
Minutes of the 318th COUNCIL special meeting, Wednesday, 13th May 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:	Professor Ruth Ayres	Richard Billingham
	Professor George Feiger	Professor Simon Green
	Professor Sarah Hainsworth	Saskia Loer Hansen
	Andrew Harris	Professor Anthony Hilton
	Mark Smith	Sir John Sunderland (Chancellor)
	John Walter (Secretary)	

GOVERNANCE MATTERS

Welcome

19/137 RESOLVED:

To join the Pro-Chancellor in welcoming the Chancellor, Sir John Sunderland, and members of the wider Executive who were in attendance for this special meeting to discuss the University's response to the COVID-19 outbreak and the associated government restrictions.

Declarations of Interest

19/138 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

CHANGING HE LANDSCAPE AND ASTON'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Overview of the Current Position and the University's Response

19/139 RECEIVED:

A report from the Vice-Chancellor summarising the main focus of the University's response to the COVID-19 crisis to-date:

- i) The University's first priority continued to be to protect the health and well-being of students, staff and visitors to the campus at all times.

- ii) Another high priority had been to fulfil the commitment to existing students to enable them to progress or to complete their programme this year, including the implementation of alternative student assessments during the current term, as traditional examinations could not be conducted on campus, whilst ensuring that the University continued to follow the advice of the OfS and the QAA. Unfortunately, it had been necessary to postpone the July 2020 Degree Ceremonies, but the University was tentatively planning to reschedule them on 25/26 November subject to government advice. The Vice-Chancellor was immensely proud of the way in which Aston's staff and students had positively responded to these challenges to-date.
- iii) Aston was contributing regionally and nationally both to the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the longer-term recovery from it.
- iv) Responding to the financial impact of the pandemic and planning actions to safeguard the University's sustainability going forward, which was the principal focus of today's meeting. The proposed approach to the preparation of next year's budget and financial forecasts was underpinned by the following principles:
 - Preserving and supporting Aston's sources of revenue.
 - Flexible "students first" delivery (the product offer).
 - Resourcing marketing and recruitment (and conversion and retention).
 - Preserving cash.
 - Deferring major capital projects.
 - Managing operational expenditure.
 - Delivering quality education and experience for Aston's students.
 - Preserving jobs.
 - Job retention proposals.

Student Perspective – Report from the SU President

19/140 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/19/69 presented by the Students' Union President which provided a summary of how students were responding to the COVID-19 restrictions and the support being provided to them by the Union and the University. The following points were noted:

- The COVID-19 situation was affecting Aston students in many different ways. In addition to coping with concerns regarding the virus itself, they were also having to complete their academic studies and examinations, whilst struggling with finances, accommodation, and concerns about their future employment prospects. A number of students were suffering financially due to losing their part-time jobs, struggling to pay for accommodation they were not using, and having placement year or graduate job opportunities taken away. Students were also feeling deflated, as many of the normal student events had sadly been cancelled or postponed (including Sports Varsity, Award Ceremonies, Graduation Ball, Graduation Ceremonies and many more), and aggrieved that their experience as a student had been so badly constrained.
- Students were generally very appreciative of the efforts and care shown by the staff of the University, in their efforts to support students to complete their studies and their assessments. The financial support that the University was offering to students been very well-received by students, who hoped this would continue this going forward.
- The Students' Union was providing a range of services to students, largely virtually. 700 students had engaged with the Aston Virtual Campus created on Facebook, to help maintain a sense of an Aston community during the lockdown. This included a program of daily events such as cooking and baking tutorials, crafting workshops, dance classes, cheerleading flexibility lasses, Welfare Wednesday and a weekly online Quiz. Academic Awards were held virtually via Instagram live, to celebrate the year.
- Union Officers had been lobbying, in liaison with other local Students' Unions, with student accommodation providers and MPs for Term 3 rents to be waived for students.

This campaign had been largely successful, with nearly all of the providers offering refunds or waived rents for Term 3. The SU and the University would continue to work together to help students to obtain a fair deal with their accommodation.

- The Union had assisted the University with the implementation of new Apps which aimed to support students with their mental health and wellbeing.
- The Union had partnered with Food Cycle, a local charity, and had been delivering food packages to students in need, with over 300 students benefitting from this scheme.
- The President recommended that the University should place more focus on careers and placements as students were very worried about their future or had already lost placement year and graduate positions. She also recommended that the University continue with its efforts to ensure that degree classifications were not negatively impacted by this situation. The Provost reported that the University was making strenuous efforts to ensure that students were able to progress, or to complete their degrees with fair and appropriate classifications. The University would be heavily promoting its efforts to support this year's graduates in terms of scholarships for Masters programmes: for Aston graduates (including exchange students) a 20% loyalty scholarship which was applied automatically as a tuition fee discount; and an additional COVID-19 scholarship.

ACTION: Provost and DVCE to provide a brief report to Council members in relation to support being provided by the University at this time, including for careers and placements

Potential Impact to Aston's Operational and Financial Plans, and Proposed Mitigations

19/141 RECEIVED:

- i) A report from the Chief Operating Officer that the FIC (17.4.20 and 1.5.20) had considered reports from the Executive on the potential impact of COVID-19 and proposed mitigations. Paper CO/19/70 reflected a refinement of earlier discussions and proposed a 'planning' scenario, which would provide the basis for budgetary and operation planning for 2020/21 and 2021/22. It also highlighted longer-term challenges to Aston's financial sustainability and possible responses. The key focus of FIC was the University's short- and long-term financial sustainability, notably its cash position for the next 15 months (to ensure Aston remained a 'going-concern'). The paper included seven recommendations for consideration and approval by Council.
- ii) Papers CO/19/71 and CO/19/72 being the minutes of the special meetings of the FIC held on 17th April and 1st May 2020.

The Chair of FIC reported that the Committee recommended the planning scenario to Council as the basis for a credible plan for student recruitment and revenue generation balanced by a prudent approach to expenditure reduction which aimed to preserve jobs and maintain a strong cash position, and to ensure that the University stayed in line with its banking covenants and in control of its own destiny. The plan included the target of a zero-operating surplus for 2020/21 and 2021/22. The Committee had discussed with members of the Executive the need for the University to address a range of longstanding structural issues and to adopt a more flexible operating model to secure its competitiveness and sustainability going forward.

19/142 NOTED:

Student Recruitment and Academic Delivery

- Members of Council asked if the Executive had considered what recovery for the UK HE environment would look like. The Vice-Chancellor reported that there was a range of ongoing significant external uncertainties, including the action of the UK government and other governments, particularly regarding visa and travel restrictions; the health of the UK and global economies; the spread of COVID-19; the future attitude and behaviour of students and parents with regard to HE studies; and anticipated increased competition from other universities seeking to make up substantial revenue shortfalls as a consequence of decreased international recruitment and commercial activity

(particularly student accommodation income). It was unlikely that the long-term future for UK HE (ie the new normal) would remain the same as the past, but it was not clear which of the current trends would continue. The international market could reduce in size compared to previous expectations into the medium and long term; there might be a greater acceptance of online education; there would be a greater acceptance of working from home; and demand for HE from home students could change but this was not clear. The Executive and FIC had agreed that investment in the digital infrastructure was essential to support the increased use of on-line provision going forwards.

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

Revenue

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

- Council noted that the FIC and Executive had agreed that the planning scenario should be 'self-funded' and should not assume any additional cash grants from government.

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

University Strategy

- Council members agreed that there was a need to review the University Strategy in the light of the implications of COVID-19 and a potentially "new normal", and to consider whether its objectives and assumptions remained relevant.

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

19/143 RESOLVED:

- To approve the following recommendations made by the Executive and FIC:
 - The medium revenue risk scenario as the basis of Aston's mitigation planning
[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]
 - That Council noted the risks and opportunities to this planning scenario, particularly regarding returning student assumptions.
 - [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]
 - To approve the proposed approach to payroll mitigations set out in the paper.
 - [FOI exempt/commercially confidential].
 - [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]
- [FOI exempt/commercially confidential]
- That a review of the University Strategy be presented for discussion at a future meeting of the Council.
- To thank members of the Executive and FIC for the extensive work and thought that have been given to the development of the above proposals.

ACTION: Vice-Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

19/144 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

BRIEFING FOR INDEPENDENT MEMBERS

19/145 NOTED:

That the Pro-Chancellor would be providing a briefing for independent Council members on topical issues immediately after this meeting.

JGW/19.05.20