

## Council

20/31 A meeting of the Council was held online on Monday 12 May 2020 at 2.00 pm.

The President  
The Vice-Presidents (Mr R.E.R. Evans and Mrs K. Owen)  
The Vice-Chancellor  
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor  
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor M. Fellowes)  
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor E.M. McCrum)  
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor D. Zaum)

Mr T. Beardmore-Gray	Miss G. King
Professor J. Board	Mr J. Magee
Miss M. Cleaver	Ms S. Maple
Mr K. Corrigan	Mr P. Milhofer
Mrs P. Egan	Mr N. Richards
Professor C.L. Furneaux	Dr C. Shaw
Mrs H. Gordon	Mr J. Taylor
Professor Uma Kambhampati	Ms S.M. Woodman

In attendance:

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary  
The Chief Financial Officer  
The Director of Quality Support and Development

Apologies were received from Mr S.C.C. Pryce.

The President thanked the Vice-Chancellor, University Executive Board, and the Leadership Team for their impressive work in response to the coronavirus emergency and their success in transforming at speed the University's ways of working and its delivery of education to its students.

He also thanked the Vice-Chancellor for his advance briefings to members of the Council on the business of the meeting, which would mitigate the constraints of meeting online.

20/32 The minutes (20/11-20/30) of the meeting held on 16 March 2020 were confirmed and signed.

20/33 Matters approved by the President since the last meeting of the Council (Item 3)

It was noted that, on the recommendation of the Senate, the President had approved, on behalf of Council, revisions to the student complaints process.

20/34 Update from the Vice-Chancellor as to the current position of the University in relation to the Coronavirus (Item 4)

The Council received an update from the Vice-Chancellor as to the current position of the University in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Vice-Chancellor paid tribute to colleagues across the University for their formidable achievement over the past weeks in transforming how the University worked, and in ensuring the continuity of the University's business in relation to the student academic experience, research, support for the local community and other areas of activity.

The Vice-Chancellor reported on the progress of the proposal put forward by Universities UK (UUK) to secure the future of the sector. The government appeared to recognise that the surplus from international students' fees cross-subsidised research, and that the fall in international student recruitment therefore represented a major threat to the viability of research in UK universities. It was clear, however, that, in addressing this issue, the government was likely to set conditions on additional funding, which would align research and education with the government's priorities. In consequence, funding would most probably be directed towards research into Covid-19 or economic recovery and to those institutions which had discontinued programmes deemed by the government to be 'low value'. In the absence of immediate clarification of the government's position and given the scale of the University's financial challenge, the University had no alternative but to assume an impending £100m deficit over the next three years and, in consequence, to develop a plan for radical cost reduction. Such a plan would necessarily involve a substantial reduction in staff costs. Discussions with the University and College Union and the Staff Forum would be initiated shortly.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor reported that, as the University moved from the response to the recovery phase, the Major Incident Team had been replaced by the Major Recovery Team with revised terms of reference and membership. It was undertaking detailed planning for a phased return of activity to the campus, with priority given to increasing activity in those buildings which had remained open during the lockdown period and the resumption of business critical activity dependent on campus facilities. Maintenance work was required to ensure the safety of buildings and infrastructure and compliance with statutory requirements.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) explained that the government had announced a cap on recruitment of Home undergraduates, which was set for each university at its recruitment target plus 5%. An intake of Home undergraduates at this level would not compensate for the projected loss of income from international students. It was, however, critically important that the University recruit fully to the capped level. To this end and given the restrictions on physical recruitment events consequent on Covid-19, the University had transformed its recruitment activity, creating an online hub, enhancing the facility for prospective students to have a one-to-one chat with current students and staff, and running online open days and visit days. This highly personalised approach helped to engage and build relationships with prospective students, and had been well-received. In an intensely competitive environment, the University had already been successful in increasing its application numbers and was now working hard to ensure a high conversion rate.

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary reported on the University's engagement with the government's furloughing scheme. To date, the University had received some 430 cases for furloughing, of which 290 had so far been approved. The eligibility criteria in relation to university staff were complex, but legal advice indicated that academic staff were generally not eligible, while professional staff generally were. The rate of furloughing at the University appeared to be broadly consistent with the rest of the sector.

The Chief Financial Officer outlined the financial challenges faced by the University and referred to the paper later on the agenda which detailed how the challenges might be addressed.

In response to a question from the President, the Vice-Chancellor explained that the University's plans for teaching in the Autumn Term mitigated the risk of a second wave of Covid-19 as far as reasonably possible: the arrangements would be consistent with social-distancing requirements and would include possibilities for blended and fully online delivery.

In response to further questions, the Vice-Chancellor and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) explained that the University was reasonably confident that it would achieve its recruitment cap. In consequence, there would be no competitive advantage in offering a reduction in the fees of Home students to acknowledge that their experience of the first term (and possibly longer) would be different from their original expectations. They affirmed the University's commitment to offer all students an excellent educational experience which represented good value for money. Since postgraduate taught student numbers were not capped, the University was considering offering scholarships for postgraduate taught programmes and was undertaking market research to identify whether there was a market for these programmes particularly among local graduates who, in the current circumstances, might be reluctant to move further afield and might be considering further study given the challenging job market.

In response to questions from Mrs Gordon and Mrs Egan, the Vice-Chancellor confirmed that there would be a formal consultation with the UCU on proposals to reduce staff costs, and that he would explore with both UCU and the Staff Forum how the University might minimise the number of redundancies. He was committed to being open with staff about the financial challenges and the absolute necessity of reducing staff costs, but wished to proceed as far as possible with the support of staff and to maintain a strong sense of community. Plans for cost reduction would be accompanied by a review of the size and shape of the University, and a consideration of the student learning experience and how the academic year might be used more productively.

Mr Taylor noted that the current emergency appeared to have engendered a strong sense of common purpose across the University community and an unprecedented commitment to rapid change. It would be important to sustain this ethos as far as possible to ensure that positive aspects of recent changes were adopted as normal practice, and that the willingness of staff to adapt and innovate led to further improvements.

In response to a question from Mrs Woodman, the RUSU President spoke of the frustration of finalists that they had not been able to enjoy the usual activities which

would have marked the end of their course. RUSU was looking to provide a virtual space which would allow finalists to come together to celebrate and offer a sense of closure.

**Resolved:**

‘That the Vice-Chancellor’s report on the current position of the University in relation to the Coronavirus emergency, now submitted, be received.’

20/35 Education: decisions taken by the University in response to the Coronavirus (Item 5)

The Council received a report on decisions taken in relation to teaching, learning and assessment in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) (Professor McCrum) outlined the measures taken to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on teaching, learning and assessment, and explained the basis of the Senate’s decisions.

She informed Council that the move to online teaching for the University’s provision in China in February and in the UK in March had been largely successful. Staff had been provided at speed with training and support in the delivery of online teaching and learning, and early feedback indicated that students had been satisfied with the quality of the online teaching provided.

Professor McCrum explained that, in considering its approach to assessment, progression, award and classification, the University had taken an early decision that the current *force majeure* provisions, which had been designed primarily for other circumstances, did not offer the best solution to the issues emerging from a pandemic. A set of principles had been agreed to guide the University’s approach to assessment, progression, award, and classification in the current context, and provisions had been developed and agreed. Closed examinations had been replaced with 23-hour online take-home papers. A new temporary extenuating circumstances process had been introduced, which allowed students to defer examinations, to receive extensions on deadlines for coursework and dissertations, and to retake examinations following receipt of their results. In addition, a ‘mark safety net’ had been put in place which meant that, where there was sufficient evidence of student achievement in the academic year prior to 27 March 2020, the mark for the module assessment to that date could be used as the module mark in calculating a student’s progression outcome or classification, subject to a number of conditions.

Professor McCrum reported that the University had received some negative feedback on aspects of these provisions from some students, who felt that they were disadvantaged relative to peers at other universities. Universities had generally adopted broadly similar approaches, although there was variation in the detail which reflected a range of factors, including different patterns of assessment. Throughout this work, the University had given careful consideration to the regulatory framework, the principles of fairness and equity the best interests of students, and the maintenance of academic standards and the value of University awards.

In response to questions, the RUSU President explained that RUSU had worked well with the University in the development of these provisions, and that the University had responded positively to RUSU’s representations on behalf of the student body.

In response to questions, Professor McCrum elaborated on the ways in which the risk of academic misconduct in take-home papers was being mitigated through the design of assessment, amendments to the academic misconduct regulations for examinations, and

guidance to students.

The President, on behalf of the Council, commended the University's careful determination of the educational arrangements in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Resolved:**

'That:

1. the Council has assured itself that proper processes have been followed in the determining of educational arrangements to address the effects of COVID-19, and that proper regard has been taken both of academic quality and standards and of student welfare;
2. the report on decisions in respect of education taken by the University in response to the Coronavirus emergency, now submitted, be received.'

20/36 Report on student and staff welfare during the Coronavirus (Item 6)

The Council received a report from the RUSU President and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) (Professor McCrum) on student welfare during the Covid-19 pandemic, and from the Vice-Chancellor on staff welfare.

The RUSU President reported that RUSU had successfully moved to online delivery of its student support and other services within a short time of the lockdown, and was sustaining the student community through social media. RUSU's annual 'RUSU says Relax' campaign during the examination period had been rebranded as 'Relax with RUSU' and had provided a daily calendar of activities, such as yoga, sharing revision tips, and learning new skills. Advice staff were offering financial and other support. The RUSU Welfare Officer, as part of her mental health campaign, had provided guidance to students on how they can look after their mental health and help others during the Covid-19 pandemic. RUSU had set up a Community Facebook group which now included some 1000 members and was maintaining a sense of community and mutual support.

Professor McCrum reported that the University had transferred the range of its support and advisory services to phone and online provision, and that students were well supported by their Academic Tutors, Support Centres, Finance, Counselling and Wellbeing, Careers, and the Library. The University remained in regular touch with students through all the usual channels, including email and social media. The student services blog and the student life blog included expert advice and tips relevant to the current circumstances, and stories and advice from current students about adjusting to new ways of studying and living.

In response to questions, Professor McCrum explained that students, especially finalists, were engaging actively with Careers. Careers had focussed their provision to address the current circumstances, including advising on how to approach online interviews and offering mock online interviews. She also confirmed that the University had begun planning for the Autumn Term with provision for teaching face-to-face, online and blended delivery, and that the University was committed to ensuring that all students across the range of delivery modes were offered an excellent learning experience and appropriate support.

The Vice-Chancellor outlined how the University was supporting staff working under the new arrangements. The University had well-established staff welfare provision, including Occupational Health, an independent confidential helpline, and a well-being peer support group. The University's Parent and Family network had published interesting resources

focused on working from home with children and advice in respect of home-schooling. The University's Staff Wellbeing web page was currently the most visited on the University website. Line managers were holding regular one-to-one meetings with staff, and various teams had instituted virtual meetings to maintain normal social contact. A survey was being conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the support available.

**Resolved:**

'That the reports on student and staff welfare during the Coronavirus emergency, now submitted, be received.'

20/37 Financial effects of the Coronavirus (Item 7)

The Council received a report on the financial effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the University.

The Chief Financial Officer explained that a realistic forecast of the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the University indicated up to £100m of income loss over the next three years. The figures did not include the impact of any increases in employer contributions to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) which might follow from the current valuation exercise; but they did assume a decrease in student numbers and loss of commercial revenues. A significant delay in the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year or recruitment below the revised projections would imply an additional loss.

She reported that the Strategy and Finance Committee had agreed a series of short-term measures to ensure sufficient cashflow over the coming months, including an extension of the University's overdraft facility and a renegotiation of covenants on loans. Action had been taken to reduce campus costs, including a near-freeze on staff recruitment.

She indicated that the University was in a stronger position than many other universities: there were no ongoing large capital projects, with a couple of exceptions which were nearing completion; the University had a strong asset base; it was the beneficiary of two major trust funds; and negotiations between Blackhall Studios and Thames Valley Science Park were progressing. The government's response so far to the UUK's recent proposals offered very limited support for the sector.

She reported that the University was participating in a review of the USS covenant scheme, undertaken by PwC, which might allow a longer view to be taken of the scheme's asset base and therefore limit the increase in contributions.

An additional meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee towards the end of May would consider proposals to address the University's financial position and would report to an additional meeting of the Council in early June.

In response to questions, the Chief Financial Officer indicated that she wished to retain as much flexibility as possible in managing cashflow and that recourse to the overdraft facility or to the RET would be decided in the light of circumstances at the time.

The Vice-Chancellor advised that the Charity Commission had confirmed their approval of the Council's Resolutions, agreed at its January meeting, in relation to the RET. The new arrangements would allow the University greater flexibility in responding to the financial situation arising from Covid-19, and would reduce overheads.

**Resolved:**

‘That the report on the financial effects of the Coronavirus emergency on the University, now submitted, be received.’

20/38 The University’s support for the NHS (Item 8)

The Council received a report on the University’s support for the NHS during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor outlined the range of work to support the NHS, including research, support for frontline staff, the development of personal protective equipment, and the donation, loan and sourcing of critical equipment. She also referred to support for community organisations. The University had worked closely with the Royal Berkshire Hospital, building on the existing partnership.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor reported that University had received a letter from the Universities Minister, expressing gratitude for its support in tackling the pandemic, and that there had been extensive media coverage, both national and local, of the University’s support for the NHS.

**Resolved:**

‘That the report on the University’s support for the NHS during the Coronavirus emergency, now submitted, be received.’

20/39 Update on the University’s research (Item 9)

The Council received a report on the University’s ongoing research activity.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) (Professor Zaum) explained that the vast majority of academic and professional staff and research students were working from home. However, some research work in laboratories or field trials was continuing where social distancing could be implemented and where the research contributed to the national efforts against Coronavirus or where interrupting the work would cause significant delay (for example, where the work was seasonal). The University recognised the pressures created by home-working and other circumstances and their constraints on research work.

He reported that, notwithstanding the challenges, research divisions were maintaining a vibrant research culture, and several had started online seminars and discussion groups. Most notably, the Department of Economics had launched Reading Online Sports Economics, a series of weekly seminars with international speakers, normally attracting over 100 participants and 600 subsequent viewers on YouTube; it had been reported in the BBC and other media and was expected to continue beyond the current crisis.

Professor Zaum reported that the University’s research income in 2019/20 had been and remained strong, despite current circumstances. The University had received awards amounting to over £17m in Q1 and Q2 (compared with £10m in 2018/19), and this trajectory was expected to continue for the remaining quarters. [Redacted, section 43].

He reminded Council that the REF had been suspended and that the sector was being consulted on the future timetable. The University had responded to the consultation, supporting a short delay until March 2021.

**Resolved:**

‘That the report on the University’s research, now submitted, be received.’

20/40 Appointment of Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Item 10)

The Council received a report on the selection of a Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International).

The President reported that 80 applications had been received for the post of Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) and [redacted, section 40] candidates had been interviewed. The interview panel had recommended to the Appointments and Governance Committee that Mr Paul Inman, currently Pro-Vice-Chancellor International Student Recruitment and Dean of the Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment at Oxford Brookes University, be appointed to the role. The President noted that there had been a strong field for the post and that the short-listed candidates had been impressive. Mr Inman had stood out both in his insight and innovative thinking about the role and how to fulfil its purposes in a rapidly changing global environment, and in his track record of working with colleagues in a positive and engaging manner.

In response to questions, the Vice-Chancellor explained that the University Executive Board had considered carefully whether to proceed with recruitment to this senior management role, given the current financial context and the tight restrictions on staff recruitment. The Board had agreed that the post was strategically necessary, and particularly so in view of the challenges in international student recruitment and its importance to the financial position of the University. The Vice-Chancellor noted that the staff costs for the University Executive Board were significantly less than three or four years ago, and that the apparent expansion of the Board was due to the number of job-shares.

**Resolved:**

‘That the report on the selection of a Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International), now submitted, be received.’

20/41 Delegation of powers (Item 11)

The Council received a proposal on the delegation of powers which would give the President and Vice-Presidents the authority to make decisions on its behalf should urgent decisions be necessary. Delegated powers would be exercised exceptionally, and, wherever time allowed, urgent business would be transacted by email correspondence with all Council members. The President would provide a written report to the next meeting of the Council of any decisions taken under this delegation.

**Resolved:**



'That, given the ongoing exceptional circumstances, the authority to make decisions on behalf of the Council be delegated to the President and Vice-Presidents up to the date of the Council's next meeting (6 July 2020) should an urgent decision be necessary.'

20/42 Further meetings of the Council in the Session 2019-20

The final scheduled meeting of the Council in the current Session would be held on Monday 6 July 2020 at 2.15 pm. However, in view of the current circumstances and the urgency of impending business, it was expected that an additional meeting of the Council would be necessary in the week commencing 8 June 2020.