

Council

Minutes of the 326th Council meeting held on 20 October 2021 at 1.30pm in Room G01, EBRI Building

Present: Dame Yve Buckland, DBE (Chair)
Dr Hannah Bartlett
Professor Alec Cameron
Dr Matthew Crummack*
Ranjit Dhindsa*
Professor Gill Nicholls*
Dr Sue Noffke
Balraj Purewal

Professor Paul Topham
Dr Rob Perrins
Dr Vij Randeniya OBE
Neil Scott
Dr Jason Wouhra OBE
Dr Mike Wright*

In attendance: Professor Ruth Ayres
Saskia Hansen
Professor Anthony Hilton
Kerrie Holland

Alison Levey
Victoria Mee
Julie Ottley
Scott Trim*

* attendance by Teams

Apologies: Dr Melanie Gibbs

Governance Matters

Declarations of conflicts of interest

21/01 NOTED:
For agenda item 4.5, USS Pension Scheme, certain attendees are active members of the scheme.

Council membership for 2021/22

21/02 CONFIRMED:
Paper CO/21/1 being membership of Council for 2021/22.

21/03 NOTED:
The membership would be updated at the next meeting to reflect the appointment of the Secretary to Council.

Schedule for Council and its Committees for 2021/22

21/04 CONFIRMED:
Paper CO/21/2 being the schedule for Council and its Committees for 2021/22.

Amendment to the Statutes

21/05 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/3 being an amendment to the Statutes.

21/06 NOTED:
Following the previous consideration by Council at its meeting on 16 June 2021 (Paper CO/20/83) of the proposed changes to the University's Statutes and Ordinances, it was noted that an application had been made to seek the informal approval of the Privy Council to the draft changes to the Statutes on 4 August 2021. It was noted that the Privy Council had confirmed its informal approval to the draft changes to the Statutes to Pinsent Masons on 20 September 2021. The Council also noted

that it had also previously approved, in principle, at its meeting on 16 June proposed changes to the Ordinances (which do not require Privy Council approval to amend). Council noted that it was therefore now able to formally approve the changes to the University's Statutes (as set out in Appendix 1 to paper CO/21/3) subject to the formal approval of the Privy Council. As the changes to the Statutes would not become effective until such Privy Council approval, it was noted by Council that the changes to the Ordinances (as set out in Appendix 2 to paper CO/21/3) would be timed to come into effect on the same date.

21/07 APPROVED (unanimously):

THAT, having communicated the proposed changes to the Senate and the Academic Assembly and taken their views into account, the Statutes be amended as set out in the document produced to the meeting and initialled by the Pro Chancellor and Chair for the purposes of the minutes, subject to such changes as the Privy Council may require and which are agreed by Council.

THAT, having communicated the proposed changes to the Senate and the Academic Assembly and taken their views into account, that paragraph 1.10 of Ordinances be deleted and replaced with the wording set out in the document produced to the meeting and initialled by the Pro Chancellor and Chair for the purposes of the minutes, with effect from the date upon which the Privy Council approves the amendments proposed to the Statutes of the University.

Reserved Item

Interim and permanent VC arrangements

21/08 RECEIVED:
An oral report from the Chair on interim and permanent VC arrangements.

21/09 NOTED:

- Deputy Vice-Chancellor Engagement (DVCE) had been appointed as the interim Vice-Chancellor until a permanent appointment was made.
- The Vice-Chancellor and DVCE were working together on handover.

21/10 CONFIRMED:
Congratulations to DVCE on her appointment as Interim Vice-Chancellor and Council looked forward to working with her.

Minutes and matters arising

Minutes of the 325th meeting of Council held on 16 June 2021

21/11 CONFIRMED:
Paper CO/21/4 being the minutes of the 325th meeting of Council held on 16 June 2021.

Matters arising from the minutes

21/12 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/5 being a summary of progress against action points from the meeting held on 16 June 2021 which are not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

Strategic Issues

KPI Targets for 2021/22 with focus on Graduate Outcomes

- 21/13 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/7 being a report from Chief Operating Officer on KPI targets for 2021/22.
- 21/14 NOTED:
- The University originally established 10 beneficiary KPIs to measure performance. Two financial KPIs were added and more recently two Estates KPIs and one Digital Services KPI have been included.
 - Council was asked to formally agree changes to the targets for three KPIs for 2021/22:
 - KPI 1 Undergraduate Outcomes –change to upper quartile rather than a fixed percentage to avoid a target that moves up and down the league tables depending on the performance of others rather than Aston’s strong position
 - KPI 2 High Quality Teaching (NSS) –change to 82% to reflect the regressive position of Aston over the last four years
 - KPI 3 Student Satisfaction (NSS) –change to 80% to reflect the regressive position of Aston over the last four years.
- 21/15 COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS:
- It was noted that KPI 9 undergraduate retention and continuation was marked as N/A because HESA were no longer publishing this metric. It was suggested that a KPI for ‘proceed’ should be amended and maintained as this was an element of OfS registration. This was agreed.
 - Were the targets benchmarked against peers? It was suggested that benchmark data be included to inform about performance relative to peers.
 - Were the KPIs visible throughout the organisation and were they reflected in individual targets? It was important that individuals knew what they were doing to contribute to University KPIs. KPIs should be lived by the organisation and not just Executive and Council. It was reported that KPI targets were cascaded through the committee and College structures to relevant areas of responsibility.
 - Could there be greater speed and progress on carbon emissions? It was reported that this was an area of success but not publicly reported. A Sustainability Manager was being recruited and one of their tasks would be to better communicate the great work that Aston is doing in these areas.
 - KPIs should be more creative, looking to the future, reflecting what students want and new ways of doing things. KPIs had become transactional and were not challenging enough as most targets would be met. KPIs should drive the vision.
 - A KPI for student experience was suggested.
- CONFIRMED:
- 21/16 Council agreed changes to the targets for KPIs 1-3 for 2021/22.
- 21/17 AGREED:
- KPI 9 to be continued as a metric for ‘proceed’.
 - KPIs were to track performance against peers.
 - Colleges to reference KPIs when presenting to Council.
 - KPIs to be reviewed by the University to ensure they were relevant, meaningful and stretching.
 - One KPI to be brought to each Council for discussion.

Aston for Life – Alumni and Development Strategy

- 21/18 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/6 being a presentation from the Director of DARO of the Alumni and Development Strategy.
- 21/19 NOTED:
- ‘Aston for Life’ was the first strategy for alumni and development and had been finalised following valuable input at the Senior Management Retreat.
 - Alumni would be “front and centre” and the strategy outlined the approach for an engaged alumni community by 2025/26, demonstrating Aston’s commitment to their personal and professional development.
 - An ‘Aston for Life’ professional development platform would be launched in 2022/23 for alumni to share and learn.
 - Activities would be reviewed against the strategy and changes implemented where required.
 - Development work would be more focussed to grow deeper and more meaningful relationships.
 - The ‘Aston for Life’ approach would be “how can we support you” rather than “what can you do for us”.
- 21/20 COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS:
- It was asked of the 100,000+ community how many were Aston in touch with? It was reported that 87,000 were contactable and Aston had a 64% ‘opt in’ rate which was above the sector average of 50%.
 - The strategy demonstrated big progress, however, when connecting with interesting alumni there must be sufficient resource to follow up on opportunities to make things happen. In response it was explained that segmentation had created a more focussed approach and the narrower list ensured there was resource to see opportunities through to conclusion.
 - Engagement with the US foundation was raised and it was reported that there was not much activity and the model would be reviewed.

Report on the National Student Survey 2021 and Action Plans

- 21/21 RECEIVED:
An oral report from PVCE and DVCE on the National Student Survey and action plans.
- 21/22 NOTED:
- There had been disappointment at the fall in overall satisfaction rate to 75%, a drop of 8.4% compared to 2020, slightly above the sector average drop of 8%.
 - Some courses achieved very high satisfaction and best practice from these would be shared
 - The lowest scoring statements were:
 - I feel part of a community of staff and students (51.5% agreed)
 - The Students’ Union effectively represents students’ academic interests (53.2% agreed)
 - It is clear how students’ feedback on the course has been acted on (54.3% agreed)
 - The data was being considered at three levels: programme, College and institution
 - Key areas of focus were:
 - Student voice and closing the loop
 - Assessment and feedback
 - Learning community
 - Learning resources

21/23 COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS:

- Was the issue with closing the loop more about speed of response? It was explained that students needed more clarity on where to go and what to do for help rather than just relying on the response process.
- Managing expectations was another area to address as this was not clear in some areas and thus students were not happy with what they received.
- Student wellbeing was crucial as this affected engagement. Students must feel supported as the impact of the last two years cannot be underestimated.
- Feedback was provided to students and expectations were set about what feedback was and the different ways they would get it and this had been the practice for many years. It was reported that this was not being done consistently across the institution. External examiners had also noted in reports that institutional processes were not being followed.
- The response rate for module questionnaires was low. It was noted that MEQ had been stopped and surveys were being rationalised as it was recognised that the number of surveys impacted the return rate. It was acknowledged that students liked incentives to complete a survey.

College of Health and Life Sciences strategy and performance report

21/24 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/8 being a report from the Executive Dean on the College of Health and Life Sciences strategy and performance.

21/25 NOTED:

- The strategy remained focussed and relevant, supporting areas of emerging strength to diversify the revenue stream and thus be less reliant on established areas.
- New programmes aligned with market need and being attractive to international students were well developed.
- Increased contribution from research by actively managing the research portfolio and diversity of funder mix.
- Strategic partnerships for collaboration had been developed for education, training and research.
- An advert was currently live for the prestigious Regius Professor role with a closing date of 1 November.

Strategy Reports

Reports from Officers

21/30 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/10 being the Vice-Chancellor's Report.

21/31 NOTED:

- Students were back and campus had a feeling of returning to normality.
- Recruitment for September was £5m ahead of target and January intake was also ahead of plan.
- Cambridge Education Group had also enrolled ahead of target on the foundation programme and it was expected that these students would articulate to an undergraduate programme next year.
- Aston was one of six universities shortlisted for THE University of the Year and the winner would be announced on 25 November.

- Aston had rose from 30th to 25th place in the Guardian league table but dropped two places in the Sunday Times league table. This was because the publications used slightly different data sets to compile the tables.
- A response to the Augar Review was expected in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Pro-Chancellor and Chair of Council's Report

21/32 RECEIVED:
An oral report from the Pro-Chancellor and Chair of Council.

21/33 NOTED:
That the consideration of proposed amendments to the Charter would be taken forward by the newly appointed Secretary to Council.

President of the Students' Union Report

21/34 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/11 being a report from the President of the Students' Union.

21/35 NOTED:

- Welcome Week had been a success with lots of engagement in Union activities including from international students. Clubs and societies had enrolled lots of members.
- Aston Amigos had been introduced whereby a student could say they were interested in a team or club and someone from that activity would meet with them. It was hoped this would encourage engagement and particularly for first year and international students.
- Online activities were also taking place.
- The University's Covid rate was at the same level as the local community.

Annual Health and Safety Report

21/36 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/12 being the annual Health and Safety Report from the Director of Health and Safety and Business Continuity.

21/37 NOTED:
That accident rates were favourable and comparable to the sector.

Update Report: Student Complaints

21/38 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/13 being an update on student complaints from the Associate Pro Vice Chancellor Students.

21/39 NOTED:

- There had been an increase in complaints and whilst the pandemic had a bearing, this was not the only reason for the increase.
- The complaints process had been reviewed to make it more accessible and more timely so that the complaint could be addressed more promptly for a better outcome.
- A University Complaints Officer was to be appointed and it was expected that this would improve procedures greatly.

21/40 AGREED:
That the impact of the revised Student Complaints Procedure to be monitored.

References from Committees

Report from the Audit and Risk Committee

21/41 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/14 being a report from the Chair on the Audit and Risk Committee.

21/42 NOTED:

- An update on the Senate effectiveness review was provided. It was agreed that Senate should review the effectiveness of its work each year and ARC would review that annual process.
- PWC internal audit highlighted a number of items that needed closure.
- The audit of staff performance had highlighted issues with the process, system and traction of MyDC. This was referred to Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee for follow up.
- BDO external audit suggested that the management accounts were in order.

Report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee

21/43 RECEIVED:
Paper CO/21/15 being a report from the Chair on the Finance and Infrastructure Committee.

21/44 NOTED:

- An update on works in the Estates plan was provided and the next meeting would focus on major developments including demolishing the South Wing and a new front entrance.
- There were two large development sites on campus and decision was needed on the strategy for those sites.
- Further University investment in a spin out company was agreed.

Report from the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee

21/45 RECEIVED:
An oral report from the Chair of the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee.

21/46 NOTED:

- A benchmark report was received and the approach for Vice-Chancellor's pay agreed.
- Remuneration for senior members of staff was agreed.
- USS was discussed.

Report from the Nominations and Governance Committee

21/47 RECEIVED:
An oral report from the Chair of Nominations and Governance Committee.

21/48 NOTED:

- An update on Vice-Chancellor transition arrangements and the search process for the new Vice-Chancellor were provided.
- There was a positive update on recruitment of a new member of Council and Chair of ARC with 12 candidates having submitted applications and eight of those being followed up with a view to longlisting.

Review of the 326th meeting

21/49 NOTED:

- There was not time to review the meeting.
- That meetings be reviewed periodically and not at every meeting.

Date of next meeting

21/50 Thursday 25 November 2021 at 1.30 pm.

Resources and background material

21/51 NOTED:

The following were circulated for information to provide additional detail and background:

CO/21/16 Audit and Risk Committee minutes of 9 June 2021.

CO/21/17 Finance and Infrastructure Committee minutes of 8 June 2021.

CO/21/18 Management Accounts 2020/21 as at 31 July 2021.

VM/JO/02.11.2021