 – Period 6 (Summary) in Paper CO/19/65.

References from Committees

19/134 RECEIVED:

A report that summary reports of the following Committee meetings would be circulated to members with an invitation to raised any questions or queries – the Secretary undertook to ensure that responses were provided by the appropriate Executive lead(s)

- i) Report from the Audit and Risk Committee in Paper CO/19/61
- ii) Report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee in paper CO/19/62
- iii) Report from the Nominations and Remuneration Committee in paper CO/19/67
- iv) Report from the Senate (for noting) in paper CO/19/66

ACTION: Secretary

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

19/135 NOTED:

That the Council would next meet at 1:30 pm on Wednesday, 17th June 2020. The date of the Council/Executive Away Day would be kept under review

REVIEW OF 317th MEETING

19/136

NOTED:

Members were content that the meeting by teleconference had been effective and that all members had been given the opportunity to contribute and to raise points and questions. The move to teleconference technology would assist the conduct of future meetings.

JGW/25.03.20