
Minutes of the 330th COUNCIL meeting, Wednesday, 30th March 2022 in Room 144, Conference Aston 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

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

APOLOGIES: Dr Rob Perrins

IN ATTENDANCE:

Professor Ruth Ayres	Richard Billingham
Professor Anthony Hilton	Mark Smith
Professor Simon Green	Gary Hughes
Professor Stephen Garrett	Liam Nevin
For agenda item 4.1 only:	For agenda item 4.2 only:
Ian Oldacre	James Longmore
Oliver Milton (Hawkins Brown)	Paul John
Nigel Wakefield (Node Urban Design)	

*indicates member of Council present on Teams

APOLOGIES FROM ATTENDEES: Professor George Feiger

Governance Matters

21/93 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Dr Rob Perrins.

21/94 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received

Minutes

21/95 RESOLVED:

To approve the Minutes of the 328th and 329th meeting of the Council, held on 9th February and 9th March 2022 respectively.

21/96 **Matters Arising**

Paper CO 21/52 was received and noted.

STRATEGY REPORTS (for discussion and noting)

President of the Students' Union Report

21/97 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/53 together with an oral report from the SU President, noting the following points:

- That elections to the Students Union officer team had been completed and that induction would be arranged for the successful candidates.
- The range of social and professional activities that were now available to students had increased to pre-lockdown levels and it was pleasing to note that students were utilising these opportunities.
- Surveys had demonstrated an increase in anxiety amongst students and the Union would continue to work closely with the relevant University teams to maximise access to health and well-being services.

Vice- Chancellors Report

21/98 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/54 together with an oral report from the Vice- Chancellor, and a supplementary Paper CO/21/54A concerning the implications of the Ukraine conflict for the University. The following points were noted:

- There had been significant policy and regulatory consultations launched by the OfS and the DfE, including proposals by way of response to the Augur review.
- The Minister of State for Universities had positively cited the work of Aston University and it was also pleasing to note that for the second year in succession, the University had been ranked second on the Social Mobility index.
- Further industrial action had been taken by staff over the previous week, but it was notable that the number of staff participating had reduced, and that there had not been a significant impact on students. Staff involved in industrial action had themselves taken steps to ensure that student interests were paramount.
- There was a clear focus on providing support for staff and students affected by the war in Ukraine, but due diligence work had also been undertaken on research activities and investment activity. As a result, Council was assured that research projects were being suspended where appropriate and that the University did not have any prohibited investments.

Pro-Chancellor's Report

21/99 RECEIVED:

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

- This was the first Council meeting for Professor Stephen Garrett who was warmly welcomed by the Pro-Chancellor on behalf of Council.
- Initial meetings had been held with the Vice-Chancellor and Chief -Executive designate and these would continue until Professor Subic commenced in post.
- The Council and Executive away day proposed for May would be deferred until October to allow Professor Subic the opportunity to fully participate in the development of the University strategy. The afternoon of 25th May would be retained for a separate short Council meeting to allow for a deep dive into the Education Strategy and the wider student experience, including engagement with a student panel.

- The University was making good progress on Athena Swann accreditation, and it would be timely for Council to consider this further at its next meeting.

STRATEGIC ISSUES (for discussion and approval)

Estate Strategy Update

21/100 RECEIVED:

A presentation from the Director of Estates, supported by the project architects on the vision for the Estates Strategy from which it was noted that:

- Council had approved the Estates Strategy 2.0 in March 2021 and that the key medium-term projects to deliver this strategy were:
- Continuing the implementation of office space rationalisation, building on the work already underway or completed in MB7, MB4 and NW2.
- Supporting the new Education strategy with a reconfiguration of teaching spaces to reflect our new blended approach to teaching.
- Implementing a redesign of the Main Building Ground Floor (MBGF) to enhance the student experience through new student social learning spaces, an improved student support hub, removing the Great Hall and creating a new central 'atrium' and improve main entrance.
- Creating a transformed University 'front-door' by demolishing the south wing, to restore the original southern façade of the Main Building, creating a new entrance and University Plaza.

Council was advised that the development of detailed projects and designs would be subject to consultation and approval through the University's established governance processes. With that caveat, in the ensuing debate Members requested that particular consideration be given to the following:

- An ambitious approach to ensuring that environmental sustainability was integral to all projects and design considerations.
- That the needs of users with both seen and unseen disabilities were addressed in the design.
- That consideration be given to innovative ideas that maximised the benefit of the estate for all the University's beneficiaries.

Digital Strategy Update

21/101 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/56 and a summary of the presentation included with the background papers from which it was noted that:

- The implementation of the Digital Strategy presented a challenge to now ensure that digital was integral to how the University worked rather than being perceived as an enabler.
- That the University had invested in digital infrastructure but to maximise its value it was necessary to further consider how this was utilised to support and deliver strategic objectives

Members of Council made several observations that needed to be addressed as part of the refresh of the strategy:

- That the digital infrastructure needed to demonstrably be utilised to inform data driven decision making consistent with the regulatory regime.
- The creation of digital champions was necessary to drive change.
- Consideration needed to be given to how the strategy would support improvements in performance management.

- The requirements arising from the refresh of the University Strategy would have implications for the Digital Strategy, and that therefore, this issue should be considered further as part of the Executive/Council away day.

In Confidence (Minute Exempt from Publication)

21/102 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/57 from which it was noted that:

- Confidential Minute.

21/103 RESOLVED:

- Confidential Minute

Unite Nominations Agreement

21/104 RECEIVED:

Paper CO/21/58 being a paper from the Chief Operating Officer setting out the situation pertaining in 2021/22 with respect to the rental of rooms to students in Aston Student Village (ASV) by Unite Students PLC (Unite) and making proposals for the management of the commercial relationship between Unite and the University for 2022/23.

21/105 RESOLVED

- Confidential Minute

REFERRALS FROM COMMITTEES

Report from the Audit and Risk Committee

21/106 RECEIVED:

Paper CO21/59 from the Chair of Audit and Risk Committee which summarised issues considered at the ARC meeting held on 10th March 2022. By way of further amplification of the business considered by the Committee:

- There had been an increase in cases of academic malpractice in 2020/21 and the Committee would be seeking further assurance that appropriate mitigations were in place to address the underlying cause of this increase.
- Preparations were underway for an Ofsted new provider monitoring visit and all systems were being reviewed to ensure full compliance with the assessment criterion for degree apprenticeships.
- There had been good progress with the internal audit plan and with the implementation of internal audit recommendations.
- A pro-active approach was being taken to managing the risks and improvements required in preparation for Data Futures.
- There was discussion and agreement that the Committee would be assisted by attendance of members of the Executive with portfolio responsibility for agenda items.

In the course of further discussion of these matters Council was advised that:

- The Regulatory Sub-Committee was considering the issue of academic malpractice and further detailed work was being done in relation to academic integrity, and assessment design in order to further reduce opportunities for plagiarism and collusion.
- The regulatory approach adopted by Ofsted required a prompt, data driven approach by the University, with clarity around management responsibilities for preparing for and satisfying inspection requirements and addressing any recommendations arising from an inspection.
- The University had appointed consultants to run mock Ofsted sessions by way of preparation for inspection and Council would be provided with an update on this work at its next meeting.

Report from the Nomination and Governance Committee

21/107 RECEIVED:

A verbal report from the Chair of the Nomination and Governance Committee which had met immediately prior to Council. Issues considered by the committee included:

- A review of the current membership of Council and terms of office.
- The skills matrix applicable to current members of Council demonstrating potential skills gaps that would inform succession planning.
- Committee membership and in particular the need to consider the membership of Audit and Risk Committee as current members came to the end of their term.

Having previously conducted interviews for the recruitment of independent members of Council the Committee now also recommended the appointment of Bobby Thandi as an independent member of Council for a three- year term of office commencing on 31st July 2022.

21/108 RESOLVED:

- That Bobby Thandi be appointed as an independent member of Council for a three-year term of office commencing on 31st July 2022.

Report from the Remuneration and Workforce Strategy Committee

21/109 RECEIVED:

A verbal report from Dr Noffke on behalf of the Chair of the Remuneration and Workforce Committee. Issues considered by the Committee, which had met immediately prior to Council included:

- A review of the performance appraisal process, the improvements that were required to drive compliance, and the actions being taken by management to address this.
- The Annual Staff Equality Report which provided data demonstrating an improved position with respect to the gender pay gap. It being noted that since the review addressed equality across the range of protected characteristics it would be timely for Council to consider this matter more fully at its next meeting.
- Progress against the Athena Swann standard
- Changes to the Senior Staff Remuneration Code, it being noted that the University was fully compliant with the requirements.

Report from the Senate

21/110 RECEIVED:

Paper C0/21/62 which summarised the issues considered at the Senate meeting of the 9th March 2022 and which were more particularly described in the Upward Report contained with the agenda papers.

Any Other Business

21/111 **Committee Chairs Meeting**

The Pro-Chancellor noted that the meetings of the Committee Chairs that preceded Council were a useful opportunity to reflect on themes and cross-cutting issues that were emerging from the committees. It was therefore proposed that the meeting be formalised as a committee of Council and that terms of reference be drawn up for approval by Council.

21/112 RESOLVED:

- That the Chairs meeting be formally constituted as a Committee of Council and that terms of reference be provided for Council approval.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

21/113 NOTED:

That the Council would next meet at 1:30 pm on Wednesday 25th May 2022.