
Minutes of the 320th COUNCIL meeting, Tuesday, 21st July 2020 (by teleconference)

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

GOVERNANCE MATTERS

Welcome

19/185 RESOLVED:

To join the Pro-Chancellor in welcoming Dr Jason Wouhra, OBE, to his first Council meeting following his appointment as an independent member for a three-year term commencing on 1st August 2020.

Declarations of Interest

19/186 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

BREIFING FOR COUNCIL MEMBERS

Vice-Chancellor's Report

Introduction

19/187 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/19/95 together with an oral report from the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, which provided an introduction to and an overview of the topics for this Council briefing session.

Student Recruitment for the 2020/21 Academic Year

19/188 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/19/96 together with a presentation from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Engagement, on the current status of student recruitment for the next academic year.

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

ACTION: *A report on the outcomes of Clearing and Confirmation should be circulated to Council members*

The Student Offer for the Commencement of the New Academic Year in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

19/189 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/19/97 together with presentation from the Provost, on the Aston Students First project which had adopted a holistic life cycle approach to encourage students to enrol with Aston, to thrive and to transform their lives. It aimed to maximise the number of new and returning students enrolled in 2020/21 by being proactive in introducing a high-quality student learning and support experience which was flexible in meeting the needs of different groups of students and fit for the new future in next year and beyond. This represented a balance between the priority to protect staff and students in the ongoing presence of the Covid-19 virus, whilst seeking to provide some “in-person” elements for all modules, to meet students wishes and expectations. This had involved a major cross-university initiative to redesign modules in this new mode, develop the requisite on-line content and small group activities, and address the necessary estates, timetabling, and cleaning arrangements. The following points were noted:

- A 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, 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. Examination Boards had taken place and degrees had been awarded to students, giving those who had had to miss assessments the opportunity to take them in late August if they wished. External examiners and professional bodies had been consulted and had endorsed the approach adopted by the University. Current students were currently being progressed into the second, placement and final years, again subject to deferred assessment in late August where they were unable to sit assessments. Focus groups had been held with students to find out how they were responding to the current situation and what they were expecting when they returned to the University. The University was working in partnership with the new Students’ Union sabbaticals to inform its strategies. The communication strategy included keep warm emails to potential new students and weekly information updates to new and returning students.
- The Aston Students First Group had been developing recruitment and marketing; learning delivery and assessment; support; technology; and communications strategies and was currently rolling these out for the 2020/21 entry. The Group was being guided by the Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) on issues relating to social distancing, cleaning and best practice in response to the Covid-19 situation. The Group had Developed a project plan with the Project Management Office to maximise the success of the planned actions.
- The offer to students for the autumn term included a quality blended learning offering which included interactive lectures and larger group work online, sessions for 20 students or less on campus, together with laboratories and clinics, and a series of extra “touchpoints” on campus such as sessions at the Learning Development Centre, Careers and Placements, and with personal tutors. An additional January intake was offered for PGT students in the Colleges of Business and Social Sciences and Engineering and Applied

Sciences, with a unique opportunity to take a CIM diploma in term one before they arrived. Aston Online provision aimed to increase opportunities for students who could not physically attend the campus (eg if they were vulnerable or shielding or they were overseas) to study at a distance. A “welcome week” offering a balance of online and on campus experiences, was to be run in collaboration with the Students’ Union. Detailed legal advice had been provided by the Office of the General Council on the offer to students and flexibility to make changes if required in compliance with consumer protection legislation.

- For academic staff, an agreed cross-University set of principles had been developed to guide a common “Aston Approach” to learning and assessment. Guidelines for producing reading lists and module outlines, and a template for Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) materials had been developed. Strong technological support was being provided by the Digital Aston and Technology Enhanced Learning teams which would enable staff and students to utilise software and systems on and off campus. 600 staff had engaged in training via Active Learning and Teaching Online (ALTO), a series of professional development sessions designed to help develop and deliver consistent high-quality and flexible online learning to students.

Arrangements for a Safe Return to Campus and the Aston Covid Alert System

19/190 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/19/98 together with a presentation from the Executive Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development, Richard Billingham on the arrangements, overseen by the Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT), for a safe return to campus. He also outlined Aston’s five-level Covid alert system and the arrangements to move through these levels, as the threat increased or diminished. From 22nd June 2020, the University had moved from Level 5 (a full lock down of campus with limited access to essential staff only) to Level 4 (the initial transition from lockdown with only limited essential activity, such as laboratory-based research and Clearing activities, undertaken on campus by about 350 staff subject to health and safety restrictions, maintaining social distancing and hygiene measures). From 1st September, the University would move to Level 3, which represented Phase 1 of the re-opening the University, involving essential and priority activities undertaken on campus with social distancing. New and continuing students would be welcomed to the University at the beginning of term in September, with a gradual roll-out of on-campus provision during the course of the academic year in order to deliver a high quality learning experience that best supported the health, wellbeing and safety of all staff and students. There would be a phased return of funded and/or critical research, including the return of research students, staff researchers and some essential participant-based research. Socially-distanced services would resume, including takeaway food, limited library facilities and onsite welfare support by appointment. All services would also be delivered online, including virtual welcome events. The Executive had agreed that the wearing of face-masks on campus should be an expectation for both students and staff, with the exception of those people who had health conditions and staff directly involved in classroom delivery. It was also agreed that students and staff should initially be provided with a free pack of reusable masks, after which they would need to purchase their own masks. Guidance on how to wear the masks correctly and to reuse them safely would be provided

CIRT had approved a Covid-19 early warning process that aimed to ensure that confirmed cases of Covid-19 were properly recorded and notified to Public Health England (PHE) and the Director of Public Health for Birmingham City Council, and that staff, students and visitors were given appropriate guidance and made aware of their responsibilities, including contacting the NHS Track and Trace Service. The Health and Safety Unit (HSU) and CIRT would oversee the implementation of mitigating actions including deep cleaning or quarantine of people, equipment, rooms and resources as required. HSU and CIRT would monitor the number of defined cases to identify any outbreaks (Local outbreak: = > 2 concurrent cases, Amber >40 cases per 100,000 at risk; and Red >60 cases per 100,000 at risk)

and to take appropriate action, including escalation to PHE/ Director of Public Health. CIRT would make contingency plans in response to a possible second surge of COVID-19 cases on the autumn term.

19/191 NOTED: the following responses to questions from Council members:

- As the majority of the University's activities took place within a single building, it would not really be feasible to operate a more granular approach to the opening of the campus and an institutional-wide framework was required to protect the health and well-being of students, staff and visitors.
- Covid-19 was affecting students in many different ways and the well-being of its students remained a very high priority for the University. In addition to coping with concerns regarding the virus itself, they were also having to complete their academic studies and examinations, whilst coping with concerns about their finances, accommodation and future employment prospects. They were also missing out on many of the social activities and opportunities that were normally associated with university life. Some Aston students lived at home in crowded conditions with limited access to quiet study space or IT facilities. The COVID-19 Student Emergency Hardship Fund had been set-up to support students who were suffering from economic hardship as a result of COVID-19 and to provide assistance in three key areas: the 'living essentials' hardship bursary helped students with the costs of accommodation, food and household bills; the 'learning essentials' bursary helped students to purchase their own laptop; the 'returning home' bursary helped students on placement who had been struggling to obtain a flight home, or offer extra support if they had remained in location. The University continued to operate a range of on-line student services, including counselling. The Students' Union had also assisted the University with the implementation of new Apps which aimed to support students with their mental health and wellbeing. The Students' Union was providing a range of services to students, largely virtually, including the Aston Virtual Campus created on Facebook, to help maintain a sense of an Aston community during the lockdown.
- A staff survey had recently been carried out which demonstrated that the majority of staff felt connected to their manager and their colleagues, and had been given appropriate flexibility to manage their work as well as their responsibilities at home. Some staff had indicated that they were very eager to return to campus whilst others had concerns about returning or were reluctant to return due to underlying health conditions or the need to shield vulnerable household members. Individual risk assessments would be undertaken for any staff with concerns about returning to campus. The University strongly encouraged staff and students to use the check-in functionality in the mobile phone Safe Zone app as a part of the safe on campus working arrangements.
- It was the University's strategy to diversify revenue streams and to this end it was promoting the development of on-line provision, particularly for international markets and for those in employment, including offering "micro-credentials" (sector-endorsed short courses, designed to build professional skills and to support further, specialised study). The University was also seeking to increase its pipeline of degree apprenticeships in collaboration with employers.

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

- The University was in the process of finalising service level agreements with three NHS Trusts for the provision of the 62 clinical placements required for medical students in 2020/21. Council and ARC members would be informed when these placements were confirmed.

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

2020 National Students Survey Results

19/193 RECEIVED:

A presentation from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Engagement on the 2020 National Student Survey results. The initial summary of Aston's results was as follows:

- Aston overall satisfaction score was 83.4%, which represented a 0.4% drop on 2019's figure. The sector average dropped over 1% compared to the 2019 survey.
- Aston was 0.8% above the sector average which was an improvement on last year's position of 0.1% above the sector average. This should lead to a modest improvement in rankings (all other factors being equal).

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

- Aston had performed well in comparison to key competitor institutions.
- Overall, this was felt to be a relatively positive result taking account of the impact of the UCU strike action and Covid-19.

The NSS Task Force and the Colleges were undertaking analysis of the detailed comments made by students on the individual questions and actions plans would be formulated with the individual Colleges as a matter of urgency, so that actions could make a positive impact on next year's NSS.

ACTION: A report on Aston's position in the academic league tables should be provided for the next Council meeting

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

19/194 NOTED:

That the Council would next meet at 1:30 pm on Wednesday, 14th October 2020. A date for the Council/Executive Away Day was to be identified.

JGW/28.07.20