

Minutes of the 323rd COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday, 27th January 2021 (by videoconference)

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| PRESENT: | Dame Yve Buckland (Chair) Dr Hannah Bartlett Ranjit Dhindsa Toby Lewis Dr Sue Noffke Neil Scott Professor Paul Topham Dr Mike Wright | Professor Alec Cameron Professor Helen Higson Professor Gill Nicholls Dr Vij Randeniya Harry Sheppard Dr Jason Wouhra |
| APOLOGIES: | Dr Melanie Gibbs Dr Rob Perrins | Professor Anthony Hilton |
| IN ATTENDANCE: | Professor Ruth Ayres Professor George Feiger Professor Sarah Hainsworth Gary Hughes Julie Ottley John Walter (Secretary) | Richard Billingham Professor Simon Green Saskia Loer Hansen Alice Hynes Mark Smith |

GOVERNANCE MATTERS

WELCOME

20/80 RESOLVED:

To join the Pro-Chancellor in welcoming Sir John Sunderland, University Chancellor; Alice Hynes, external Chair of the Senate Effectiveness Review; and Members of the Executive, who were in attendance by invitation of the Pro-Chancellor.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

20/81 NOTED:

That Dame Yve Buckland, Pro-Chancellor and Chair of Council, reported that she had stepped down from the role of Chair of The Royal Orthopaedic Hospital and been appointed Chair of the newly designated Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System (ICS). The ICS included all health and social care partners, commissioners and the Local Authority, and its purpose was to support partnership and drive improvement. Dame Yve had also been appointed to the Board of the Birmingham Health Partners (BHP), which was a strategic alliance between the University of Birmingham and two NHS Foundation Trusts (Birmingham Women's and Children's, and University Hospitals Birmingham) and where members collaborated to bring healthcare innovations through to clinical application; Dame Yve would endeavour to represent Aston University within these discussion.

MINUTES

MINUTES

20/82 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 322nd meeting of the Council, held on 26th November 2020.

MATTERS ARISING

20/83 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/48 being a report on matters arising from the minutes of the 322nd meeting of the Council.

Review of the Strategic Risk Register and Risk Appetite (Minute 20/62)

20/84 NOTED:

That it was currently intended that the Strategic Risk Register and Risk Appetite be reviewed in the light of the significant changes to the operating environment at a Council/Executive workshop to be arranged later this year.

ACTION: *Chief Operating Officer*

STRATEGIC ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION AND APPROVAL

SENATE EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW

20/85 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/49, the final report of the Senate Effectiveness Review, which was presented by Alice Hynes, the independent Chair of the Review Group, noting the following points:

- The initiative for the Review arose from the Council's independent governance review which had recommended a review of the Senate's Effectiveness, and in light of Council's own concerns about assurance and its responsibilities which suggested that such a review would be timely and necessary.
- The Terms of Reference of the Review had been approved by Senate (6.10.20) and Council (14.10.20). The CUC HE Code of Governance, updated 2020, was also used as guidance.
- The Review had been conducted over the Autumn term 2020, with an interim report being made to the November meetings of the Executive, Senate and Council.
- The methodology utilised included a survey, focus groups and interviews exploring the agreed scope:
 - Clarity and Relevance of the Purpose and Terms of Reference of the Senate
 - Effective Membership
 - Effective Structure and Processes and Operation
 - Effective Information and Communication
 - Effective reflection of the University Strategy and Culture
- These areas had been considered in Review Group meetings and finally, the Group had carried out an analysis of decision-making processes via four Senate case studies and benchmarked the overall findings with those of other universities which had recently carried out their own Senate effectiveness reviews.
- The Senate derived its powers and functions directly from the University Charter, and it was therefore the responsibility of the Senate to provide assurance to Council that these were carried out effectively. The Senate's powers included setting academic standards, making awards to those who met them, and quality assuring the learning and teaching that allowed them to do so. Linked to that was the development of the research and academic intellectual property that formed the University's courses. Underpinning Senate work were the peer review and associated processes and structures, that were undertaken to evaluate and challenge Aston's research and academic programmes.

- The Review group had spent some time discussing what effectiveness should mean. From the material collected, the Group was able to confirm a range of underpinning principles for the work of the Senate, on which its effectiveness could be anchored (these were set out in Appendix 1 of the Report).
- The Group concluded that an effective Senate was one which was fit for purpose, nimble, competent and focussed, and where it used its powers through efficient, demonstrable delegation to its substructure of committees and groups. Importantly, Senate must ensure academic excellence across the University, whilst assuring Council that Senate's decision-making processes were based on demonstrable evidence and good governance.
- The key messages from the Review included the need for:
 - A better understanding of Senate purpose, role and responsibilities
 - Clarification and review of Senate Committees and Substructure
 - Greater transparency in delegation and assurance by Senate
 - Clarification of the relative responsibilities of Senate, Council and the Executive
 - Investment in the induction, training and support of Senate members
 - Review of how the Senate conducts its own business
 - Review of administrative support for Senate, Council and the Executive
 - Implementation of the recommendations during 2021 for full operation in 2021/2022 academic year
- Although the Review did not replace the depth of a past QAA review, on the basis of documentation examined, the Review Group did not find evidence that the University should be concerned about the core academic standards, quality and governance per se, which the Chair of the group endorsed.
- As independent Chair, Alice Hynes had concluded that there was much to be valued in the current Senate, the coverage it provided, the commitment of its members to the University and support at all levels for its core purpose differentiated from Council and Executive. The Senate and its sub-structure were generally effective, as demonstrated by the Gold Rating achieved in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Aston receiving the accolade of Guardian University of the Year 2020. The University had also been able to respond with speed and agility to the academic challenges imposed by Covid-19, whilst maintaining quality and standards, enabling students to progress and complete their assessments and studies. There was, however, scope to improve the Senate's effectiveness and also, importantly, to show that effectiveness to its stakeholders. She judged, with support from the Review group, that through greater clarity, streamlining and better communication, the Senate could take thoughtful steps towards being more effective and demonstrating this in ways more visible to Council and its stakeholders. Radical refreshment could be achieved through several simple adjustments occurring in concert with goodwill from those involved.
- The Report and its recommendations had been endorsed by the Executive and the Senate.
- Alice thanked Professor Helen Higson, Provost, for her major contribution; Professor Gill Nicholls for her external input and challenge; members of the Senate Effectiveness Review Group; John Walter and Julie Ottley who had supported the Group; those who replied to the Survey and were involved in the Focus Groups; and Members of the Council and the Executive who had contributed to the Review.

20/86 NOTED the following points raised by Council members:

- Professor Gill Nicholls emphasised that Senate's effectiveness was dependent on transparent and effective delegation to its sub-committees which should be documented in updated terms of reference, and whose minutes and reports should provide a clear and auditable track of how decisions were made, who made them and under what authority.
- Professor Paul Topham, Senate's representative on Council, reported that Senate members had welcomed the report, which demonstrated that a diligent, thorough and

comprehensive review had been conducted in a relatively short timeframe. They also welcomed the clear and straightforward recommendations that should enable the Senate and its substructure to operate more effectively going forwards, and to provide the necessary assurance to Council and other members of the Aston community, that academic governance, quality and standards were robust and effective. There was a need to raise the awareness of existing staff (including some Senate members) about the role of the Senate, and to enhance the induction of new staff concerning the Council, Senate and University governance more generally. Senate members had also discussed the role of break out groups discussions and agreed that, if they were to be used in future, it should be for clearly defined and explicit purposes, for example to encourage a broad range of members to engage in discussion and comment on draft strategies or policies under development.

- Council members noted that the report stated that the Senate membership did not reflect the diversity of the University staff and student population. The Vice-Chancellor reported that the Senate comprised a mixture of *ex officio* members and elected members. The Vice-Chancellor reported that the Senate's diversity broadly matched that of the staff population, but it did not yet reflect the student population. The University was striving to enhance the diversity of staff, as evinced by its engagement with the Race Equality Charter and gaining the institutional Silver Athena SWAN award. The University would continue actively to encourage staff and students from all backgrounds and underrepresented groups to put themselves forward for election to Senate and its sub-committees.
- Council noted that the Senate scheme of delegation/assurance map (in appendix 2 of the Report) was an initial mapping of how and where Senate's various powers and responsibilities were undertaken. This was work in progress and would be developed and refined as the terms of reference of Senate's sub-committees were reviewed, clarified and streamlined.
- Members of Council noted that there were 22 recommendations and asked who would be responsible for delivering them, how they would be prioritised, what was the timescale for their delivery and how would their effectiveness be demonstrated. The Vice-Chancellor reported that it was intended to implement the recommendations in time for the start of the next academic year, although this would not preclude implementing some recommendations immediately. As Chair of Senate, the Vice-Chancellor would oversee the implementation which would be led by the Pro-Vice-Chancellors for Education and Research, with professional support from John Walter and Julie Ottley. Council agreed that ARC should monitor the progress with the implementation of the recommendations and report thereon to Council

20/87 RESOLVED:

To approve:

- i) the Report of the Senate Effectiveness Review, including the recommendations for implementation, timelines and those accountable to ensure completion for the start of the 2021/22 academic year;
- ii) the recommendation that Internal Audit conduct a review in 2022 to confirm the implementation of the recommendations; and
- iii) in light of the CUC Guidance, a recommendation that a follow up Review be conducted in autumn 2024 to consider the impact and success of the actions undertaken and need for further changes.

ACTION: Vice-Chancellor, PVC Education and PVC Research to develop and implement an action plan for delivery of the recommendations. ARC to monitor progress with its implementation and report thereon to Council

NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY (NSS) – UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE ACTION PLANS

20/88 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/50, presented by the Provost, the PVC Education and the DVC Engagement, which provided an update on implementation of University and College action plans in response to issues raised in the NSS 2020 results. The paper also set out details of the preparations for the next NSS survey which would take place from February 2021 and would include a new separate section of questions on the impacts of Covid on the student experience, as distinct from the total student experience over the past 3-4 years.

20/89 NOTED:

- Work had taken place through College-based action plans to address all areas of the survey, with a particular focus on Teaching Quality, as this was the area which needed most strengthening in the NSS, and also because it fed so strongly into the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF).
- Council members asked how the University monitored the effectiveness of the actions taken in response to student feedback and also whether the Covid-19 restrictions and previous staff industrial action were likely to impact student opinion and the NSS 2021 results. When Council had met with student panels in the past, the issue of access to personal tutors had been raised as an issue, members asked if the move to on-line delivery had impeded access to tutors. Executive members reported that the Covid-19 pandemic had required the University to take urgent action rapidly to move all programmes to online learning, teaching and assessment (end of academic year 2019/20); followed by a more planned move to blended learning (in person and online) for the start of academic year 2020/21, and since January 2021, a return fully to online delivery and assessment, apart from exempt subjects like Medicine, Audiology and Optometry. This had necessitated the upskilling of staff in online delivery and assessment through a series of bespoke staff development and online resources, developed and rolled out by the Education team. There had been a focus on keeping quality high throughout this process, and this was beginning to be evidenced in positive student feedback. The University introduced a set of pulse surveys to support the standard module evaluation questionnaires to gather student feedback in response to changes made as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic; also, the SU's Student Speak Week had also provided invaluable feedback which had informed the development of approaches to delivery and assessment. Students, particularly those whose first language was not English, had welcomed the opportunity to replay on-line lectures. Efforts had been made to make personal tutor support more consistent across the University and in one week this year all personal tutors had reached out to their students - feedback on the support received from staff had been generally positive. The University had invested in a range of additional on-line educational resources to support students, and the Library was acting effectively as the central hub for student support services. Mental health had been a challenge too and extensive work had been undertaken to provide appropriate support for students – this had had been assisted by working closely with the SU to ensure appropriate and relevant support provision for all students. Impact and effectiveness of the actions taken by the Colleges was currently monitored via College Learning and Teaching Committees; and it was intended to move to continual monitoring of quality focusing on student outcomes data as was being proposed by the OfS.
- One concern was the increased workload for staff in preparing on-line materials, which tended to require considerably more development time than face-to-face lectures. All line managers were working closely with their teams to ensure that staff took their annual leave and had the chance to take a break from work and to get some rest.
- Another area of concern was finding sufficient placements for students given the impact of Covid-19 on the economy and employment. This year Aston needed to find

placements for 1400 students; a number of innovative and flexible placement activities had been piloted to deliver these and as of today only 30 students had not engaged with this initiative and remained at risk of not being able to complete the requirements for the placement year.

20/90 RESOLVED:

To approve:

- i) the Report on progress with the University and College NSS 2020 Action Plans.
- ii) a proposal that a student panel, to include an international PGT student(s), be arranged by the SU for the next meeting to give Council members an opportunity to engage with students to elicit their views on the service being provided by the University and any concerns they may have regarding the impact of Covid-19.
- iii) that the University give consideration as to how members of Council might be given access to some of Aston's on-line teaching and associated resources to gain an appreciation of the student experience first-hand.

ACTION: DVCE and PVCE to consider how Council members may be given access to on-line teaching and associated resources

STRATEGY REPORTS FOR DISCUSSION AND NOTING

COVID-19 UPDATE

20/91 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 relatively low compared to other HEIs. 16 students had confirmed Covid-19 positive in the past week, as had 2 staff.
- The University continued to follow current government guidance concerning the national lockdown, which included that all teaching and learning should take place online until 8th March 2021. The only exception to this was for 'permitted programmes' in health and life sciences and during the current period; some on-campus teaching in audiology and optometry was being delivered and medical students were on placement. Staff who could not work from home and those whose roles were essential for business (such as those in IT, estates, library, campus safety, student-facing teams, as well as researchers carrying out critical lab-based research) were continuing to work on campus. Arrangements for the rest of term would continue to be reviewed in line with latest guidance as and when it became available.
- The Library was delivering a range of support services to students, with extended opening hours. The volume of students using the Library had grown significantly, resulting in the need at peak times to open overflow spaces within the Main Building. Regrettably, there had been some instances of antisocial and disrespectful behaviour from students within the Library (eg disrespectful behaviour towards staff who tried to enforce social distancing rules or students praying in inappropriate or unsafe places sometimes without social distancing). Four Sports Aston Staff had been temporarily redeployed to assist staff in the Library and the Campus Safety Team presence had been enhanced at the entrance to the Library.
- Following government advice, all eligible students and staff were now required to take two lateral flow device (LFD) tests per week as part of the programme. Twice-weekly testing would help to break chains of transmission, identify asymptomatic infections and help further ensure safety on campus to help enable a return to face-to-face teaching as soon as is possible. Aston had a test reporting system for students and staff which

notified the University of the outcome of tests. The University then followed up with each member of staff or student, to ascertain whether they were self-isolating, if they needed support or help and whether they had been on campus in the two days prior to their test result. All data held was kept in accordance with the University's privacy policies.

- Council members had been concerned to read in the press that police had recently been called to break up a large student party held in privately owned student accommodation, which the police understood to be predominantly occupied by students from Aston University and University College Birmingham. They asked if the University would take disciplinary action if students were found to have organised such an event. The Vice-Chancellor reported that the University did take disciplinary action against students who jeopardised the health and safety of other people or brought the University into disrepute. He believed the involvement of Aston students in this incident had been misreported, probably based on the proximity of the residences to the Aston campus. Officers from the University would be liaising with the police to make sure they were aware that the University did not oversee the security arrangements for the residences in question.
- The Prime Minister had announced today that the government would be setting out plans for a 'gradual and phased' route out of lockdown for education settings and it was hoped that this could commence from during the week beginning 8 March. The University would continue to monitor and review its arrangements in line with any changes to government rules and with the health and wellbeing of its staff, students and the wider community at the heart of our decision-making. Council agreed that the University should continue to work closely with the SU, in ensuring that students were kept informed of any changes to government restrictions and/or teaching and learning arrangements as soon as possible after their publication.
- Council members asked how the University ensured that students did not cheat when taking virtual assessments and examinations. The Provost reported the University provided support and guidance to students to help them cope with the added stress of examinations during the lockdown which helped to reduce the temptation to cheat. In addition staff were encouraged to design on-line examinations in ways to reduce the risk of cheating, for example by avoiding purely factual questions and asking students to describe their thinking or working methods; or by providing students with the questions and answers and asking students to explain why they were correct or incorrect; or by individualising questions (eg "by focusing on your project..").
- Council members asked about the morale, health and well-being of the public facing professional services staff who were continuing to attend campus to provide essential services. The University provided additional support, advice and counselling for staff attending campus, including access to the counselling service. Recent staff surveys indicated a high level of engagement, and levels of work satisfaction at least on par with pre-pandemic levels; staff generally felt they were provided appropriate support and advice by their line managers and the University. Staff absence rates had reduced during the lockdown period. The University had added an additional Aston Achievement Award this year, entitled "Leadership in a Time of Crisis", to recognise and celebrate some of the outstanding work that had been carried out in dealing with the challenges faced during the pandemic.
- Council members asked for a report on progress in taking forward the good work started in developing and implementing new terms and conditions of employment. The University had needed to respond very quickly to the government restrictions, which meant enabling staff to work remotely, including providing them with equipment (including 800 new laptops delivered to staff), enhanced digital infrastructure, and additional training (including on-line teaching, learning and assessment). Staff had generally welcomed the new agile ways of working which provided them flexibility in managing the work-life balance. The University would be taking the lessons learned during the pandemic and applying them to the "new normal" that would emerge when it was over. Council requested that a progress report on the work being undertaken to

ensure the lessons learned were integrated into new ways of working beyond the pandemic restrictions be made to the next meeting of the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee.

ACTION: *EDHROD and Chair of Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee*

PRESIDENT OF THE STUDENTS' UNION REPORT

20/92 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/51, together with an oral report from the SU President, noting the following points:

- The SU President reported that the main issue being raised by students at the SU Advice and Representation Centre continued to be how to get out of their accommodation contracts or at least how to obtain some kind of rent refund. Currently most students could not legally access their accommodation due to the third national lockdown. The President had written to the main student accommodation providers requesting that they provides rent refunds, reductions and/or provide all students with the opportunity to terminate their contracts with immediate effect and without financial penalty. Four providers had responded positively, unfortunately the other had not yet replied. The President would be liaising with University Officers to discuss the position with regard to Unite Students, who provided accommodation for a large number of Aston students. The Vice-Chancellor reported that the University was in the process of negotiating the 2021/22 nominations agreement with Unite Students and would use this opportunity to discuss their future policy with regard to students impacted by the pandemic.
- Aston SU was conducting a strategic review which would involve reflecting on the lessons learnt from the last few months. It will also help to ensure that the Union created a new engaging strategy to provide the best student experience possible in 2021/2022. Over 2,000 students had responded to the annual SU Survey, the Sustainability Survey and the Speak Week Survey which would help inform the SU's plans for the future.
- Council members found the report on the work of the SU Vice-Presidents to be particularly helpful and informative.

VICE-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT

20/93 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/52 together with an oral report from the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, which included the University's response to the Covid-19, staffing matters; student education and accommodation; the positive financial position; progress with the review and refresh of the University Strategy; and some recent sectoral policy developments. The following points were noted:

- A number of important national HE policy announcements had been made over the last few days, the detail and implications of which the University would need to consider. These included the government's "interim conclusion" to the Augar review; the Skills for Jobs white paper and interim conclusion to the review of post-18 education; the future arrangements for Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF); and a consultation on whether to adopt a Post-Qualifications Admissions (PQA) system. The Vice-Chancellor undertook to circulate a briefing on these papers to Council members.
- Michelle Donelan, Minister of State for Universities, would be visiting the University virtually on Thursday, 4th February, for discussions with the Vice-Chancellor and Executive members, and with the SU President.

- Gary Hughes, Executive Director of Marketing Recruitment and Communications, gave a presentation on the latest student recruitment position

FOI exempt/commercially confidential

ACTION: Vice-Chancellor to circulate a review of national HE policy initiatives to Council members

PRO-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT

20/94 RECEIVED:

An oral report from the Pro-Chancellor, noting that she had recently been involved in the recruitment of the new Executive Dean for HLS; and had been interviewed by Alice Hynes as part of the Senate Effectiveness Review.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE STRATEGY - UPDATE

20/95 RECEIVED:

A presentation (paper CO/20/53) from Professor Simon Green, PVC Research and Mark Smith, Executive Director of Business Engagement, on the development and implementation of the Knowledge Exchange (KE) Strategy, noting the following points:

- KE entailed the deployment of Aston's expertise and research to engage with external collaborators in a range of activities.
- KE had grown significantly in importance in recent years and was now a central part of the policy agenda and was now a government priority. This agenda played to Aston's strengths and helped to deliver the University's mission to serve its beneficiaries.
- The Strategy promoted KE as an enabler of the core activities of education and research, rather than primarily as an end in itself and thereby would contribute to Aston's success as a dual intensive University. This reflected the fact that the Strategy could not be self-contained, but needed to link explicitly to, and thereby reinforce, other elements of the Aston strategy landscape, including the International Strategy.
- The KE Strategy articulated a vision of an 'engaged University' and provided a framework through which future projects could be determined and prioritised. It entailed making choices about which activities should be prioritised for investment and focus, and ensuring that resources were deployed to best effect into areas of strength and reinforcement of the University Strategy.
- The five main areas of focus included: research and knowledge transfer; Degree Apprenticeships/work-based learning; employability and entrepreneurship; regional and civic engagement; and engagement with private, public and third sectors.
- The new KE Framework (KEF) would help benchmark Aston's performance against comparators, whilst the University's commitment to the KE Concordat (KEC) would promote continuous improvement in this important area. Future funding allocations via HEIF, worth £200m in 2019/20, were likely to be linked to performance in the KEF.
- It was proposed: to launch the strategy this year; to produce an externally-facing version; to develop College implementation plans; and to establish a forum for Associate Deans Engagement and the RKE team as the primary 'owners' of the KE Strategy.

20/96 NOTED:

- Council members endorsed the KE Strategy.
- Council members asked how the KE Strategy would link to national and regional initiatives, such as the government's 10-point plan for a 'green industrial revolution' and its proposed Shared Prosperity Fund, which would replace EU structural funding. The Executive believed that the KE Strategy would better enable the University to engage

with such initiatives through selective focus on areas which were aligned with, and would contribute to the development of, Aston's strengths and mission.

- Council members asked how Aston's contribution to the KE agenda could be better recognised within the West Midlands. The University was working on a media campaign to build Aston's brand nationally and within the region, drawing on the recently awarded accolades of Guardian University of the Year 2020 and THE Outstanding Entrepreneurial University 2020. The assistance of well-placed Aston alumni and members of Council would also be invaluable in raising the profile of the University going forward. Council members suggested that the provision of a simple one-page flyer highlighting key facts would be useful as a prompt when representing and promoting Aston in this context.

ACTION *PVCR, EDBE AND EDMRC to provide a flier for Council members*

ASTON'S TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME - UPDATE

20/97 RECEIVED:

A presentation (paper CO/20/54) from Neil Scott, Chief Operating Officer, on progress in implementing the Aston Transformation Programme, which included a portfolio of 11 approved change projects to deliver improvements to Aston's systems and processes, underpinned by the work of the Project Management Office. These aimed to help support the delivery of the Aston Strategy through the transformation of activities to support a beneficiary-led approach in achieving more efficient and higher quality services and increased value for money. The University needed to address the current operating and financial model which was unsustainable in view of the fact that it was increasingly difficult to generate increase revenue whilst costs continued to rise. The Transformation Programme would provide capacity to pursue new initiatives within a more sustainable operating and financial model. A change governance structure, including an Improvement Delivery Board (IDB), had been implemented to oversee and support cross-University transformation. The Project Management Office had been expanded in order to increase change support capacity. Next steps included increasing capacity across the institution to enable delivery of change projects, which included the development of staff skills and capabilities. The Executive had agreed that the Transformation Programme should explicitly seek to deliver a cost efficiency target of 1% of income as part of 2021/22 budget.

20/98 NOTED:

- Council members asked how the University achieved staff buy-in to the Transformation Programme. In practice, staff had been willing to engage in projects, where the focus had been on working collaboratively with colleagues from across the University in improving the experience of beneficiaries, as well as enhancing the working lives of staff through more effective systems and processes, and the elimination of wasted effort and duplication.
- Council members sought reassurance that the additional staffing and costs associated with transformation projects would be removed after the projects had been completed. It was noted that each transformation project had a budget which provided support on a back-fill basis using temporary or fixed-term contracts which would end with the project.
- Audit and Risk Committee would continue to monitor the programme on behalf of Council with other committees reviewing the operational implications of changes. For example, Finance and Infrastructure Committee would continue to review projects that had an impact on finances and infrastructure.

DIGITAL ASTON STRATEGY - UPDATE

20/99 RECEIVED

A presentation (paper CO/20/55) from Neil Scott on progress in developing and implementing the Digital Aston Strategy, which sought to shift focus from Information Technology (the what) to Digital delivery (the how). The DigitalAston Strategy was launched in November 2018, to support delivery of Aston's new beneficiary-led University Strategy and its underpinning sub-strategies. The Digital Strategy was supported by additional resources; with the 5-year capital plan being increased from £8.8 million to £25.5 million. Achievements to-date included:

- Establishment of a governance structure to oversee the implementation and execution of the strategy notably a Digital Infrastructure Strategy Committee (DISC) and Systems Owners Group (SOG).
- Enhancement of the Project Management Office and development of project management disciplines, and the Digital Services leadership team.
- Implementation of a new support desk and software, internally branded "Solve"; and of a new desktop environment with all staff migrated to mobile devices - a £1.9million investment project approved in March and 1,000 laptops rolled-out to-date.
- Implementation of a Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) – a £2.0 million project approved in June to enable/enhance remote study for students from September 2020. MS Teams, Apps Anywhere and other developments also supported remote working.
- Implementation of the £1 million Aston website project to migrate to a new Content Management System (CMS) and ensure critical interactions with beneficiaries, notably recruitment and clearing.
- Enhancements to the MyAston App. to improve student experience and timetabling.
- Learner analytics project commenced utilising attendance monitoring data.
- MS Dynamics was selected as the technology platform and an outline specification developed for a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.
- A delivery partner was appointed and had commenced implementing a Curriculum Management (CMS) system on MS Dynamics.
- A major upgrade had been completed on the Student system (SITS)
- The Data Integration project had been initiated and technology architecture designed, with MSAzure selected as the data integration tool. Specification of data warehouse and data interfaces were under development.

Next steps for 2021/22 included Website Phase 2 project; further development of MyAston App; support for delivery of new Education strategy, including development of staff digital skills; roll-out 'Solve' service desk across the University to improve service/support for students and staff; development of MSDynamics CRM for student recruitment; Business Intelligence and Data Integrity project to be initiated in January 2021; investment on next generation cyber security and user authentication; review of data centre resilience and data recovery capability; and next generation wi-fi/5G project.

20/100 NOTED:

- That the Nominations and Governance Committee was in the process of identifying a suitable candidate for an Associate Council Member in the role of Digital Advisor, to provide advice and guidance to Council in relation to this very important agenda for the University going forwards.
- FIC had asked the Executive to develop appropriate output measures to be used to assess the effectiveness of and added value delivered through the investment in the implementation of the Aston Digital Strategy for consideration at its next meeting.

COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES – STRATEGY UPDATE

20/101 RECEIVED:

A presentation (paper CO/20/56) from Professor Sarah Hainsworth on progress in developing and implementing the Strategy for the College of Engineering and Applied Science, noting the following points:

- The College had now completed the implementation of three Schools: Engineering and Technology; Informatics and Digital Engineering; and Infrastructure and Sustainable Engineering.
- The introduction of BSc Quantity Surveying (full time & sandwich) (2019/20) and BEng (Hons) Civil Engineering (full time & sandwich) (2020/21) had proved to be very successful in terms of recruitment, with approximately 210 students (UG and OG) and plans to grow to 360 by 2022-23. The new Civil Engineering programme had been particularly attractive to applicants from the Aston University Engineering Academy, who in previous years had had to apply to other universities to take this subject. 40% of AUEA students now progressed to Aston.
- The College had continued to increase postgraduate numbers; with a 47% increase this year versus 2019 enrolment. A pleasing feature had been the successful recruitment onto January 2021 start programmes, with 38% of this year's intake recruited in January. New programmes in Sustainable Engineering and Future Vehicle Technologies had been approved for September 2021 entry and were open for recruitment.
- FOI exempt/commercially confidential
- The implementation of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Institute of Technology (GBSIOT) was progressing well in collaboration with all partners. The student targets for 2019/2020 had been achieved. Increased DfE funding had been provided which would enable the Hub building to proceed, despite the higher than expected tender returns. GBSLEP funding had been received for specialist equipment. Virtual events would continue to progress for all partners. The STEM-Up professional development programme had been established and would offer give access to skills workshops and webinars (eg Women into Engineering event). The programme delivered workshops and webinars in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) and Soft Skills.
- Two examples of the Colleges Research with Impact from Dr Mark Prince and Dr Lucy Bastin were highlighted.
- Dr Mark Prince, a 3D printing expert was seconded to Endoscope-i earlier this year and had led the design work in collaboration with two surgeons, for the newly developed SNAP device that protected surgeons performing nasal endoscopies . This had been rolled out free to the NHS. Using an industrial-grade 3D printer borrowed from the University during the lockdown period, he had created around 2,000 prototype versions of the device from his home. This had attracted very positive media coverage.
- Dr Lucy Bastin, contributed to the establishment of the Digital Observatory for Protected Areas (DOPA) which was developed to support the European Union's efforts in strengthening the capacity to mobilize and use biodiversity data, information and forecasts so that they were readily accessible to policymakers, managers, experts and other users. Conceived as a set of web-based services, DOPA provided a broad set of free and open source tools to assess, monitor and even forecast the state of and pressure on protected areas at local, regional and global scale. DOPA has played a key role in enabling countries and regions to measure progress against UN Sustainable Development Goals and Aichi Biodiversity Targets, including the development of 196 country data dossiers.

20/102 NOTED:

- Council members, in noting that a significant number of new and innovative programmes were planned, asked if any less successful programmes would be withdrawn to provide additional resources for areas of growth. The College continuously monitored the performance of programmes, and where there was a cause for concern would take mitigating action (eg increased marketing or adjustments to the content or delivery mode) and, if necessary, would withdraw the programme.
- The College was fully committed to equality, diversity and inclusion, and was keen to show its support for relevant national initiatives to promote these within HE, such as Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter.
- Council members asked if the morale of the College staff had been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The morale of colleagues from the College remained positive, as evinced by results of recent surveys, and feedback to line managers. One initiative that had helped to achieve this despite the various challenges, was the establishment of a buddy scheme in which 4 or 5 colleagues agreed to network and support each other.
- Council members asked if the College had been able to, or planned to, exploit funding opportunities related to the green and sustainability agenda. A new Director, Professor Patricia Thornley, had been appointed for the Energy and Bioproducts Research Institute (EBRI), who was well connected in relation to funding bodies and companies engaged in this area. Researchers from EBRI and other areas of the College would have an important role to play in supporting the timely deployment of waste, water and energy technologies in collaboration with policymakers and industrialists. New undergraduate and masters degrees were planned in sustainable engineering.

ANNUAL REPORT ON STUDENT COMPLAINTS 2019/20

20/103 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/20/58, a revised version of the Annual Report on Student Complaints for 2019/20 which had been amended to address the comments raised at the previous meeting by the HE Advisor to Council, and now included more detail on the nature of the complaints, the actions taken, the level of compensation paid out and the lessons learned.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

20/104 NOTED:

That the Council would next meet at 1:30 pm on Wednesday, 24th March 2021.

REVIEW OF 323rd COUNCIL MEETING

20/105 NOTED:

That the Chair invited members to submit any suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of Council meetings to herself or the Secretary.

VALEDICTORY REMARKS

PROFESSOR HELEN HIGSON

20/106 RECEIVED:

An address from Sir John Sunderland, Chancellor of the University, marking the fact that Professor Helen Higson would be standing down from the role of Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the end of February 2021, when she would return to the role of Professor of

Higher Education Learning and Management in the College of BSS. Helen had worked at Aston for thirty-six years, having held several senior management positions within the Business School before following several senior University roles from 2007 to-date. Helen had served as a member of Council and Senate since 2010. Helen was an exemplar to her colleagues of professionalism, dedication, focus on excellence and commitment to promoting social mobility and widening participation, as well as treating all students and staff with care, compassion and dignity.

20/107 RESOLVED:

To join Sir John in thanking Helen for her outstanding contribution to the University and to Council, and in wishing her well when she returns to her academic role in the College of BSS.

JGW/1.2.21