
Minutes of the 328th COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday, 9th February 2022 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

Saskia Loer Hansen
Dr Melanie Gibbs
Dr Matthew Crummack
Dr Jason Wouhra
Neil Scott
Dr Mike Wright
Dr Rob Perrins

APOLOGIES: Professor George Feiger

IN ATTENDANCE:

Richard Billingham
Gary Hughes
Professor Anthony Hilton
Professor Simon Green

Professor Ruth Ayres
Professor Tony Clark
Liam Nevin (Secretary)
Mark Smith

Governance Matters

21/71 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Professor George Feiger.

21/72 Declarations of Interest

With the consent of the Pro-Chancellor a late paper had been circulated to Council concerning the UUK consultation on the USS pension scheme. The Vice-Chancellor declared an interest on behalf of her herself and all employees of the University present at the meeting in relation to this matter.

Minutes

21/73 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 327th meeting of the Council, held on 25th November 2021.

21/74 **Matters Arising**

Paper CO/21/43 was received and it was noted that in relation to minute 21/58 that the Vice-Chancellor was addressing campus safety in discussion with the City Council and other stakeholders.

STRATEGIC ISSUES (for discussion and approval)

KPI Targets: Focus on Degree Apprenticeship Recruitment

21/75 RECEIVED:

Paper CO 21/44 from the Director of Business Engagement from which the following points were noted and discussed:

- The University was meeting its income target attributed to the KPI for degree apprenticeships and one in twelve students at the University were now undertaking a degree apprenticeship
- The income received for these programmes was lower than for undergraduate programmes but they provided the University with further opportunities to develop relationships with employers
- Members questioned whether efforts were being made to work with mid-sized business and it was noted that the University was supporting apprentices from 153 employers.
- Members further questioned whether research had been undertaken to determine whether there was potential for growth in this market and Council was advised that this was feasible but needed to be considered in the context of the lower income generation from these programmes and the risk of tariff changes at short notice. It was agreed that scenarios for consideration would be helpful information for Council to consider.
- Revenue diversification had improved over recent years and there was also strong growth in other areas of undergraduate and postgraduate provision that would need to be considered in shaping targets for future apprenticeship provision.
- It was difficult to interrogate performance against the KPI without consideration of the context of the University strategy and modelling the potential impact of changes in the national policy context such as the pending government response to the Augur recommendations.
- Further consideration of the matters raised in the discussion was necessary in order for Council to consider whether any changes to the current provision was desirable.

ACTION: The Interim Vice-Chancellor and Executive to review apprenticeship targets in the context of the University strategy, the balance of current provision, and the impact of potential national policy changes.

21/76: RECEIVED:

A presentation from the Acting Dean of the College of Engineering and Physical Science (EPS) on the key initiatives being undertaken within the College. It was noted that:

- There was a rigorous Action Planning process with a strong focus on student experience.
- A number of post graduate programmes had recently been developed or were in development and that this focus was in- line with the University strategy.
- There was an emerging focus on sustainability in research projects and the Senior Management had introduced a digital delivery programme as a key initiative.
- A submission had been made against the Athena Swan gold standard in January 2022.

Council commended the approach to student engagement and it was noted that:

- There was merit in considering how competitive advantage could be maximised. The quality of work placements was an important part of this challenge and the College was exploring ways of delivering learning outcomes through smaller module placements that could be aggregated as part of a student portfolio.
- Members encouraged consideration of Research and Development projects that would capture employer interests, with the work underway on sustainability projects being one example of this.
- There was strong benefit to business of combining work streams from EPS and the College of Business and Social Sciences on cyber security and digital developments.

21/77 **Report from the Nomination and Governance Committee**

RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/45 which summarised the outcomes from the meeting of the Nomination and Governance Committee on the 17th December 2021.

21/78 **RESOLVED:**

- i) That Kathy Cooper be appointed as Chair of Audit and Risk Committee and independent member of Council with effect from 31 July 2022;
- ii) That Steve Washbourne be appointed as independent advisor to the Audit and Risk Committee.

STRATEGY REPORTS (for discussion and noting)

President of the Students' Union Report

21/79 **RECEIVED:**

Paper CO/21/46, together with an oral report from the SU President, noting the following points:

- That the Student Union Executive had determined the investment priorities for the additional £500k grant funding provided by the University and these were set out in the appendix to the report. The Student Union were grateful for the additional funding and believed that the investment proposals would enhance the student experience.
- The Students Union had been consulted over the decision to move the January exams on-line. The situation had been challenging with significant disquiet expressed by students over the original plan to hold the exams on campus but there had been a satisfactory resolution and it was pleasing to note that the Student Union were invited to discuss the future arrangements at the next Senate.
- It was noted that the Student Union budget proposals carried the risk of an ongoing financial deficit and that the Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor Students was a member of the Student Union Trustee Board who would provide advice as necessary.

Vice-Chancellor's Report

21/80 **RECEIVED:**

Paper CO 21/47 together with an oral report from the Vice Chancellor from which the following points were noted:

- The Executive team core strategic priorities for the remainder of the year had been set and the process for determining this had been helpful in identifying interdependencies between portfolios.
- Student recruitment was higher than the comparable position in 2021 and was also ahead of the performance across the sector and the University benchmark group.
- A mid -module questionnaire had evidenced that students were generally happy to be returning to campus. However, the rapid rise of Omicron at the end of 2021 had required a change in position with the plan to hold exams on-site. Having listened to student concerns the Executive took the decision to move the exams on-line and the process was managed with minimal disruption.
- A summary of the OfS consultation on changes to the regulatory regime demonstrated the importance of the University improving its data quality

management. It was acknowledged that the University had weaknesses in its existing processes but plans to address this were in place.

Pro-Chancellors Report

21/83 RECEIVED:

Being an oral report from the Pro-Chancellor in which it was noted that:

- It was pleasing to see the work that the interim Vice-Chancellor had done with the Executive to develop the workstreams to deliver strategic priorities. The consultative work being done with staff through “Town Hall “meetings was also to be commended.
- Attendance at the Risk Management Workshop had prompted further consideration of the need to review the University’s approach to risk management. The proposal by the Interim Vice-Chancellor to develop a regular Council report that provided oversight of the key metrics against which Council could monitor performance was also welcome.
- The recruitment process for the new Vice-Chancellor was now reaching a conclusion with final interviews scheduled for the following week. Council members were thanked for their participation in the process.

Knowledge Exchange Strategy - Update

21/84 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/48 which set out the activities being undertaken in furtherance of the University Knowledge Exchange Strategy.

Members noted the importance of ensuring that knowledge transfer initiatives were in the national interest and that security concerns were fully considered and the Pro – Vice Chancellor for Research assured Council that considerable work had been done to ensure that an effective due-diligence framework was applied to all research proposals. It was further noted that the Knowledge Exchange Framework data demonstrated that the University was performing in the top 30% nationally.

Transformation Programme Update

21/85 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/49 which summarised progress against the objectives of the transformation programme to deliver improvements to the University’s systems, processes, and ways of working, and hence supporting the delivery of the beneficiary-led strategy.

Members made the following observations:

- Solutions implemented through the Programme needed to be integrated into the business- as- usual operations of the University.
- Consideration should be given to integrating the Performance Management project into the Programme as the Internal Audit report had identified issues around systems and processes that needed to be effectively rolled out.
- Initiatives developed through the programme should utilise an improvement methodology so that the learning could be deployed across the organisation. The Executive Director of HR and OD provided assurance that agile methodologies were deployed to projects and there was commonly incremental roll-out to allow for learning and iteration.

21/86 **Any Other Business**

The Chief Operating Officer advised Council that following an Ofsted inspection in January the Aston University Engineering Academy had been graded good with some outstanding features. Council congratulated the staff and governors whose hard work had resulted in this achievement.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

21/87

NOTED:

That the Council would next meet at 1:30 pm on Wednesday 30th March 2022.