



Minutes for Meeting Book - 229th Meeting of Council, 19th October 2022

19/10/2022 | 10:00 - 00:00 - (GMT+00:00) Edinburgh

Room 402, Eastern Gateway/Teams

Attendees (20)

Prof Stuart Palmer (Chair); Prof Andrew Jones; Ms Amanda Rowlatt; Mr David Kennedy; Prof Hua Zhao; Prof Trevor Hoey; Mr Mark Garrett; Ms Lucinda Hunt; Prof David Delpy; Dr Peter Thomas; Dr Kevin Thomas; Dr Vineta Bhalla; Mr Mukhtar Ahmed; Mr Chris Maw; Ms Tone Rosingholm; Dr Rosa Scoble; Prof Paul Hellewell; Prof Geoff Rodgers; Ms Gemma Bailey; Ms Chiluba Musukuma

Welcome and Apologies

Apologies were received from Mr Andrew Murphy, Ms Josie Mangan and Ms Anne Waltham.

Declaration of Interests

Dr Vineta Bhalla declared that she had been appointed to The Hillingdon NHS Foundation Trust and The Northwest London Acute Collaborative.

Minutes of the 228th Meeting held on 7th July 2022 and EGM held on 3rd October 2022

In the minutes of the 228th meeting, two grammatical errors were noted in Para 4212.1, in respect of the first and last paragraphs.

The minutes of both meetings was approved.

Matters Arising

None.

Chair's Action to Report

Chairs action was taken in respect of approving the UBS Election Report, confirming the election of only the three new sabbatical officers to the UBS. Chairs action was also taken to re-appoint Dr Kevin Thomas to the Nominations Committee.

Council approved both actions.

The Chair used this opportunity to thank Council for inviting him to the Chair of Council and provided members with an overview of the next 12 months and what Council is looking to achieve.

In the first instance, the effectiveness review from John Rushforth and the recommendations made within it needs to be addressed and the Chair suggested that this could be undertaken by a task and finish group, based within the Nominations Committee, which would report back to Council.

Council will in conjunction with the VC and senior academic team be setting the strategy over the next 4 months.

The university was appointing key staff members, including a deputy vice chancellor and two interim pro vice chancellors for research and education and experience.

There are two challenges that will be focussed upon: firstly, research and research strategy. The REF results will allow the university to formulate its research strategy in the year ahead and beyond. Secondly, there will be a focus will be on teaching quality and the student experience, ensuring that the university climbs the NSS league tables. It is anticipated the deputy vice chancellor would take the lead in addressing these areas. Council's role will be to monitor the progress made against these challenges, using a limited set of KPI's and provide a friendly challenge to the VC and senior executive team.

The Chair has now spoken to everyone in a one-to-one setting and proposes repeating the exercise in February/March 2023.

In discussions with the VC, it is planned to bring the away-day forward to February/March 2023, when its outcomes could have some effect on the academic year, rather than occurring at the end of the year.

A suggestion had been made that the Council lay members could go on a fact-finding exercise through visiting similar institutions to Brunel, such as Surrey, York and Warwick, for instance.

In the New Year it was suggested Council could hold its meetings in the afternoon, which would then be followed by a presentation or two on issues of strategic importance, followed by dinner.

The Chair hoped that Council would continue to meet in person, going forward, to encourage both discussions around the table and at informal sessions before and afterwards.

The Deputy Chair, as Chair of the Nominations Committee, provided members with a brief update on the recruitment of a new Chancellor. The current Chancellor, Sir Richard Sykes has indicated that he would like to retire at the end of the year. The search agents, Minerva, were appointed to assist with the process of recruiting his replacement and a short list was settled on from the long list they provided. A good potential candidate was identified who is a member of the local community and he possesses a good understanding as to where the university is coming from. There has been a series of meetings and site meetings that have already taken place. The Chair of Council is now going to meet the candidate and will let the Nominations Committee know if this is someone the committee should bring to Council as a potential Chancellor for the university.

The VC confirmed that Sir Richard is content to continue in the role until the end of the year, the December graduations forming a major element of that decision to stay on until then. A dining-out event is scheduled for the 22nd February 2023 for Sir Richard and the members of Council who have recently left.

OfS Reportable Events

There was one event to report, that being the appointment of Prof Stuart Palmer as new Chair of Council.

FOR DISCUSSION

Vice Chancellor's Business

The VC provided an overview to members of the sections contained within his report.

Members were interested in the timeline the VC was working to in respect of the strategy development work and details of the plan. The VC confirmed that following the assembling of the new senior team and the appointment of the new Chair of Council, this was the next step in that process. It would necessitate engaging the wider stakeholders within the community and the introduction of a working group consisting of elements of Council. The VC will also need to establish an oversight executive group that is separate from the Executive Board and think about the wider mechanisms for engagement. Council will be updated at its next meeting.

The VC stated that he anticipated that the strategic work would be completed by the end of this academic year. The Chair suggested that the away-day in February/March could usefully constitute a key component in finalising the strategy.

The VC offered the members some clarity in respect of those committees that had been disbanded and the work that was being undertaken by the new strategic advisory groups.

It was recognised that a conversation with the Chair would be useful regarding how independent members could be engaged more effectively that would enable their expertise to be used whilst providing them with the right level of oversight on the direction of travel the university was undertaking.

Addressing the student engagement will necessitate a deeper reach into the student body, beyond the union, to understand their needs and requires a comprehensive continual engagement.

The VC recognised that staff morale was a top priority and their motivation was essential to some of the issues that the university faced. Key to this was an effective communication strategy and developing a narrative sense of a distinct sense of identity.

Whilst it was recognised that there were some short-term solutions that could be put in place and reported back to Council, the VC emphasised that the longer-term solution will require the university to invest its limited resources into responding to the matters that are shaping what students are saying within the NSS and other surveys.

Several members commented that it would be helpful once a strategic plan had been produced for it to contain timings and identify objectives that progress can be measured against.

The Chair reminded members that if there were any items within the section on the agenda headed 'To Note' that members wanted to discuss, they should inform him now, otherwise they would be approved/noted as the paper required.

Financial Matters

The DoF confirmed that an updated draft budget had been presented to the Finance Committee the previous week, which was a holding position that reflected the student numbers at a point in time before registration was closed off. Contained within that position were some assumptions and those are still being worked through, based upon the team's understanding of enrolment of new and returning students. The budget will return to Council once there was clarity in respect of that financial position.

In summary, Council was presented with a budget position in July 2022 which anticipated a surplus of £1m. A proposed budget that delivered a surplus of £3m was then presented to the Finance Committee,

driven by the expectations of improved student numbers, including recruiting more overseas students and in anticipation of changes to accounting adjustments, including inflation rates and pension costs, which would produce a favourable position. It was recognised that the January intake may also have an impact upon the budget. In summary, it was not anticipated that the university would fall into deficit.

The Chair of the Finance Committee commented that Finance Committee had received a lengthy report on the budget at its last meeting and its view was that the financial position of the university should be no worse than the last year. It was significant that the university had made a surplus which had served to reset the banking covenants.

The DoF commented on the costs and explained that the Finance team had included within the budget the best information they possessed in respect of rising costs and it reflected the current inflation. A 4% increase in salaries from an inflation perspective and a grade increase has been had been planned for. The university will be monitoring the next round of national pay negotiations, but it was acknowledged that this represented a risk in future years.

The VC was aware that the university was not in line with some of its comparators in that it charged too little for unregulated fees. These has been increased this year. The shift to international unregulated fees will help to bring the university more into line with other institutions, although there is further to go to create more headroom and margin. It was noted that there was a risk with international students that institutions may be forced into constraint by the OfS.

[REDACTED]

The budget will return to Council at its next meeting in November.

The DoF introduced the management accounts. The accounts were still subject to external audit and were not finalised. No issues have been raised by the auditors as yet. The operating surplus of £6.3m was higher than anticipated back in January and the DoF explained the reasoning behind that. The surplus also took account of the significant swings in the pension due to the revaluation of USS and the impact of inflation upon the LPFA and increase in discount costs.

Clarification was sought as to the increase in agency fees and bad debt. These were incremental costs that were linked to the recruitment of more international students. In respect of the bad debt provision,

the university's income had increased last year, but it had not anticipated a similar increase of its bad debt provision. This year the bad debt provision has been matched with the level of increased income. However, it was noted that the figure provided was a prediction and not based on any specific bad debt that the university is aware of.

Estates Update

Apologies of absence had been received from the COO. Questions from members would be taken from the meeting and passed on to him.

It was commented that it would be helpful if the estates update was aligned to the strategy. It was acknowledged that as it currently read, it appeared to be three master plans that were concerned with reorganising what was currently in place.

The VC anticipated that a new strategy should be in place by the summer of 2023. A new working group chaired by the new PVC Enterprise and Employment is designed to make the estates approach strategic in relation to the planning process.

The VC was asked what the timetable was for moving professional staff from the Eastern Gateway building to St Johns. He explained that it was a medium-term project which was anticipated to take place in 12 to 24 months' time. Central to the current discussion was the enhancement of the experience for the people working there, given its limited facilities. The VC was also exploring the possibility of moving the executive team to the centre of campus.

Estates Litigation Working Group Update

Council discussed the background to the litigation and approved the report.

Corporate Risk Register Review

The paper was subject to review every 6 months and had been presented to the Executive Board and has been subject to some amendments from the Audit Committee. The register was due to be substantially reviewed shortly so as to transform it into a platform that is more dynamic and better able to capture the risks of what is an increasingly volatile environment. The register will be reviewed monthly by the Executive Board.

Audit Committee meetings now include specific deep-dive presentations on specific risks, which to date has included research income, international risk and cyber update.

The Chair of the Audit Committee commented that with the arrival of a new CDIO in post, the mitigated risk associated with cyber has increased to 16 and is a risk that is being taken seriously. The committee had also noted that the research culture appeared to be low, given the morale issues. Overall, the committee were supportive of the change proposed.

The Chair expressed his concern that the rating for a likely major infrastructure failing was 4.

The DSP confirmed that part of the review involved looking at identifying and prioritising what were the current risks and the mitigations that were proposed and then addressing them. It was likely that Council would see a new format at its meeting in March 2023, once the template had been approved by the Audit Committee.

The register was approved.

Union of Brunel Students

The UBS provided Council with a verbal update. Following the Spring election, the union now had confirmed 3 full-time officers and 9 part-time officers in post. The Student Assembly elections had been held the week before, with the voting being exclusively undertaken by ballot, rather than allowing voting via mobile phones. The success of the election has given the union the confidence that it can go ahead with planning future major elections.

The democratic review of the union was due to take place shortly, along with discussions concerning future elections. Senior university staff, external consultants and student members will be involved in this.

The union reported that it has now extended the bar to almost double its size and an open terrace is currently under construction, which will include an open cafe for students to be able meet with union officers.

Council's attention was drawn to the cost of living campaign, due to the impact the cost of living was having on students. There were also issues with budgeting in respect of accommodation prices for international students and tuition fees.

Mention was made of the backlog of student misconduct cases, with many students approaching the end of their visa deadlines. There was a risk that some students may not end up receiving a degree.

A current big issue concerned teaching space and the room booking system. Reference was made to the first-year integrated engineering cohort and the desire for in-classroom teaching, rather than the course being run online. The VC explained that there were monthly meetings with the union and this issue had been raised at the latest meeting, along with the challenge of obtaining visas for international students. The PVC - Research explained that the college are looking at the viability of running the course in the classroom, which is dependent upon the availability of the lecture rooms. The worst-case scenario is that this will start to take place from the second term. The online lecture is part of the module and there are smaller group tutorials and laboratories.

The democratic review had not taken place yet, due to the elections to the Student Assembly. It was not anticipated that there would be many major changes to the Spring elections, but it is anticipated that in-person voting would remain.

The CGO informed Council that part of the review involved the establishment of a working group that will include the Registrar and the CGO and that the university had invited Mr Jim Dickinson from WONKHE to help steer it through this process. The first meeting of the working group will be held at the end of November and Council will be updated on its progress.

Reports from Committees

The Chair of the Finance Committee explained that the key points discussed at the committee had been covered in Council earlier. The committee were waiting to scrutinise the budget and end of year accounts.

The Chair of the Audit Committee referred to the internal audit report the committee had received, which contained a progress report and noted that the implementation of follow-up actions is improving, following adjustment made to the new internal auditors method of operating. The committee also noted the risk register benchmarking undertaken by the external auditors who had looked at risk registers across HE institutions, with cyber being the most recognised risk which supported the current risk rating in the university's register. Climate change and staff welfare has also risen considerably, in the context of Covid and the challenges people have faced.

A data protection audit had been conducted by an external expert, which the committee found extremely useful. The audit recognised the work that had been undertaken by the external expert brought in by the CGO to plug some of the gaps and ranked the university just below middle in terms of other HE providers. However, the auditor also highlighted the need for stronger systems for wider information governance, the need to look at data protection and information security and making sure that people understand the governance around it. The committee will be looking at the recommendations that were made within the report and the next steps needed to be taken, noting that whilst progress had been made, there was more to do.

The CDIO in her presentation to the committee highlighted the risks in the cyber space to the university, with emails and ransomware. The Chair of the Audit Committee suggested that when the CDIO had been in the role longer, that the topic of cyber be brought to Council. The committee were also informed about the state of the Cyber Essentials certification and the urgent work being undertaken to renew the certification at the end of the year.

The committee received a presentation on the risk associated with research income, noting that income was in a steady state, with the university less dependent upon EU funding and with more reliance placed on government funding, but noted that this income stream could be at risk of being cut in the current economic climate.

The committee also looked at risk management in internationalisation. The risk management group that has been set up has divided risk into categories and the committee's sense was that it had a good understanding of current issues.

Finally, it was noted that the risk management report in respect of the reports to OfS was very positive, having been rated 'green'.

The Chair of Audit confirmed that she believed that Council had the right committee structures in place and that there was a good process within the executive that focussed on risk. More thought needs to go into which risks are brought to Council, such as cyber and GDPR.

The Executive Dean of CBASS took the opportunity to inform Council that Babcock passed their Ofsted inspection for their entire training programme and were rated as 'good', which in degree apprenticeship terms is very good, due to it being difficult to obtain.

The Chair reminded members that Council had responsibilities across the operation of the university, for its research programme, quality of teaching and student experience and needs to be assured that the

checks and balances take place and this includes the health and safety of the students, staff and the animal unit too.

The Chair of the Remuneration Committee informed Council that the committee had required to review a number of requests for compensation, particularly for new hires. It is anticipated that the ad hoc reviews will disappear as the organisation beds down. In the longer term, a review of the banding and hiring process together with understanding how that aligns with industry would be welcome.

The Chair of the Nominations Committee informed members that the committee had received an update on the recruitment of the Chancellor role, referred to earlier in the meeting. It was looking more strategically at how it could align the terms of members appointments with the terms on the committees. It also engaged in a discussion on appraisals for independent members.

The Chair took the opportunity to thank the Chair of the Nominations Committee for taking on the interim role of Chair of Council.

TO NOTE

The following papers were taken as approved/noted.

Statement on Freedom of Speech

International Risk Report

Knowledge Exchange Framework Outcomes

Senate Updates

Secretary's Business

FOR INFORMATION

Meetings of Committees

Media Coverage Jun - Sep 22

Staff Appointments, Resignations and Leave of Absence

University Events

Any Other Business

The Chair informed members that there were plans to make the committee peripatetic, holding meetings at different locations across campus in order to meet staff and students in the process.

Date of Next Meeting

23rd November 2023