
Minutes of the 327th COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday, 25th November 2021 in Conference Room 3 Aston University and by videoconference

PRESENT: Dame Yve Buckland (Chair)
Dr Hannah Bartlett
Ranjit Dhindsa*
Professor Gill Nicholls*
Dr Sue Noffke
Dr Vij Randeniya
Professor Paul Topham
Balraj Purewal
Professor Alec Cameron
Dr Melanie Gibbs*
Dr Matthew Crummack*
Dr Jason Wouhra *
Neil Scott
Dr Mike Wright (from 2.30pm)

APOLOGIES: Dr Rob Perrins

IN ATTENDANCE: Sir John Sunderland
Richard Billingham
Professor George Feiger
Saskia Loer Hansen
Liam Nevin (Secretary)
Phil Burke
Gary Hughes
Professor Anthony Hilton
Professor Simon Green

*indicates on-line attendance

Governance Matters

21/52 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Dr Rob Perrins.

21/53 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were declared

Minutes

21/54 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 326th meeting of the Council, held on 20th October 2021.

21/55 **Matters Arising**

Paper CO/21/20 was received and it was noted that the matters arising had either been dealt with or were to be addressed in the course of the agenda.

STRATEGIC ISSUES (for discussion and approval)

Vice Chancellors Report

21/56 RECEIVED:

Paper CO 21/21 together with an oral report from the Vice Chancellor from which the following points were noted:

- Following a ballot in favour of industrial action the trade union had notified its intention to take strike action between the 1st and 3rd December 2021 and that there would be further action short of a strike that would follow. An internal committee chaired by the Exec Director HROD and Pro-Vice Chancellor Education, working closely with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Engagement, was developing a plan to minimise the impact on and disruption to students, and to further ensure good communications with affected students.
- That the pension trustees had to determine whether to enact the 2020 valuation by the 28th February and therefore further industrial action was expected in January and February 2022.
- Members noted that Council had previously discussed an approach to the Pensions Regulator to raise concerns about the long- term sustainability of the scheme but it had been determined that it was more appropriate to work through the existing engagement with the UUK and USS to discuss these matters.
- Council stressed the importance of ensuring that any salary deductions arising from the strike were reinvested in students.
- It was noted that the trade union had requested to address the Student Union and the if the Student Union was amenable to this it was requested that the Executive Director of HR and Organisational Development and the Deputy Vice Chancellor Engagement be invited to address the same meeting.
- The January intake for student recruitment was now closed and the University had significantly exceeded its targets and was performing above the market average
- The Minister for Universities had announced significant changes to the requirements of Access and Participation Plans. It was noted that whilst details had not been published there would be an emphasis on both fair access and good graduate outcomes, and an expectation that universities would have an obligation to support raising standards in schools.

Pro- Chancellor’s Report

21/57 RECEIVED:

Being an oral report from the Pro-Chancellor noting:

- That the Privy Council had approved changes to the University’s Statutes which were now effective and as a consequence the changes agreed to the Ordinances were also operative.
- That the independent members of Council would be briefed following the Council meeting in respect of the steps proposed in the recruitment process for a new Vice-Chancellor.

President of the Students’ Union Report

21/58 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/22, together with an oral report from the SU President, noting the following points:

- That it had been a busy and exciting start to the first term for the Students Union and the Office Team and that footfall into the Students Union building had been high
- That the President, Vice President Student Welfare, Vice President Education, and Vice President Student Activities had been involved in a number of events and activities that had helped bring the campus back to life.
- Members of Council questioned whether the Students Union were aware of any mental health concerns amongst students, or any concerns about security and safety on campus. It was noted that the Advice Centre was dealing with a number of counselling and well being cases.

- The Chief Operating Officer provided an update on the Campus Masterplan and advised that this would improve the gateways to the campus and the underpass to Bagot Street. However, there was a need for the City Council to address security and connectivity in the city centre.

ACTION: *The Interim Vice-Chancellor to meet with the Chief Executive of the City Council to discuss safety measures in the city centre.*

Presentation on League Tables Rankings

21/59 RECEIVED:

A presentation from the Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications and Senior Market Analyst which demonstrated the University's performance against the three largest UK league tables and the most influential global league table.

Council noted that there were College action plans in place in relation to improving student satisfaction, additional planning and activity had been introduced to support students and graduates to achieve positive long term employment outcomes and that a new approach had been adopted to garner support in the Academic and Employer Reputation surveys. It was agreed that periodic review by Council of performance against these metrics was important but should not detract from a focus on the primary objectives of quality education and good student outcomes.

Strategic Risk Register

21/60 RECEIVED:

Paper CO21/24 being an update from the Chief Operating Officer on the Strategic Risk Register and which had been reviewed by the Audit and Risk Committee at its meeting on the 18th November 2021. It was noted that:

- Two risks had been removed from the register as they were no longer deemed to be strategic risks (Brexit and the website project)
- Two new strategic risks had been added (security risk in internationalisation and declining income per student)
- The Audit and Risk Committee had also identified a risk arising from the transition to a new Vice- Chancellor and the need to ensure that adequate support and resource was afforded to the Interim Vice-Chancellor
- Cyber security was a risk that warranted further consideration and members noted the informative update provided in the Resources and Background papers
- A review of strategic risks would be timely following the Council briefing session that would be delivered by PwC. This would be arranged for the early part of 2022 and would be arranged as an on-line session.

Action: A one hour on- line briefing on Risk Management for Council to be delivered by PwC

College of Business and Social Sciences Strategy and Performance

21/61 RECEIVED:

A presentation from the Executive Dean for the College of Business and Social Sciences setting out the progress and direction of the College against its aspiration. It was noted that:

- The College aimed to achieve excellent outcomes across all education programmes whilst investing people and money in research and external engagement in a modest number of areas.
- Education performance had been excellent in terms of both undergraduate and post graduate student recruitment with the exception of SSH, in respect of which there was

vigorous pursuit of quality control activities to rectify NSS shortfall areas and there was optimism about a turnaround.

- Staff recruitment had fallen short of student recruitment with the consequent threat to quality but recruitment was now being undertaken with due regard to diversity and inclusion and long- term workforce planning needs.
- External engagement with enterprises and various levels of government had been outstanding. For example, the government’s Build Back Better management programme for SMEs had been developed through extensive input by the Aston Centre for Growth in the Aston Business School
- The Research centres and the academics who lead them are internationally renowned and pre-pandemic the Research Centres had brought in record funding levels
- Council members noted that the College was well placed to provide resource and input to other Colleges, with its work on cyber security being a good example of how working across traditional College boundaries could emulate successful cross-sector work being undertaken by business
- Council members felt that cross-college collaboration was an important challenge for the University and should be explored further at the next Council/Executive away day.
- Council noted the examples of innovation and high performance and emphasised the importance of marketing and promotion to highlight success.

Action: Consideration to be given to cross college collaboration as a topic for the next Council/Executive away day.

STRATEGY REPORTS (for endorsement and noting)

References from Committees

Report from the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)

21/62

RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/26 which summarised issues considered at the ARC meeting held on 18th November 2021. By way of further amplification Council were advised that:

- The External Auditors had identified a sector risk in relation to the ESFA funding rules for degree apprentices. More detailed testing of evidence would address the extent of any risk to the University but in order to address the risk a provision of £3.8 million was being made in the accounts
- The Annual report and financial statements had been updated following the Committee meeting to reflect the provision and these had been included with the Council papers
- The external auditor had issued an unqualified audit opinion and the Committee were recommending the approval of the accounts with the adjustments now made.
- There had been a focus on implementation of internal audit recommendations and the Committee had received evidence of good progress.

Annual Reports and Accounts for 2020/21

21/63

RESOLVED

That Council:

- Approve the University Reports and Financial Statements for the year ending 31st July 2021 on the recommendation of the Audit and Risk Committee
- Note the Assessment of Going Concern approved by Audit and Risk Committee
- Note and approve the content of the letter of representation included in the BDO Audit Report.

Annual Report from ARC to Council 2020/21

21/64 RESOLVED:

To approve the Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee for 2020/21 (Summary) noting that ARC's opinion based on the evidence it considered during 2020/21 (as detailed in the Annual Report) was "that it is satisfied that the University has implemented and, 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 undertook an audit of data quality and data quality management arrangements in 2019/20 resulting in a "Needs Improvement" rating. The Committee noted that the Annual Internal Audit report for 2020/21 found that the University is taking positive steps to improve the quality of its underlying key data sets but that more detailed reporting was required to substantiate performance. The Committee concluded that the use of data to make more informed decisions needed more focus and that there remains some concerns about the overall effectiveness of data quality management systems. This will remain an area of focus for the Committee over the course of its business cycle.

The full Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee 2020/21 (paper CO 21/36) and the Annual Report of the Internal Auditors (CO 21/37) were provided in the Resources and Background material for the meeting.

Report from the Finance and Infrastructure Committee (FIC)

21/65 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/29 which summarised issues considered at the FIC meeting held on 16th November 2021. By way of further amplification Council were advised that:

- The meeting had substantially focussed on the Campus Masterplan and Estate Strategy and the presentation had been well received by the Committee. An update would come to the March Council meeting and further work would be done on the design concepts in the interim. The Committee had approved an increase of £4.1 million to the capital plan over the ten year period, with an increase of £8.8 million in years 1-5, partially offset by a reduction in years 6-10.
- Members of Council stressed the importance of student involvement in the design and planning of the project and were assured that student experience and student support were the key drivers of the Estate Strategy.

Action: The Campus Masterplan and Estate Strategy be presented to the March Council meeting.

Report from the Nomination and Governance Committee (NGC)

21/66 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 NGC included:

- There was a strong shortlist for the position of ARC Chair that would arise at the end of the academic year with four candidates being considered and a candidate who had been identified as a potential independent advisor to the Committee. It was possible that the recruitment process could also result in a recommendation to appoint an additional independent member
- The recruitment process for the new Vice-Chancellor was running to schedule with a shortlist having been agreed and a timescale for Executive and Council member engagement.

- The Skills matrix for independent members had been considered and it had been agreed to refresh and simplify this
- There had been initial discussions about the appointment of a new Senior Independent Director in anticipation of Dr Wright's retirement from office.

Report from the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee (RWSC)

21/67 RECEIVED:

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

- Review and agreement of remuneration for members of the Executive taking into account sector benchmarking data
- Endorsement of the proposed Remuneration Report for inclusion in the University Financial Statements 2020/21
- An internal audit report on the Performance Management framework that had been referred by ARC. All of the recommendations had been accepted and the Committee had identified a range of system and cultural challenges that it would consider further in a deep dive at its next meeting.

Report from Senate

21/68 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/30, which summarised issues considered at the Senate meeting held on 10th November 2021. By way of further amplification Council were advised that:

- The main focus of the meeting had been a discussion around agile workplaces and dynamic working and there had been a constructive discussion about the need to provide the right working environment for staff who were now utilising more flexible working patterns. These discussions would continue.
- Senate had approved twelve candidates put forward for the award of honorary degrees.

Statutory Reports

21/69 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/31 being a report which sought approval to the Office for Students Prevent Duty Annual Accountability Statement and Data Return, and a Revised Student Protection Plan.

Council noted that the Prevent Accountability Statement and Data Return was supported by further information contained in the Resources and Background Materials that provided an overview of actions relating to the University's Prevent Duty that had occurred during the past year, including a review and refresh of the University's Prevent risk assessment and an updated action plan addressing any issues identified

Council further noted that it had approved the Student Protection Plan in November 2020 but that an update was timely to include mitigations in relation to Covid- 19, impending strike action and the need for updates in relation to collaborative provision and degree apprenticeships. Subject to Council approval to these revisions being granted the revised plan would also need to be approved by the Office for Students before it could be updated on the University website.

RESOLVED:

That Council approve

- The Prevent Duty Accountability Statement and OfS Data Submission to the OfS
- The Revised Student Protection Plan for submission to the OfS.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

21/70

NOTED:

That the Council would next meet at 1:30 pm on Thursday 9th February 2022.