

## **Minutes for Meeting Book - 230th Meeting of Council, 23rd November 2022**

23/11/2022 | 10:00 - 00:00 - (GMT+00:00) Edinburgh

Room 402, Eastern Gateway/Teams

### **Attendees (26)**

Ms Gemma Bailey; Prof David Delpy; Prof Trevor Hoey; Prof Andrew Jones; Ms Josie Mangan; Mr Andrew Murphy; Prof Geoff Rodgers; Prof Hua Zhao; Mr Archan Raval; Mr Suraj Shaw; Dr Vineta Bhalla; Prof Stuart Palmer; Ms Amanda Rowlatt; Ms Lucinda Hunt; Mr Mark Garrett; Ms Tone Rosingholm; Prof Stephen Langdon; Prof Paul Hellewell; Ms Maddie McGowan; Prof Rosa Scoble; Dr Nicola Rogers; Ms Chiluba Musukuma; Dr Kevin Thomas; Prof Claire Turner; Mr Eliot Glover; Mr Jonathan Bainbridge.

### **Welcome and Apologies**

The Chair noted that Council had met twice in this academic term in a short timeframe, along with the sub-committees that supported it. For the next academic year, the Chair would be in favour of reducing it to one meeting of each committee for the term, which would be more efficient and manageable for the staff.

The Chair welcomed Prof Stephen Langdon, the interim Executive Dean for CEDPS, to his first meeting.

Apologies have been received from Mr Chris Maw and Mr David Kennedy.

### **Declaration of Interests**

Dr V Bhalla is a non-executive Director of the North West London NHS Board, and as such is now on the financial performance committee, which includes the capital programme for Hillingdon Hospital.

### **Minutes of the 229th Meeting held on 19th October 2022**

Two members proposed minor drafting amendments to the minutes and will pass them on to the Secretary.

## **Matters Arising**

There was none.

## **Chair's Business**

The Chair provided members with an update on the recruitment of a new Chancellor. Since Council's last meeting, the Chair had met with the proposed candidate, which had been positive. He reminded members of the background to the current recruitment and explained that the preferred candidate had met with the VC and Prof Mike Spyer, the former Chair of Council. A meeting also took place between the Interim Chair of Council, Dr Vineta Bhalla, Prof Trevor Hoey and the candidate. The Chair outlined the most recent developments in this process and the proposed next steps that would be taken to move the matter forward.

## **OfS Reportable Events**

There were none.

## **FOR DISCUSSION**

One member requested that Item 20, the Graduate Outcome Survey be discussed at the meeting.

## **Vice Chancellor's Business**

The highlights of the report were presented to the committee.

The Chair reminded Council that in respect of the TEF submission, Brunel was awarded silver on the last occasion and that since then the rules of the assessment had changed. A bronze or silver rating would constitute a significant achievement.

The VC updated members on the imminent industrial action as a result of the UCU ballot. Whilst the university was expecting some activity, it was probably less affected than some universities. There has been dialogue with the unions and the deans have been involved in a long period of planning around mitigating the impact upon the students' experience. At present, the unions have not opted for a marking boycott, which would be more disruptive to the university.

The VC confirmed that at the strategy seminar in January 2023, members would receive a presentation that sets out the existing landscape, the university's strengths and weaknesses

and core competitors. The Director of CMSR provided an overview of the supporting work that was in progress using insight market data to better understand the university's position, which has proven to be positive, although not without challenge. This would be shared with Council at the seminar in January. A listening exercise had also been held so as to better understand what the university's stakeholders think of its current positioning and what its ambition ought to be in five to six years' time.

In answer to a question from one member concerning the Executive Board sub-committee structure, the VC stated that there needs to be a joint oversight group established between the Executive Board and Council for the strategy development. The restructure of the committees, how it mapped to the Council governance and whether there was a dual track on some of them, was work currently in progress.

## **Union of Brunel Students Report**

The highlights of the report was presented to Council.

The VC explained that the university was aware of the demand for space on campus and this matter was being looked at. There is considerable pressure upon space in terms of use and non-teaching areas. Careful thought needs to be given to the difference between space pressures, the expectations of students and the experimentation with online and blended learning and it was not clear as to whether in CDEPS, for example, the right balance had been achieved at present. It represents a complex debate that is ongoing within the sector. A task and finish group has been established (Space and Estate Management Strategy Group) that is looking at space management and mechanisms for booking and usage of space. The PVC Education is meeting the UBS regularly to discuss this issue.

One member commented that the new booking system for space was causing difficulties for the delivery of mandatory training, particularly when that training involved utilising external trainers. There were issues concerning rooms which had been booked and not used.

The CIO is leading a new change unit group, its first main task being the management of space, the bookings, timetabling and degree of integration within the university's systems, together with culture and practice.

An explanation as to how the union hardship fund worked in practice and the due diligence associated with it was provided. The COO clarified that the fund was separate from the

university's hardship fund and is distributed according to a different criteria. During the pandemic, the university increased spending in this area and allocated some of those funds to the union.

It was also noted that with regards to the cost of living, the university had committed to raise the minimum stipend for all postgraduate researchers by 10%, (£2,000) to £19,668, in line with the recommendation of the UKRI and before the Russell Group universities.

It was not clear from the report how long student misconduct cases were taking to be resolved, or why there has been a dramatic increase in their number. Mention was made of the poor understanding of international students to the requirements of referencing within their work. The VC explained that work in this area had been reported into Senate over the summer. The increase in case numbers was driven by the move to online assessment, by the practice of using software tools for detecting plagiarism and by virtue of the demographic of students the university attracted. Whilst additional resources had been invested into clearing the backlog, it was recognised that the university had not responded so well with the custom and practice around the introduction of the detection software.

Council was informed that a campaign had been embarked upon in the summer to recruit more academic staff to review and clear the backlog of cases.

The students' union were congratulated on delivering upon their promise to provide free sanitary products across the university.

## **Strategy Development Process and Timeline**

The Executive Board had met to discuss the proposed process the day before and an executive position has been developed around the substance of the strategy. A festive lunch was arranged at which a further discussion with the wider senior leadership team would take place. Thereafter the intent was to bring it to Council to develop the narrative and begin to distil the highest-level strategic framing. This will then form the basis of the engagement with the wider institution and stakeholders, including the alumni and wider community. Once the strategy is formed, the supporting strategies will follow on, which will include the international strategy and research strategy.

Council discussed the limitations of seeking opinions from stakeholders and the timeline for the strategy development, with the need to maintain pace and follow up upon the engagement. The VC confirmed that part of the work of Data HE involves a factual analysis

of the university's market position, both nationally and internationally and the listening exercise was targeted on key empowered stakeholders. Both pieces of work represent pieces of the jigsaw in the strategy development.

The Chair summed up the discussion by members. Council was strongly backing the formation of the new strategy enthusiastically but it was suggesting that that it could be undertaken slightly more quickly than was currently scheduled, without rushing it, to maintain momentum over the following ten months.

Council approved the paper.

## **Financial Matters**

The Financial Statements will need to be submitted to the OfS and have been considered and approved by the Finance Committee and Audit Committee. The statements have also been audited by KPMG, who have nothing substantive to report.

The university made pre-adjustments for impairments and pension re-valuation of £6.2m. The USS deficit reflected the 2020 USS valuation and the large deficit that the university had to recognise its share of, whilst adding back the credit for the LPFA scheme. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

One of the key requirements in the statements is for the university to be satisfied that it is a going concern, i.e., that it believes that it will be financially solvent for a minimum of 12 months. Members attention was drawn to the report from KPMG audit. Whilst there were a number of areas of risk that had been raised, there was nothing material to highlight from it and the auditors had signed the accounts off.

[REDACTED]

The Chair of the Audit committee provided feedback on the committee's last meeting at which they discussed how far the statements ought to be a quantitative assessment of the university's performance. Given that the new strategy was in development, the committee

concluded that this year was not appropriate year, but it actively encouraged the university to review how the data is presented in future, given that the annual report is the document that people tend to go to when looking at performance.

Council approved the Financial Statements.

The Going Concern Review had been discussed at length at the Finance and Audit Committee, looking at various scenarios and undertaking some stress testing. The conclusion from the committees was that the university remained a going concern and could prepare the statements upon that basis.

Council approved the Going Concern Review and Assessment Paper.

The Letter of Representation is a standard letter that is signed by the Chair of Council. Council approved the signing of the letter.

The university is required to submit an Annual Financial Forecast Submission each year to the OfS that forecasts out for a number of years. The report is now required to be submitted no later than the end of November. The return reflects the university's strategy and contains a number of high-level planning assumptions which aim to show the direction of strategic movement. Given that the new strategy for the university is in development, Council needed to be content that it was comfortable with the contents of the submission reflecting the university as it is seen today. In particular, the table set out on page 43 sets out what will happen to the income based upon the high-level assumptions. A level of reinvestment of the surplus has been built in. The surplus deficit highlighted reflects the figure after investment in additional academic systems, the estate and other developments. The allowance for that investment is reflected in the 1% turnover. The capital expenditure plan will be developed throughout the summer, which has built in a level of cash.

Should the performance be different from the forecast, the COO stated that there is a requirement to submit a commentary at the end of January in which the university is required to provide further detail, explaining the underlying assumptions. The DoF explained that there would be opportunity to pull back on some of the proposed investment if student numbers were not met.

Council approved the Annual Financial Forecast Submission.

The Delegated Authority for Finance Committee to approve TRAC Return and the commentary for the Annual Financial Return was approved.

The Chair of the Finance Committee reminded members of the context of the university budget, that from navigating through a bleak period three and a half years ago, and avoiding a breach of the banking covenants, the university was now in a position to make some choices between investing in estates or more academics.

The DoF highlighted the key movements in respect of student number assumptions, recognising that the September intake and population is lower than anticipated and the incremental costs, such as utilities. The accounting adjustments bring the university back into a surplus and are non-cash items and the January 2023 intake will be important in bridging the gap and securing the surplus position. The Director of CMSR was optimistic that the university will reach that target.

Council discussed student home undergraduate numbers, the financial challenges associated with current fees and recruitment strategy.

Council approved the Budget for 2022 - 2023.

## **Audit Committee**

The Internal Auditors Annual Report contained one draft audit which it returned a partial assurance, being the cyber and IT security. The university is aware that it has an issue and there is a new Chief Digital Information Officer in place. A follow up review and a further presentation is planned for the next meeting. The committee recommended that a presentation be made to Council on the current state of cyber, the risks and challenges.

The Chair of Audit Committee referred to the red rating in respect of follow-up actions and explained that with the arrival of a new audit team, they had introduced response dates in respect of management actions that had not been clearly communicated to management who were used to the practices of the previous auditors. The university has accordingly needed to adjust its practices.

Overall, the internal auditors have given the university a green-amber rating, which is the rating that the majority of organisations receive.

The committee is taking a strategic look at the risks, focussing upon one each meeting. It has worked closed with data privacy and received updates on cyber, as well as other areas that require particular attention.

The DSP clarified that the website compliance audit related to the university's adherence to the OfS and CMA requirements, rather than the condition of the internal/externally facing website itself.

Council approved the Internal Auditors Annual Report and Annual Report to Council.

## **Reports from Committees**

The Remuneration Committee provided substantial input on the draft of the senior staff configuration policy, which will be reviewed at the next meeting and approved an additional compensation package.

At its last meeting, the Nominations Committee talked about the Chancellor's appointment, reviewed the committee's terms of reference and changes to the Governance Review Task and Finish Group were proposed.

Council noted the reports from the sub-committees.

## **Terms of Reference for Governance Review Task and Finish Group**

The Nominations Committee have approved the terms of reference for the Task and Finish Group to oversee the implementation of the recommendations arising from the governance review conducted by Joh Rushforth.

Council approved the terms of reference.

## **Teaching Excellence Framework Provider Submission**

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a submission made to the Office for Students. Five years ago, the university was awarded a silver rating. The OfS have requested that



universities need to submit their revised teaching excellence framework by the end of January 2023.

The OfS test is based upon two components: the student outcomes data and student experience. It is anticipated that the university will achieve a silver rating in respect of the outcomes, however, because the NSS scores are challenging and below the benchmark across the board, the narrative component of the submission presents the university with the opportunity to explain and to provide context as to why the student experience data is at it is.

The final submission is the 24th January 2023 and the paper has been approved by the Executive Board and following Council, it will be presented to Senate.

The Chair of the Audit Committee offered to forward her notes to the PVC Education in respect of the areas where the university may wish to make comparisons with other HEI's and other areas where the evidence was not quite in the right place and then to talk through them.

The PVC Education confirmed that work is ongoing to mine the NSS data so as to include it in the body of the submission.

Council approved the draft in its present state and recommend it for development.

## **Graduate Outcome Survey**

The Chair of Audit Committee commented that it would be helpful to understand the background to the survey, as it appeared that the university was doing less well than in previous years and felt it was missing a detailed comparison with other institutions within the appendix.

The Director – Professional Development Centre (D-PDC) explained that there were a number of factors behind the university falling slightly in the league tables. The survey was the first undertaken during the pandemic, with students graduating in the summer of 2020, four months into the pandemic. One of the key employers for local students is the airport and there was a significant impact on the local labour market. In respect of the OfS metric, when the TEF submission was released, the university was positioned within the OfS benchmark and the majority of subjects sit comfortably within the benchmark for the institution.

Whilst the university appeared to be good on general progression, it did not appear so good in respect of securing high quality jobs. It was suggested that it would be helpful to understand the positioning of the university as part of the strategy and to see how it compares with its peer groups in London and more widely. Members entered into a discussion concerning placements and the relationship between them and students obtaining high quality jobs.

The draft survey will be updated to include some of the benchmarking data and the D-PDC offered to share that and the standard occupational codes, which help to track graduate roles, with members.

The report was noted.

## **TO NOTE**

**UREC Annual Report**

**Prevent Annual Report**

**Committees' Terms of Reference**

**OfS Regulatory Conditions Compliance**

**Secretary's Business**

**Senate Updates**

## **FOR INFORMATION**

**Meetings of Committees**

**Media Coverage Sep - Nov 2022**

**Review of Policies (Anti-Bribery & Corruption, Gifts & Hospitality, Conflict & Declaration of Interest Policy)**

**University Events**

**Any Other Business**

**Date of Next Meeting:** 15<sup>th</sup> March 2023