
Minutes of the 322nd COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday, 26th November 2020 (by videoconference)

PRESENT:	Dame Yve Buckland (Chair) Dr Hannah Bartlett Ranjit Dhindsa Professor Helen Higson Dr Sue Noffke Dr Vij Randeniya Harry Sheppard	Professor Alec Cameron Dr Melanie Gibbs Professor Gill Nicholls Dr Rob Perrins Neil Scott Dr Mike Wright
APOLOGIES:	Toby Lewis Dr Jason Wouhra	Professor Paul Topham
IN ATTENDANCE:	Richard Billingham Professor George Feiger Saskia Loer Hansen John Walter (Secretary)	Phil Burke Professor Sarah Hainsworth Professor Anthony Hilton

GUARDIAN UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR

20/43 RESOLVED:

To join the Pro-Chancellor in congratulating the Vice-Chancellor and all the staff of the University who had contributed to Aston receiving the prestige accolade of The Guardian University of the Year 2020. This was in recognition of the work of staff across the University in giving students the best possible learning experience and in supporting them to achieve the best possible outcomes.

20/44 NOTED:

- This prestigious accolade has been awarded following Aston's rise to 30th in the rankings of the Guardian University Guide 2021 – a crucial league table that focused on student satisfaction, graduate employment and quality of teaching. In making this award, the judges considered the effectiveness of key criteria including:
 - Graduate employability and earnings
 - Retention of students
 - Closing attainment gaps
 - Embedding sustainabilityThe decision to make this award to Aston University was based on the Guardian's objective assessment of 121 UK universities against rigorous criteria.
- The University had also recently received the news that Aston had won the Guardian's "Buildings that Inspire" award for the new Students' Union building. The University was proud of this building at the heart of the campus and the central presence it gave to Aston's student body. This recognition was a strong endorsement of the clear vision and hard work that so many put into this project.
- The University would be developing a strong marketing campaign that would build on these accolades.

GOVERNANCE MATTERS

WELCOME

20/45 RESOLVED:

To join the Pro-Chancellor in welcoming Dr Hannah Bartlett, the new representative of the Academic Assembly on Council, who was a Reader in Optometry and Aston's Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion. The Executive Deans, who were in attendance by invitation of the Pro-Chancellor, were also welcomed.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

20/46 NOTED:

Dr Mike Wright reported that he was Chair of the Steering Group and Chair of WMG Academy Trust which were involved in the Mercia Academies University Trust (MAUT) proposal (Minute 20/50). There were no other new declarations of interest from members of Council or from those in attendance with respect to any agenda items.

MINUTES

MINUTES

20/47 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 321st meeting of the Council, held on 14th October 2020, subject to deleting Dr Mike Wright from those in attendance and including his name in the list of those who had sent apologies.

MATTERS ARISING

20/48 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/3 being a report on matters arising from the minutes of the 319th and 320th meetings of the Council.

National Student Survey (NSS) Results and College Action Plans (Minute 20/19)

20/49 NOTED:

That a report on progress with the University and College NSS action plans would be provided for the January Council meeting.

ACTION: *Provost to present a progress report on NSS actions plans to Council (27.1.21)*

Aston University Engineering Academy (AUEA) – Proposal to join the Mercia Academies University Trust (MAUT) (Minute 20/27)

20/50 NOTED:

That, acting under the authority delegated to her by Council at the previous meeting, Melanie Gibbs had met virtually with the Chief Operating Officer (COO), who was also the Chair of the AUEA Governing Board and Member of the AUEA, to discuss the proposal for AUEA to join the MAUT. She had agreed with the principle that the proposal to Council should be that any decision about whether to go ahead should be delegated to the Vice-Chancellor and that any alternative future arrangement for AUEA, should this proposal fall through, should be overseen by Audit and Risk Committee if necessary, as this was where

previous business regarding AUEA had been considered previously. The COO reported that a formal proposal and supporting documentation to bring the Health Futures (HF), AUEA, and WMG UTCs into one MAT had been submitted to the DfE on 4th September with two explicit conditions. This proposal had not been approved by the DfE, particularly in relation to the explicit conditions. Consideration was now being given to further possible ways forward.

Investments in Fire Safety Arrangements (Minute 20/3)

20/51 NOTED:

That the FIC would continue to monitor the planned investments in fire safety arrangements and the implementation of the associated programme of work.

Council Effectiveness Review Action Plan (Minute 20/40)

20/52 NOTED:

That the Nominations and Governance Committee would monitor the implementation of the Council Effectiveness Review Action Plan.

STRATEGIC ISSUES

COVID-19 UPDATE

20/53 RECEIVED:

The Executive Director of HR and Organisational Development reported on the recent work of the Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) in responding to Covid-19 and the government's directives.

- Infection rates on campus continued to be low. 17 students had confirmed Covid-19 positive in the past week, as had 8 staff.
- The Government had asked all UK universities to roll-out and manage a student Covid-19 test and travel window from 3-9 December 2020 to enable those students who were planning to return home to do so in a way that minimised the risk of virus transmission to their families and the wider community. A project team had been established at Aston to develop and implement this testing facility. HLS student were being recruited and trained to help organise and administer the test.
- From 30th November, Aston would be providing an on-campus testing facility to allow asymptomatic students to access tests on a voluntary basis in order to make informed choices about their travel plans. An on-line booking system would be provided which would allow 15 students to be tested in 10-minute slots which would be offered 9:00-5:00 on weekdays and 10:00-4:00 on the weekends. Students would be asked to take two tests three days apart to verify that they did not have the virus before making their journey home. Once students had tested negative on the second test, they would be issued with a letter from the University to confirm their status at that time and would be advised to leave campus within 24 hours of the result. In the event of a positive test, students should: self-isolate for 10 days, book in for a further test at a national centre and wait for the laboratory-tested results to confirm their status. The centre, based in Conference Aston, would have a capacity of 300 tests per day and an appointment booking system will be in operation.
- Asymptomatic staff could also access tests via the facility, but the first priority was for students who lived in student accommodation and were planning to travel home for the Christmas break. This advice did not apply to students who did not live in student accommodation.
- A series of communications for students on these measures was being planned in line with DfE guidance which would also be shared with staff.

- CIRT was now planning the support and services to be offered to students who would be staying on campus over the Christmas vacation or coming to the campus prior to a January start. This would include provision for students who were quarantined and confined to their rooms and therefore who would be more dependent on others, including for provision of food, medicines and other essential supplies. It was not yet known what catering facilities would be available during this period off-campus in the City. The Main Building would be closed during this period, but the Library, Students' Union Building and/or the Multifaith Centre would remain open and provide a more attractive and suitable environment for the number of students likely to remain on campus. The Library would provide an enhanced help desk, assisted by colleagues from the HUB and elsewhere in the University, to provide support and advice to students. On-line support services would continue to be provided throughout the period. In addition, a small team of volunteer staff would be available to help support the health and wellbeing of students remaining on campus throughout this period, some of whom might be feeling lonely and isolated. Their role would involve being on campus as a first point of contact and a friendly face, providing a signposting service to other support as and if required. The Students' Union was also planning how it could support students in the build up to and during the Christmas break. The SU's International Buddy Scheme would provide further support to new starters in January.
- Council members reported that the NHS would need to identify resources for a future vaccination programme, including assistance from university students to administer vaccinations (eg medical students) and with management roles.

PRESIDENT OF THE STUDENTS' UNION REPORT

20/54

RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/24, together with an oral report from the SU President, noting the following points:

- The SU President stated that more than 100 Aston students in residences had expressed their dissatisfaction with Unite Students and in his view many students wished to leave their tenancies early and to receive rent refunds. It was understood that residence providers at other universities were being more lenient and releasing students from tenancies with one month's notice. Students had asked if there had been any progress in requesting Unite Students to be more lenient with releasing Aston students from their tenancy agreements. It was suggested that it would be in Unite Students' long term interests to remain on good terms with their customers. The Vice-Chancellor reported that during the first Covid-19 lockdown Unite Students had been one of the first accommodation providers to allow students to terminate tenancies and to grant rent refunds, in recognition of the fact that the University had closed down all face-to-face activities. During this second lockdown universities had continued to function and to offer blended delivery of programmes, including some face-to-face provision on campus, and therefore Unite Students and other residence providers felt justified in requiring students to meet the terms of their tenancies, unless there were strong welfare considerations. The Vice-Chancellor undertook to raise the students' concerns at a forthcoming meeting with the CEO of Unite Students.
- The President stated that in his view many students felt they had been misled by the University and that they were not receiving the learning approach which had been promised to them – "the blended learning approach is not really blended". Such students had stated that they felt that since it was possible to undertake all classes on-line there was no need for them to attend campus and to incur the cost of renting accommodation.
- The Provost reported that students in the HLS and EPS Colleges understood that they were required to attend the University for clinical and practical classes. Students from the BSS College were required to attend particular "touch points" but were given the flexibility to choose from a range of timeslots in which they could attend them. Some

students had misunderstood this to mean that they could opt out of attending these touchpoints. Next term BSS students would be allocated specified timetabled slots for their compulsory touchpoints and communications around this would be improved and made clearer. The pulse surveys of students which the University had recently conducted suggested that the majority of HLS and EPS students were satisfied with the blended learning provided, and that opinion was more divided amongst BSS students.

- The President reported that one way the University could better support its students was by making more e-books available. The Provost reported that £0.5 million had been allocated from the Strategic Investment Fund for additional Library resources, including e-books.
- The University and the Students' Union would continue to work in close partnership in improving communications with students and supporting them through the pandemic. The Aston Delivery Group was reviewing the medium- and long-term lessons to be learned from the pandemic, and how the delivery and content of programmes would evolve into a "new normal" as a consequence. A new Student Experience Group had been established to test the opinion of students on the actions and policies being developed by the University.

VICE-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT

20/55 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/25 together with an oral report from the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, which outlined progress with and achievements of the beneficiary-led University Strategy, the impact that Covid-19 was having on its delivery and some recent sectoral policy developments. The following points were noted:

- Aston was continuing to effectively manage the safe return to on-campus activities and protecting the health, safety and well-being of staff and students. The University now produced rolling seven-day aggregate statistics on Covid-19 cases which were published on the Aston website.
- The new research strategy had been launched with four key themes: Impact; Collaboration; Excellence; and Sustainability. Four Aston Research Institutes had been established which were now the major focus of investment and research activity. Research grants won had increased from £20 million to £30 million in 4 years to 2020. Aston was now very well-placed for 2021 REF. Significant grants had already been won in the 2020/21 year - a recent example being a multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional €4 million grant from the EU, which Aston had successfully led, to create a chip out of stem cells (and of which €1 million would remain with Aston).
- The University was very well-placed relative to its budgeted position for the current year. Aston's enrolments had been less impacted by COVID than anticipated at the time of budgeting. Consequently, there had been a £10.0 million improvement to income versus budget. £5 million of this surplus was being allocated to operating units and strategic expenditure, while £5 million was being retained to cover financial risks (relating to student discontinuation or refunds) in the current environment, and to deliver a surplus result (above the break-even budgeted result).
- Universities UK had recently published a report on its Fair Admissions Review which identified post-qualifications applications, post-qualifications offers (PQO) and post-qualifications decisions, with PQO emerging as the preferred option to be put out to further consultation. Any new system would be unlikely to be implemented until the 2022/23 cycle.
- UUK was seeking to lead a proactive sectoral response to address perceptions of "low quality" or "low value" programmes (ie as measured by a combination of low continuation rates, and poor employment outcomes) which had been expressed by the government and the Office for Students. Aston currently performed well on these measures and would not expect any of its programmes to be adjudged "low quality".

- The Government had become increasingly concerned about foreign interference in UK HE (mainly relating to China) particularly with regard to transfer of sensitive (or UK-owned IP) to third countries, via university research partnerships or contracts. Saskia Loer Hansen had been involved with the UUK taskforce developing advice on this matter. Legislation was pending in Westminster, and while this may impose disclosure obligations on universities, this may be preferable to current arrangements, where universities often received little guidance from government as to the sensitivity of international partnering in certain research topics.
- A review and refresh of the Aston strategy has been initiated in the context of the impact of the pandemic and the recent five-year extension of his appointment (setting a new horizon for the planning period). He was confident with the positioning of Aston as a focussed technical University with disciplinary strengths in Health, Engineering and Business; and as a University which was pragmatic and applied, and sought to make a real impact outside academe, and measured itself on the outcomes that it achieved. Aston's beneficiary orientation continued to be appropriate, including the identification with the three beneficiary groupings of students, external organisations, and the region and society. Aston was likely to maintain its position as a mid-tariff institution, which excelled at value-add for its beneficiaries, and retained a strong social purpose. The impact of Covid-19 had been to reinforce the major themes of the University Strategy to focus on the needs of beneficiaries, and to prioritise investment in the areas of strength. There was a need to continue to review the impact of Covid and how this might influence the nature and pace of the delivery of aspects of the Strategy, eg increased investment in digital services over the development of the estate. There might be new areas of activity that the University should now consider. The process would commence in earnest at an Executive Away Day on 27th November and culminate in the Council/Executive away day on 12th May.
- Council members agreed with the Vice-Chancellor's view that the Strategy focused on meeting the needs of beneficiaries remained appropriate, and that there was a need to review its implementation in the light of external factors such as Covid-19, Brexit, and evolving Government policy (eg in relation to expansion of the role of Further Education and to the level of HE tuitions fees). There was a need to address the current business model under which it which it was challenging to grow revenue but costs continued to increase. The University needed to review its risk appetite and to decide whether it was prepared commit to the delivery of the Estates Strategy and implementation of the proposed new building to enhance the student experience.
- Members observed that the Covid-19 pandemic was leading to a significant increase in the application of data-enabled services into all aspects of life and digital transformation was now a business imperative for most organizations. The importance of people and culture to effective digital transformation should not be underestimated. One area of growing importance was the use of metadata to inform and improve decision-making. The OfS was using a risk-based and data driven approach to monitor HEIs' performance and it was important that the University was able to use similar approaches to monitor its own performance and to identify and resolve any issues. The COO reported that the ongoing Data Integration and Business Intelligence projects aimed to enhance the quality and availability of data and to transform the way that that it was used in all aspects of decision-making. The Digital Strategy recognised the importance of staff capability and development – this had been demonstrated by the programme of staff development which had underpinned the rapid and effective transformation to on-line delivery and working across the institution.

ACTION: Vice-Chancellor to lead the review and refresh of the University Strategy

PRO-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT

20/56 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Pro-Chancellor, noting:

- That the Pro-Chancellor and Vij Randeniya had attended the CUC autumn mini plenary (15th October), including sessions on issues and practicalities in implementing socially distanced campuses, preparing for the world post-Covid, and the implications of blended learning. Some good practice points had been shared including regular virtual coffee mornings with groups of students, the need to be mindful of students' mental health, and for Council members to sample and experience on-line classes.
- The Pro-Chancellor had written to the Chair of CUC expressing the Aston Council's concern about the long-term viability of the USS pension arrangements and the recent proposals from the USS Trustees to resolve the growing pension deficit. The Chair of CUC had responded that he agreed that that governing bodies and their Chairs needed to engage proactively in the debate and the search for a long-term solution. CUC would continue to provide opportunities for members to discuss the USS pension challenge and seek to play an effective role in creating a consensus for the resolution of this strategic risk. CUC had created a CUC pensions group, chaired by Edward Astle, chair at Manchester, which comprised the Chairs of the 20 largest contributors to USS. They had met twice to discuss the key issues relating to the valuation. Their work was supported by a CUC Pensions Technical Group, comprising eight members with significant experience and expertise in pensions. Both groups were supported by experts from UUK. CUC had organised a USS session at the CUC Plenary on 15th October. RWFSC had agreed that it would be appropriate for the Pro-Chancellor to write again to the Chair of the CUC highlighting the need for the CUC to represent the interests of smaller institutions, such as Aston, and others who could not afford the types of increased contributions being proposed by the Trustee, and who, therefore, were seeking to move a more sustainable scheme going forward. Aston would continue to lobby vigorously for a more realistic and sustainable approach to resolving the USS deficit, which would be likely to entail further significant benefit reform. There appeared to be a growing consensus at UUK that there was a need to address this issue as a matter of increasing urgency.

LEAGUE TABLE RANKINGS

20/57 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/26 and an oral report from the DVC Engagement and Phil Burke, Senior Market Analyst, on Aston's recent performance across a number of league tables, which highlighted some of the challenges facing Aston moving forward. The key findings and recommendations were as follows:

- Aston's ranking had begun to recover recently in UK League tables but had continued to fall in global tables.
- Aston's 'output' metrics generally remained strong, whilst 'input' metrics were the main reason Aston was not ranked higher. The recent work to successfully decrease the Student:Staff Ratio had helped to improve rankings, but it was understood that the SSR might increase for the next round of tables. Aston's output results were even more impressive given the student mix challenges faced by the University.
- Socially inclusive institutions were disadvantaged in League Tables; as a widening participation institution, Aston had to work harder to achieve the same results as more exclusive institutions. Aston's student mix, both demographically and subject mix, had changed in recent years; this would affect the outcome metrics in years to come. Going forward the University would need to identify 'at risk' students upon entry and offer additional support to ensure their success
- NSS was the key to short term improvement in UK tables, assuming that the NSS continued in the way it had previously. The action plans compiled by Colleges therefore needed to be fully implemented and to make an impact.
- External reputation growth among academics and employers was the only way to substantially move the needle in global tables. This might also naturally raise Aston's citation count. Some non-Russell Group universities had outperformed Aston in relation to academic and employer reputation. The development and implementation of a long-

term marketing strategy in raising Aston's profile among prospective students, employers, and academics around the world was felt to be the only way to increase Aston's league table position to the required level. In the short term, wider and stronger engagement from academics across the University would be required in mining contacts for the upcoming Academic Reputation Survey. Aston was receiving plenty of citations, but comparatively fewer academic votes. Academic colleagues were being encouraged to proactively mine the list of those who cited their work and to reach out to them.

- Covid had complicated the situation, but increased international student recruitment, particularly at UG level should have positive implications in both UK and Global tables.
- The University needed to acknowledge its limitations and to adjust expectations. Some elements of the UK and Global tables were not important to Aston 's mission. Rather than setting targets and measuring success/failure by its overall League Table position (which included several key metrics not aligned with Aston's strategy), the University should focus on a limited number of individual metrics which did align with the strategy and strive to maximise performance in these, rather than chasing everything.

20/58 NOTED:

- Council members noted with regret that the term BAME was being used to classify ethnicity in some league tables and highlighted the fact that this was increasingly regarded as inappropriate, as it was perceived to be offensive as well as hiding important differences between specific ethnic groups. As part of its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy, the University did use data at a granular level to determine and monitor the performance and attainment of different groups with protected characteristics and the efficacy of interventions and where further investment was required. For example, disabled students were generally more satisfied than students without disabilities, whereas students with dyslexia were less satisfied; and black students attainment was generally not as high as that of asian students. The OfS monitored Aston's access and participation plan at a granular level, which meant that the University also needed to closely monitor the data across the year.
- Council members asked about the extent to which the University's league table performance and academic reputation impacted on the employability of graduates and availability of placements for students. The Vice-Chancellor report that league table rankings did impact on institutional reputation and Aston would continue to need to seek to improve its performance in them. Aston's student population meant that it could not expect to compete against the more exclusive universities in all input elements of the league tables, but where such factors were controlled Aston excelled in terms of added-value and social mobility, as shown by the accolade of University of the Year. The new marketing and communications strategy would emphasise this, which should help to maintain and build the reputation with employers.
- Other members noted that intake tariffs had decreased over the last five-years and asked if this had been a consequence of a strategic decision and if this had an impact on reputation. The Vice-Chancellor reported that there had not been a strategic decision to reduce entry tariffs. In the forthcoming, strategic review, the Executive would agree the student recruitment and tariff strategy going forward taking account of the likely positive impact of the University of the Year accolade.

ACTION: *A report on progress with the University and College NSS action plans should be provided for the January Council meeting*

UNIVERSITY KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

20/59 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/27, presented by the COO, which provided the latest Quarterly Report and Analysis relating to the 10 beneficiary KPIs to measure performance and three financial KPIs. For the reporting cycle 2019/20, the majority of the beneficiary KPIs (9 of the 13) now had the actual data measure to report and interpret. The remaining 4 KPIs would be updated

once the finalised information was available or the actual measure was released. The delayed Graduate Outcome measure (KPI 1), which was outstanding from the 2018/19 reporting cycle had now also been issued.

20/60 NOTED:

That a Council member asked why the proposed new target for 2020/21 for KPI 1: Undergraduate Outcomes – Highly Skilled Employment or Further Study was set to Top Quartile for the future rather than the Top Quintile, given Aston's USP was employability, transforming lives and enhancing social mobility. The COO reported that Top Quartile would provide a challenging but realistic KPI taking account of impact of Covid-19 on the economy and the characteristics of Aston's population.

STRATEGIC RISK REGISTER

20/61 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/28, presented by the COO, which provided a report on the University strategic risk register. Executive risk owners for the individual strategic risk pages had reviewed and updated their risks as necessary. The risk papers had been amended to take account of recommendations from a recent audit by PWC. The risk register had one amendment which was to include a renamed column Sources of Assurance and Controls. A summary page providing a narrative on key changes to risks had also been added as requested by ARC (10.6.20). A draft risk page relating to USS pension risks was now included, as recommended by FIC as this was now considered to be a strategic risk. ARC (11.11.20) had discussed the paper and noted:

- The risk register had improved in content and format, and was now easier to understand, particularly in relation to where movements had occurred.
- ARC members had focussed discussion on Risk 6: Employability risks - Provision of High Quality/Work Ready Graduates, which had moved to C3 to B1. ARC members queried whether the University had responded to the needs of the employment market which were evolving because of Covid-19, in terms of the skills and attributes that would be required going forward. Members of the Executive had provided reassurance on these points and outlined the plans to enhance graduate employability and outcomes notwithstanding the challenges being faced.
- ARC members noted that Risk No. 2: Brexit was currently rated as C2 (red rating) and asked what would need to change in order to bring this down to an orange rating. Executive members indicated that the University would need to know the outcome of the negotiations between the UK government and the EU, including in relation to whether the UK would continue to take part in the Erasmus+ programme and various EU research funding initiatives.
- ARC noted that the new Risk No. 9: Pensions - Universities Superannuation Scheme was rated as A1, the highest red risk rating, as the USS pension deficit and the USS trustees planned actions to address it remained a substantial risk to the University.
- ARC members queried whether Aston students had raised the issue of whether they continued to receive value for money when their education was delivered largely on-line in response to Covid-19 restrictions.
- ARC again raised the issue around whether the Actions to be taken in respect of the various strategic risks would achieve the Target risk and how they could be assured of this. Executive members indicated that the mitigating actions that were specified in the strategic risk register were those which the University considered would be the most likely to bring about the desired target risk rating, assuming that nothing else changed. ARC members indicated that some of the specified risks were very broad in nature and it was therefore not always clear what aspects of the risks were being targeted for mitigation and what it would take to achieve the target risk rating.

- Council members noted that the risks associated with the University's current operating model in which the cost base was increasing ahead of revenue were not currently included in the risk register, and asked if, in the light of increasing volatility in the external environment, consideration should now be given to including them. The COO reported that financial sustainability had been included in a previous version of the risk register, but it had been agreed to remove it as it was felt to be potentially too broad in scope to be useful and instead key specific financial risks had been included (eg USS pensions, Brexit, and missing student recruitment).
- Council members endorsed the recommendation from ARC and the Executive that it would be timely to undertake a general review and refresh of the strategic risk register in the light of the significant changes to the operating environment.

20/62 RESOLVED:

That the Strategic Risk Register and Risk Appetite Statement be reviewed as part of the University Strategy Review but prior to the Council/Executive Away Day (12.5.21).

ACTION: *Pro-Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and COO to determine when the strategic risk register and risk appetite should be reviewed*

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES – STRATEGY AND PROGRESS

20/63 RECEIVED:

A presentation (paper CO/20/29) from Professor George Feiger, PVC and Executive Dean on progress with the development and implementation of the strategy for the new College of Business and Social Sciences. The mission of the College reflected the mission of the University: "to enhance the career prospects of those who learn with us, to improve the performance of enterprises and the professions and to enhance the quality of decisions made in our community". The College was ambitious and aspired "to do these things at a level that earns the College renown, in the UK and internationally. Simply being 'good enough' is not good enough".

20/64 NOTED:

- That BSS comprised three Schools: Aston Business School (ABS), Aston Law School and School of Social Sciences and Humanities, with unified central management for some key functions. These Schools varied considerably in terms of maturity, size, success relative to peers, operating models, staffing structures, income generation, academic/research strengths, and challenges and issues facing them.
- ABS was by far the largest and most successful of the Schools, with a strong reputation both domestically and internationally. It was one of the 1% of global business schools with triple accreditation (EQUIS and AMBA) and ranked within the QS top 100 business schools. Its MBA was ranked by QS as 40th in the world for entrepreneurship. Domestically, the LEO median salary outcomes for its undergraduates were £11,000 above the average for UK business schools, notwithstanding the marked widening participation composition of the student body. Research performance was steadily improving: annual research funding increased from £9.9 million in 2014 to £18.3 million last year, and ABS was ranked 12th among UK business schools in terms of research funding raised. ABS was internationally renowned for its impact on business and business policy making, working through a number of centres of excellence. ABS was particularly distinguished in support of SMEs. It was firmly embedded in the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses programme in the UK and leading the curriculum nationally for the government's new £10m Small Business Leadership Programme. The School had a well-established and successful management structure. The main focus of future strategy was to maintain and build upon the School's current leading levels in teaching quality and innovation, applied research for, and funded by, policy makers and businesses, and active enterprise coaching. The School was responding to a number of major challenges (eg

provision of degree apprenticeships, increasing demand for life-long learning/in-company provision, growing global competitions, and changes in research funding streams) by embracing new ways of working, including:

- Integrating its design and supervision of learning with the management structures of enterprises and other institutional customers.
- Forming long term partnerships with companies and professional associations.
- Changing the working practices and terms of staff to accommodate the varied peaks and troughs of these new education modes.
- Revising the University's fee charging practices, for example, embracing a subscription model.
- Creating articulation agreements with universities and specialised pathway providers to "lock in" student flows from other countries
- Transforming the flagship placement programme to provide "work experience" in a variety of forms for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.
- ALS was a relatively new School which was in a period of transition to its full structure and capacity. It had succeeded in rapidly growing student numbers, although it had struggled to achieve acceptable levels of employability for its graduates. It did not yet offer any significant postgraduate or CPD provision. ALS was involved in some external engagement, either with law firms or on legal policies and issues. With a modest volume of highly regarded research, it was primarily an undergraduate teaching school. ALS future strategy was to commit to creating immediately employable graduates (whether in the law or other endeavours), working closely with the legal profession and commercial enterprises and undertaking research focused on contemporary issues. This would principally require a refocusing of skills already present in the School led by the new Dean of ALS.
- SSH had been established for a longer period, but the quality and success of its component parts and offerings varied considerably. Forensic Linguistics received the largest research grant ever raised by Aston University and was deeply engaged with the police, the courts and the security services. Some other parts of SSH had significant community impact, but no equivalent record of research funding. The School had arising research profile but a low ratio of professors to other academic staff, limiting ability to make credible grant applications and mentor junior colleagues into greater effectiveness. Europe was its strongest area of expertise in Politics and International Relations, but this was not particularly attractive to the bulk of the international postgraduate student market, in China, India and Africa. Employability and post graduate earnings of undergraduates were better than the average of equivalent departments in other universities. But these graduate prospects remained significantly below those of areas like business, economics or law. The number of secondary school students taking modern languages A Levels had declined in recent year, leading to a decrease in the supply of languages undergraduates and a concentration into fewer, higher ranked language departments in higher ranked universities. Especially but not only for languages, SSH tended not to be the first choice of students interested in studying modern languages or social sciences. As a result, SSH has faced declining enrolment for some years across all its offerings. The SSH strategy was at an early stage of development. The first step was to establish whether by using current resources it could establish viable undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, as well as enough distinguished and impactful research, to justify significant investment in senior staff. Market research was being undertaken to inform decision-making regarding refocusing activities and staff away from subjects that did not recruit adequately, towards areas with higher potential for growth. In the potential growth areas, programmes would be redesigned to appeal to students and be effectively connected with their subsequent working environments, to enhance employability and income. Research and engagement would be refocused on a limited number of areas of excellence, to grow international reputation, capture more grant income and attract promising and ambitious scholars to the School.
- Members of Council thanked Professor Feiger for his clear articulation of the College's strategy, plans for development and the challenges and opportunities being addressed.

They were very supportive of the College's efforts to address the sustainability issues facing SSH and to divert resources from areas of weakness which were not delivering positive student outcomes to more successful areas with potential for growth.

- Members applauded the College leadership's efforts to ensure that staff across the College were being properly supported through the pandemic via regular one-to-one meetings with line managers. They also appreciated the College's focus on developing a culture which encouraged staff to initiate new and innovative proposals and ways of working, to use data to inform decision-making, to appreciate the value of diversity, and to work collegiately in teams.

STRATEGY REPORTS

REFERENCES FROM COMMITTEES

Report from the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)

20/65 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/30 which summarised issues considered at the ARC meeting held on 11th November 2020 (the full minutes of which were included in the Resources and Background Material for this meeting). Issues discussed by ARC included:

- The Annual Reports and Accounts for 2019/20. The External Auditors had commended the Aston Finance team who had greatly assisted the audit process by being well-prepared and helpful in providing information and responding to queries and requests for documentation in a timely and efficient manner. The Internal and External Auditors had commented that the financial statements had received more challenge and comment from Aston's ARC than they had seen at other HEIs, even though there was a clean audit opinion. (refer to Minute 20/66).
- ARC considered the strategic risk register. (refer to Minute 20/61).
- ARC recommended to Council that a specified Council Committee should be given delegated responsibility for receiving and testing assurance on behalf of Council that academic governance was adequate and effective through explicit protocols with the Senate. It was noted that recommendations on this matter would be made to Council as part of the effectiveness review of Senate.
- ARC reviewed its terms of reference and operational effectiveness in the light of the revised CUC Audit Code of Practice. ARC concluded that it acted broadly in accordance with the new CoP, which was not surprising as it has operated in accordance with the previous version of the CoP. The new CoP included an increased emphasis on the importance of organisational culture which should be reflected in ARC's work going forward.
- ARC received assurance that suitable clinical placements for all AMS students in 2021/22 had been agreed, apart from for 10 students whose placements were under active negotiation with the Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital NHS Trust. Good progress was being made with negotiations with a pool of providers to secure sufficient placements for 2022/23.
- ARC received a report from the Director of Quality and Process Improvement, on progress with the implementation of the portfolio of 11 approved change projects to deliver improvements to Aston's systems and processes and the work of the Project Management Office.
- ARC received a progress report on implementation of management actions in response recommendations from Internal Audit reviews.
- Under delegated authority, ARC had approved the University's Modern Slavery Act Statement for 2020 and the Annual Report on use of the University Seal 2019/20.

Annual Reports and Accounts for 2019/20

20/66 RESOLVED:

To approve the following papers for signature by the Pro-Chancellor and/or Vice-Chancellor, as appropriate, for submission to OfS as part of the Annual Reports and Accounts for 2019/20 as recommended by ARC (Paper CO/20/31):

- i) BDO's External Audit Highlights Report for the year ended 31st July 2020, including a letter of representation (Paper CO/20/38).
- ii) Draft University Reports and Financial Statements for the year ended 31st July 2020 (Paper CO/20/39).
- iii) Draft audited Financial Statements and letter of representation for Conference Aston Limited for the year ended 31st July 2020 and a letter of support from Aston University in respect of Conference Aston (Paper CO/20/40).

Annual Report from ARC to Council 2019/20

20/67 RESOLVED:

To approve the Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee for 2019/20 (Summary) noting that ARC's opinion based on the evidence it considered during 2019/20 (as detailed in the Annual Report) was "that it is satisfied that the University is committed to maintaining appropriate and effective arrangements for risk management, control and governance; and economy, efficiency and effectiveness. ARC is also required to provide an opinion to Council on the effectiveness of data quality management and the quality, accuracy and timeliness of external data returns submitted to the HESA, the SLC, OfS, Research England and other bodies. PwC's 'Needs Improvement' ratings in its reports focused on data quality and on the data quality management arrangements in respect of ESFA Funding compliance and of the HESA Student and Transparency returns, suggest that there is some doubt about the overall effectiveness of data quality management arrangements. The Executive has fully accepted the need to improve the effectiveness of data quality management systems and processes and is developing and implementing action plans to address control weaknesses. ARC agreed to monitor progress with these plans and requested the University to provide it with regular reports on actions being taken to strengthen data quality systems and controls, and in responding to PwC's specific audit recommendations."

The full Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee for 2019/20 (Paper CO/20/41) and the Annual Report of the Internal Auditors, PwC, for 2019/20 (CO/20/42) were provided in the Resources and Background Material for this meeting.

Report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee (FIC)

20/68 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/33 which summarised issues considered at the FIC meetings held on 23rd October and 4th and 10th November 2020 (the full minutes of which were included in the Resources and Background Material for this meeting). Issues discussed by FIC included:

- Under delegated authority, FIC considered and approved the contractual proposals, for the Embedded Academic Centre in partnership with CEG noting that the conditions of approval imposed by the Senate had been met, and authorised the Vice-Chancellor and the COO to proceed to sign the contract (refer to Minute 20/69).
- FIC received a report summarising the outcomes of the latest financial forecast reflecting the current position on returning students and new student recruitment. Overall, there had been a £10.0 million improvement to income versus budget.

- FIC reviewed its terms of reference and operational effectiveness. Members were satisfied that the FIC terms of reference were clear and that they were understood by members.
- FIC recommended to Council that ultimate responsibility for oversight of Health and Safety matters should rest with the Council. The internal University Health, Safety and Environment Executive Committee (HSEEC) should report directly to Council in relation to health, safety and welfare matters. (refer to Minute 20/71).
- FIC recommended to Council that it would be useful for it to hold an annual review of the committee/governance structure, terms of reference and calendars of business at the September Council meeting. Council endorsed this proposal.
- FIC asked for the USS pension 2020 valuation and the action the USS Trustees could take to resolve the growing pension deficit to be added to the strategic risk register – this was done (refer to Minute 61).

Embedded Academic Centre (EAC)

20/69 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/34, which summarised the process and steps taken by the University to reach the stage of signing a contract with CEG for the launch of an EAC at Aston, with the first students entering in September 2021. The final EAC contract proposals had been considered and approved at a special FIC meeting on 4th November. The DVC Engagement reported that the Vice-Chancellor had now signed the contract with CEG. There was still a considerable amount of work to be done in collaboration with CEG to establish the EAC; Senate and Council would receive reports and be consulted on these developments going forward. Proposals were being prepared for an Integrated CAS (Confirmation of Acceptance of Studies) which were scheduled to be submitted to the March 2021 meetings of Senate and Council for approval.

Report from the Nominations and Governance Committee (NGC)

20/70 RECEIVED:

An oral report from Dr Sue Noffke, who had chaired the NGC meeting held in the morning prior to this Council meeting. Issues considered by NRC included:

- A review of the membership of Council for 2021/22, noting that the Pro-Chancellor had spoken with the three members due to complete their second terms of office as independent members on 31st July 2021 and the NGC had supported her recommendation to Council as follows:
 - That Sue Noffke be exceptionally reappointed for a third term of office ending 31st July 2024 as an independent member and as Chair of NGC;
 - The Vij Randeniya be exceptionally reappointed for a third term of office ending 31st July 2024 as an independent member and as Chair of RWFSC and Deputy Chair of Council;
 - That Toby Lewis would stand down on completion of his second term.

Council endorsed the above recommendations.

- NGC had identified the need to appoint an independent member of Council who could potentially take on the role of Chair of ARC. NGC agreed that as there was a current digital expertise gap in the Council membership, it would also be prudent to seek an Associate Council member with this expertise. The Associate role would give the member an opportunity to assess their interest and capacity to take on full membership at a later date, as well as enabling the Council to assess their contribution before committing to a full appointment.

- The Mallory Partnership, an executive search company, had provided a list of potential candidates for consideration as Council members. This did not provide a strong field for the ARC Chair role and it was agreed that the Mallory Partnership should undertake to identify some additional candidates for consideration as soon as possible. It was suggested that audit experience from the public sector/NHS would be an advantage here. It was agreed that the Pro-Chancellor and Vij Randeniya would also review their NHS networks for potential candidates for this role. There were two strong candidates with digital expertise which the Committee felt would be potentially appointable and agreed that their interest in a potential Associate member role should be canvassed, and, if they continued to be interested, virtual meetings should be arranged with them as soon as possible.
- NGC had considered a report from the Secretary on a self-assessment of Aston's compliance with the revised CUC HE Code of Governance. The University was largely compliant with the Code, not surprisingly as Aston had adopted and followed the previous version of the Code and had recently undertaken an external review of Council's effectiveness which anticipated some of the changes made to the new version of the Code. NGC agreed that the CUC governance values and objectives could be added to the Council's Operational Guidelines, alongside evidence of how delivery of these would be assured. They also agreed that the University's values should be added to this section of the Guidelines. It was agreed that the value statements of the University and Council should be reviewed at the Council/Executive Away Day in May 2021. The report also listed a range of ongoing initiatives within the University which, when completed, would strengthen Aston's compliance with the six primary elements identified in the Code that embodied the core values, assisted in delivering the objectives and provided the basis for good HE governance. NGC members were informed that the target date for completion of the bulk of this work was the end of the 2020/21 academic year.
- The Provost reported on progress with the Senate Effectiveness Review, which was one of the above-mentioned ongoing initiatives to improve University governance.
- NGC agreed that Council and its Committees should continue to provide members the flexibility to attend meetings virtually.

Report from the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee (RWFSC)

20/71 RECEIVED:

An oral report from Dr Vij Randeniya, who had chaired the RWFSC meeting held in the morning prior to this Council meeting. Issues considered by RWFSC included:

- Review and agreement of remuneration for members of the Executive and professorial staff for 2020 taking into account sector benchmarking data.
- Endorsement of the proposed Remuneration Report for inclusion in the University Financial Statements for 2019/20.
- Received a report on the good progress being made with consultations and implementation of the new terms and conditions of employment. RWFSC encouraged the Executive to maintain the pace and to seek to make progress quickly in areas where there was agreement with trade union colleagues.
- Endorsed the implementation of a new systems and forms for recording declarations of interest and fit and proper person declarations from senior staff and Council members.
- NIC supported the FIC's recommendation to Council that ultimate responsibility for oversight of Health and Safety matters should rest with the Council. Council approved this recommendation. It was noted that the Pro-Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and the Chair of RWFSC would discuss the Executive responsibility for health, safety and well-being.
- Received a report on the latest positions regarding the USS pension deficit.

Report from the Senate

20/72 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/35 which summarised issues considered at the Senate meetings held on 22nd October and 11th November 2020 (the full minutes of which included in the resources and background material for this meeting). Points discussed by Senate included:

- i) Consideration of three statutory reports which Senate had recommended to Council for approval (refer to Minute 20/73).
- ii) Senate considered the Annual Report on Student Complaints for 2019/20 and recommended its approval by Council (refer to Minute 20/75).
- iii) Senate had received a report from the SU President on the dissatisfaction expressed by some students about the Unite Students' current policy regarding tenancy agreements and rent refunds; and about the blended approach to learning (refer to Minute 20/54).
- iv) Senate considered and approved the academic aspects of a proposal that the relationship with CEG to form an Embedded Academic Centre within Aston University should proceed, noting in particular the advantages that the proposal would bring in terms of securing a pipeline of international students to support the University's planned growth strategy in this area refer to Minute 20/69).
- v) Senate received a report on the current status of the five KPIs within the Senate's remit which were a subset drawn from the Council's 10 beneficiary KPIs to measure performance and three financial KPIs.
- vi) Senate received an interim report on the Senate Effectiveness Review (this was included in the Council's resources and background material). A Senate Effectiveness Review Group has been established and at its first meeting had confirmed the scope of work and timetable for the work. An online questionnaire has been distributed to members of Senate and its sub-committees and made available to staff more generally. The results from this would inform more detailed questioning at focus groups and one-to-one discussions with key stakeholders, including Council members, during November/early December. Alongside this activity, a review of processes, paperwork and procedures would also be undertaken to include looking back at key incidents and learning from mistakes and good practice to feed into the operation of Senate in the future. The Group would meet a further 3 times and the work would culminate in a final written report and recommendations being presented to Senate and Council in January 2021. Senate endorsed a recommendation from the Group that a new section be added to the scope of the Review: "Effective reflection of the University Strategy and Culture", to take account of advice in the new version of the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) HE Code of Governance.
- vii) The Provost reported on the completion of Phase 1 of the Aston Students First Initiative. This had adopted a holistic life cycle approach to encourage students to enrol with Aston, to thrive and to transform their lives.
- viii) The PVC Research reported on the Annual Research Strategy Review for 2019/20.
- ix) Senate approved the appointment of Professors Paul Furlong and Stefano Seri from the College of HLS; and Sahar Al-Malaika, Mike Wood and Lin Zhang from the College of EAS as Emeritus Professors following their retirement from the University.
- x) Senate approved a Schedule of Business 2020/21 noting that consideration of the Senate's Annual Report to Council had been deferred to the March 2021 meeting.
- xi) A Senate Breakout Group discussed a Report on the impact of Covid-Related Regulatory and Assessment Changes. The Group's view was that overall, these had maintained academic quality and standards whilst ensuring that no students were disadvantaged.

Statutory Reports

20/73

RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/36, which invited the Council to approve three statutory reports on recommendation of the Senate.

20/74

NOTED:

That the Council's HE Advisor reported that the covering paper stated that a Senate breakout group had "endorsed" a revised Student Protection Plan (SPP), this was inappropriate as such groups were not formal decision making groups within the governance structure and therefore had no actual power to make decisions for Senate, they could merely report their views. It was noted in the Senate's minutes that the Senate had endorsed the Group's recommendation that Council be invited to approve the SPP.

20/75

RESOLVED:

To approve the following statutory reports on recommendation of the Senate:

- i) The Prevent Duty Annual Accountability Statement and an OfS data sheet for sign off by the Pro-Chancellor and submission to the OfS
- ii) A revised Student Protection Plan for submission to the OfS.
- iii) The Degree Outcomes Statement for publication on the University Website.

Annual Report on Student Complaints

20/75

RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/37, the Annual Report on Student Complaints for 2019/20 on recommendation from the Senate.

20/76

NOTED:

That the Council's HE Advisor commented that the Annual Report on Student Complaints provided insufficient detail on the nature of the various complaints, the actions taken, the level of compensation paid out and the lessons learned.

20/77

RESOLVED:

That an amended version of the Annual Report on Student Complaints for 2019/20 revised in the light of the above comment be submitted to the next Council meeting.

ACTION: DVC Engagement

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

20/78

NOTED:

That the Council would next meet at 1:30 pm on Wednesday, 26th January 2021.

REVIEW OF 22nd COUNCIL MEETING

20/79

NOTED:

That the Chair invited members to submit any suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of Council meetings to herself or the Secretary. The following points were raised:

- i) Members felt that the volume of papers submitted as required reading and for consideration at the meeting had been very high, even though an even higher quantity had been included in the background and resources material for information. The Executive needed to ensure that papers were as succinct as possible, whilst ensuring that key information and risks were identified to support effective decision-making.
- ii) Members felt that the agenda had been over full given the time available for the meeting and suggested that the agenda could usefully be structured into sections such as statutory and regulatory; strategy updates; and stakeholder reports. The agenda should better identify which items were for noting and which for approval.
- iii) Members found the presentations from Executive Deans very useful in highlighting the academic work of the University, and the challenges and opportunities faced by the Colleges.

JGW/2.12.20