

Academic and Governance Services



Council

22/01 A meeting of the Council was held online on Tuesday 25 January 2022 at 2.15 pm.

The President	
The Vice-Presidents	(Mr T. Beardmore-Gray, Mrs H. Gordon, 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)

Professor J. Board	Mr J. Magee
Mr K. Corrigan	Ms S. Maple
Mrs P. Egan	Mr P. Milhofer
Professor R. Frazier	Ms L. Moses
Professor J. Gibbins	Mrs S. Plank
Professor U. Kambhampati	Mr S.C.C Pryce
Mr B. Knowles	Mr N. Richards
Miss G. Loweth	Dr C. Shaw

In attendance:

- The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary
- The Chief Financial Officer
- The Director of Quality Support and Development
- The Director of Human Resources (for Minute 22/05 only)
- Mr J. Russell, Campus Jobs Manager (for Minute 22/05 only)

Apologies were received from Mrs S. Butler.

22/02 The minutes (21/57-21/78) of the meeting held on 24 November 2021 were confirmed and signed.

Items for note

22/03 Disclosure of Interests (Item 4.1)

The Council received a list of members' interests and members were asked to notify the University Secretary of any amendments.

22/04 Documents sealed and to be sealed (Item 4.2)

The Council received a list of documents sealed and to be sealed.

Resolved:

‘That the Council approve the action taken by the Officers and Members in affixing the University Seal to documents sealed since the last Ordinary Meeting of the Council and authorise the Seal of the University to be affixed to the documents to be sealed as now reported.’

Main items of business: strategic and governance matters for discussion

22/05 Presentation from Human Resources on the Campus Jobs scheme (Item 5)

Mr John Brady, Director of Human Resources, and Mr Jay Russell, Campus Jobs Manager, delivered a presentation on the Campus Jobs scheme.

Mr Brady explained that the Campus Jobs scheme had been established in 2017 to create an efficient process for the University to recruit temporary staff and to provide employment opportunities for students. It had been developed collaboratively by Human Resources and Careers, with input from RUSU, Legal Services, Digital Technology Services, and Procurement. The University had largely depended on *ad hoc* processes for employing students and other temporary staff which had been inconsistent and inefficient: recruitment processes, rates of pay, and arrangements for payment had varied widely, and the processes for checking the statutory right to work for temporary employees had not been wholly reliable. It had been difficult to recruit students in a timely way and, in consequence, the University had drawn heavily on external agency staff. The Campus Jobs scheme had been founded on the principle that, if a job could be done by a student, it should be done by a student. The scheme set up streamlined and optimally automated processes which allowed temporary posts to be advertised and students recruited quickly, ensured equitable rates of pay for the range of roles, provided for reliable confirmation of visa compliance, and ensured efficient and timely payment.

Mr Russell informed Council that, since its inception, the scheme had employed some 6,000 workers who had worked a total of some 711,000 hours and had been paid some £8.4m. A Home Office audit had praised the scheme for its efficiency and reliability in checking compliance with visa conditions and had commended the collaboration between the University and RUSU. Due to its streamlined processes, the scheme could respond quickly to demand: for example, within a space of ten days, the scheme had recruited and trained 129 workers for the Covid-19 test centre hosted on the campus. Building on its success over the past five years, the scheme was now seeking to increase the roles advertised from key areas of the University, including Digital Technology Services, Library, and Campus Commerce, and to extend its reach to include UPP and the University’s tenants, such as Shinfield Studios. Mr Brady indicated that, in the longer term, the scheme had the potential to expand to become a fully fledged employment agency serving the Reading community.

In response to questions, Mr Russell explained that the scheme, while sitting within Human Resources, worked closely with Careers and had been conceived to enable students to build a portfolio of skills and experience; unsuccessful applicants for vacancies in the scheme were referred to Careers resources on writing applications and curricula vitae. He noted that relatively few universities ran such schemes: Birmingham University had originated the idea

and Warwick University had franchised its scheme to some other universities. Mr Brady indicated that Reading's scheme was highly regarded in the sector.

In response to further questions, Mr Russell spoke of the impacts of the pandemic and the recent gradual recovery in vacancies and recruitment. Mr Brady noted that students who had been regularly employed through the scheme had been able to benefit from the government's furlough scheme over the pandemic, which had alleviated financial hardship in many cases.

The Council thanked Mr Brady and Mr Russell for their presentation and commended the scheme for delivering significant benefits to both the University and its students.

22/06 The role of Senate (Item 6)

Professor Frazier gave a presentation on the role of Senate.

Professor Frazier reminded Council that Senate was currently in the process of reviewing its effectiveness and, as part of this work, had established, jointly with Council, a sub-group to review the effectiveness of the relationship between Council and Senate. The current discussion would usefully inform the work of the sub-group.

Professor Frazier outlined the membership and purpose of Senate, and how it fulfilled its role. Senate was established by Charter to oversee the education and research of the University and to exercise responsibility for academic standards. It was subject to the overall control and approval of Council. As a consequence of the last review of Senate in 2016/17, the membership was now more representative of the range of academic roles in the University, but it did not necessarily reflect other dimensions of diversity. Senate included student members and RUSU officers, but did not include representation from the Functions. The Senate Agenda Group, acting independently of the executive, determined the agenda for Senate, and thereby ensured that Senate was well-placed to hold the executive to account. Senate relied on a number of Committees to transact the detailed business under its remit, and oversaw their work through regular reports. Professor Frazier referred to Senate's review of its effectiveness in 2016/17, which, responding to changes in the sector, had instituted major reforms. The current effectiveness review would evaluate the impact of those reforms and consider what further reforms might be required, given recent developments in the University and external environment. Professor Frazier concluded with some personal reflections on his experience as a member of Senate.

In response to questions, Professor Frazier acknowledged the challenges for Council in engaging fully with Senate's business. While Senate's written report to Council was comprehensive and accurately represented its discussion, and while, as the Senate-appointed member of Council, he sought to convey both his own views and those of Senate more broadly, he recognised that some of Senate's business and some of the assumptions which informed its discussion might be unfamiliar to Council. Strengthening the relationship between Council and Senate would foster greater mutual understanding and support each in fulfilling their responsibilities.

The President observed that, under the Office for Students, there was greater emphasis on the accountability of the governing body for education, and that it was therefore increasingly necessary for Council to have a well-grounded and confident understanding of the University's academic business, including work around quality and standards. Council needed to be in a position to offer appropriate challenge in this area. The Vice-Chancellor concurred and, to this end, suggested that it would be useful for Council to have some focussed, small group

discussion on key issues for the governance of academic activities, such as academic freedom, research ethics, and quality and standards in education.

In response to further questions, the Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary advised that other universities were addressing similar questions about the relationship between their governing bodies and Senates/Academic Boards. There was a range of practice in the management of the relationship: some relied heavily on detailed formal reporting, while others focussed on fewer, more in-depth, discussions of key issues.

It was felt that Professor Frazier's presentation would be a useful addition to the induction for lay members of Council.

The President thanked Professor Frazier for leading a helpful discussion and looked forward, in due course, to seeing the reports of the review of the effectiveness of Senate and the review of the Council-Senate relationship.

Matters for report

22/07 Report of the Senate (Item 7)

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Senate held on 5 January 2022.

Professor McCrum introduced a discussion of the Programme Expectations and Blended Learning elements of the Portfolio Review, which sat under the Strategic Foundations programme.

Professor McCrum explained the drivers for the proposals under Programme Expectations, including reducing the burden on academics and professional services, improving the student experience, making programmes more appealing to prospective students, and creating capacity for increasing teaching excellence and other priorities. The proposals would embed a programme-level approach to programme design, increase consistency in the size and shape of modules, and ensure that students were offered a realistic choice of options. Long-standing issues around assessment would also be addressed, eliminating over-assessment, positioning assessment closer in time to the relevant teaching, and making assessment more authentic and relevant to the workplace.

Professor McCrum explained that the Blended Learning proposals, while drawing on the experience of the emergency implementation of online learning during the pandemic, moved to a more principled pedagogical model which fully integrated face-to-face and online learning. There was a strong evidence base for the benefits of effective blended learning, including facilitation of an innovative curriculum, enhanced student engagement and motivation, support for accessibility and inclusivity, and improved student outcomes. Moreover, blended learning was sustainable and scalable.

In response to questions, Professor McCrum clarified that the present paper had focussed on the nature of the proposed changes and confirmed that plans for the implementation of the changes were well-developed. Implementation would be overseen by the Portfolio Pathway Implementation Steering Group and managed through two workstreams, one responsible for Enabling Learning Design and the other for Enabling Operations. The implementation plan drew on learning from previous major change projects, and was highly structured, took full account of the wider context and interdependencies with other strategic projects, and set a high priority on communication and engagement with the University community, including

academic and professional staff and students. Transparency was fundamental to the process and success of the implementation. The implementation plan included support and development for academic teams to take forward the changes, aided by locally based change agents. Milestones were well defined and regular check points built in. Professor McCrum undertook to provide Council with a paper outlining the high-level implementation plan at its next meeting.

Professor Gibbins observed that academic staff seemed generally supportive of the direction indicated in the proposals, but, given the challenges of the past two years, staff felt some trepidation at the demands entailed in the implementation of a major change programme. Colleagues were variously concerned that the programme might not deliver the full benefits anticipated, that effective aspects of current practice might be lost, and that the change process might have a negative impact on students' experience as they transition from familiar to new practices. There were also concerns that the demands of implementing change would reduce the time available for research, which had already been constrained during the period of the pandemic.

Professor Frazier, reflecting the views of Senate, concurred with Professor Gibbins. He indicated that there was widespread support for the principles and most of the proposals set out in the Programme Expectations and Blended Learning papers, but there was uncertainty about how the proposals would be implemented. A detailed implementation plan, together with guidance about those elements of current workload which could be deprioritised, would help to allay these concerns. He also cautioned that the ambitions for blended learning would need to be carefully communicated to current and prospective students; public perceptions of online learning were often negative and the current proposals could easily be misunderstood.

Professor McCrum explained that the Portfolio Review was designed to address the unsustainable workloads of academic and other staff. Reductions in the volume of assessment, in particular, would free up a substantial amount of academics' time, and the semesterisation of the academic year would allow a more rational management of research and teaching. Given that current workloads were unsustainable, there was an urgent need to proceed with implementation of the Portfolio Review and to realise its benefits. The University was pausing other initiatives to create the capacity for this work.

Professor McCrum acknowledged that any change, including beneficial changes, represented a risk to National Student Survey scores since transitions could be unsettling. Communications to students were a key element of the implementation plan and would be carefully considered and managed. Improving the student experience—and therefore value for money—were at the core of the Portfolio Review. She noted that the sector generally was increasing the proportion of online learning, and that the University had worked closely with students to understand their perspective and to identify what would work best for our students and our programmes. Miss Loweth indicated that students valued highly the campus experience at Reading, but also appreciated online learning as part of their programme; the success of blended learning would depend on the balance and quality of both elements.

In response to further questions, Professor McCrum explained that the implementation plan included an element of phasing, with some Schools acting as early adopters, which would allow testing of changes, learning from experience, and resolution of teething troubles.

In response to a question from Mr Knowles, Professor McCrum confirmed that, in accordance with the teaching framework for 2021/22, the majority of examinations would be held online, although, due to the requirements of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies and the

needs of some disciplines, there would be more examinations held in person this year than last year. In the longer term, the Programme Expectations proposals would reduce the reliance on examinations, whether online or face-to-face, and make assessments more authentic to the discipline and workplace.

The Vice-Chancellor clarified that the Resolution endorsed the principles and proposals set out in the paper, but did not represent approval for associated expenditure. The implementation plan to be considered by Council at its next meeting would set out proposals on resource. He confirmed that a report providing an update on the costs and benefits of the Strategic Foundations Programme would be submitted to Council's first meeting in 2022/23.

The Council commended the proposals and thanked Professor McCrum and colleagues for their work.

Resolved:

'That:

1. that the overarching recommendations outlined in the Blended Learning and Programme Expectations proposals, now submitted, be approved;
2. the Report of the meeting of the Senate, held on 5 January 2022, now submitted, be approved.'

22/08 Report of the Vice-Chancellor (Item 8)

The Council received the Report of the Vice-Chancellor.

The Vice-Chancellor reported that the Council of the European Centre for Medium-range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) had accepted the UK government's proposal to host its headquarters on the University's Whiteknights campus. The ECMWF headquarters would occupy the current site of TOB1, which includes the School of Art; the UK government had agreed to indemnify the costs of a new building for the School of Art in the case the move of the ECMWF HQ would not advance, which would allow the Art project to proceed without delay. The Vice-Chancellor explained that, whereas the bid approved by the Council of ECMWF had been wider in scope, including a plan for long-term investment in research, the UK government had advised that the bid should be confined to a land transaction. While the University had accepted this course, its commitment to make a substantial investment in collaborative research with ECMWF remained a requirement. This provided a welcome opportunity to rethink the research proposal and extend the collaboration to a wider group of partners.

The Vice-Chancellor drew Council's attention to the summary of international and domestic league tables and noted that there was some fluctuation in the University's rankings. The University's performance in international league tables was improving slowly and, with some small further improvement, the University could regain a ranking in the top 200. There were minor movements in the University's rankings in domestic league tables, both positive and negative depending on the weighting of the various measures in the different tables.

The Vice-Chancellor advised that the next all-staff talk would focus on the University's position in relation to Wokingham Borough Council's new Local Plan, which identified plans for growth in the years to 2038, and the future of Hall Farm. The Chief Financial Officer noted that the

Local Plan did not commit the University to any particular action, but that pursuing an alternative course would be disruptive and would damage the University's relationship with the borough council. The University was well-placed to make a contribution to the local economy and environment through the employment opportunities offered by Thames Valley Science Park (TVSP), housing development on Hall Farm, and EcoValley. The University would shortly need to determine how to proceed with the development of Hall Farm, including the extent of the role of housing developers; she noted that the University of Oxford had retained control of its recent housing developments, which offered a possible model for the University and might enable a better alignment between the development and the University's values.

The Chief Financial Officer noted that decisions would also need to be made on the future direction of TVSP as demand for space outstripped supply and as different sectors, including film, life sciences, and museums, were effectively in competition for space. Decisions would be informed by the opportunities which the various sectors offered for synergies with the University's academic activity. A key criterion in selecting tenancy was a commitment to partnership with some part of the University. The University Executive Board would consider these matters and refer recommendations to the Strategy and Finance Committee.

In response to a question about possible withdrawal from those disciplines which sat within the bottom quartile of league tables, the Vice-Chancellor explained that there was naturally some volatility in league table rankings and that, with institutions concentrated in a narrow range of scores, small differences in a few measures could lead to large shifts in ranking. He also noted that National Student Survey scores reflected students' experience across their period of registration, so that factors dating from three or four years ago could influence the most recent score. It was also important to have regard to the number of institutions in a subject area and a low rank in a select group was not necessarily an indicator of poor quality. The Vice-Chancellor emphasised Schools' responsibility for improving the quality of the student experience and their performance in league tables, and the role of the University centrally in supporting enhancement. In the case of consistent poor performance, a School would need to deliver on planned improvement or consideration would be given to restructuring and/or reducing provision in that area. In accordance with the University Strategy, the University was committed to investing in excellence.

In response to further questions, the Vice-Chancellor undertook to bring to Council a paper analysing Schools' performance in greater detail. Council indicated an interest in measures such as research performance, league table rankings, the student market, and financial performance, and asked that areas where small improvements could have the most impact be identified.

In response to questions from Mr Beardmore-Gray and Mr Pryce, the Vice-Chancellor acknowledged the risk of over-stretch, in respect of both capacity and skill-set, if the University took on direct leadership and management of the Hall Farm housing development, especially given the demands on senior management time in leading the University Strategic Foundations programme. The University Executive Board would consider carefully, and consult Strategy and Finance Committee on, the risks and benefits of alternative models for taking forward the housing development.

Resolved:

‘That the Report of the Vice-Chancellor, now submitted, be approved.’

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee held on 10 January 2022.

The President reported that the Committee had considered the Estate Strategy and the Digital Strategy, which were fundamental to the achievement of the University Strategy and its ambitions for growth, and to meeting the changing needs and expectations of students. The Council would consider and advise on both strategies at its March meeting and would be invited to approve them at its meeting in July.

The Chief Financial Officer reported that the Financial Quarter 1 Forecast indicated a deterioration of £3.7m against the budget. She expected that the position would improve in the course of the year due to likely underspend by Schools and Functions, lower capital expenditure as a result of pandemic-related delays in delivery of projects, and a potential lease premium from Shinfield Studios.

In response to a question from Mr Milhofer, the Chief Financial Officer advised that a paper on the five-year financial outlook would be submitted to Council at its September meeting, but she would offer an interim view to Council at its meeting in July.

Resolved:

‘That:

1. That the annual report of the Health and Safety Committee 2020/21 be approved.
2. the Report of the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee, held on 10 January 2022, now submitted, be approved.’

22/10 Update on progress of the audits for 2020/21 and for 2021/22 (Item 10)

The Council received an oral report from the Chief Financial Officer on the progress of the audits for 2020/21 and for 2021/22.

The Chief Financial Officer reported that the external audit for 2020/21 conducted by Deloitte had been badly delayed, due, in large measure, to the impact of Covid. She expected that the audit report would be completed by mid-February and that it would present an unqualified opinion. Deloitte was currently issuing letters of assurance, explaining the delay, to grant-giving and other bodies which would normally require audited numbers at this stage in the year.

The Chief Financial Officer reported that the tendering process for a new external auditor for 2021/22 was under way. Four expressions of interest had been received and were being taken forward, with a recommendation for the appointment expected in mid-March. Given the urgency of an appointment, the Council agreed that the President, on recommendation from Mr Richards, as Chair of the Audit Committee, approve the appointment on its behalf.

22/11 Update on the one-to-one meetings with members of Council and next steps (Item 11)

The Council received an interim report on appraisal discussions with Council members.

Mrs Owen reported that the appraisal exercise was almost complete, and that the one-to-one meetings had generated a wealth of useful information and reflection. In particular, the exercise had identified further ideas to improve the effectiveness of Council, areas where more information or better understanding of the work of the University Council would enhance individual performance and motivation, and skills and experience among its members which Council could draw on. A final report including proposals for action would be submitted to the Council at its March meeting.

Resolved:

‘That the Interim report on appraisal discussions with Council members, now submitted, be approved.’

22/12 Recruitment of new President of the Council

Mrs Owen reported that an advertisement inviting expressions of interest in the role of President of the Council had now been published on the University website and would appear shortly in a number of other locations. She invited any members of Council who might be interested in the role to contact either herself or the University Secretary and Chief Strategy Officer.

22/13 Dates of further meetings of the Council in the Session 2021/22

Further meetings of the Council in this Session had been scheduled for:

Monday 14 March 2022 at 2.15pm

Monday 4 July 2022 at 2.15pm.