



Minutes: Council

Time and date: 11:00 on Monday 17 July 2023

Location: Francis Wood Room, Crewe Campus

Present: Mr Mark Qualter (Chair of Council), Dr Keith Bothongo, Mr Chris Hollis, Mr Toby Corbett (President of the Students' Union), Professor Hongbo Du (Senate Representative), Professor Tim Evans, Mr Nick Hillman, The Lord Peter Lilley, Professor Adolfo Paolini (Senate Representative), Mr Callum Roberts (Professional Services) (from minute 62 onward), Mr Mark Rushton, Mrs Milly Soames, Professor James Tooley (Vice-Chancellor)

In attendance: Mr David Cole (Chief Financial Officer), Mrs Maureen Hampson (Governance Secretary), Mr Clive Macintosh (Head of Legal Services), Mr Chris Payne (Registrar & Director of Professional Services) (for minutes 66 and 67), Ms Alison Sealey (Interim Director of Student Support Services)

Secretary: Mr Sam Weston, Secretary to Council
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56 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Sir Francis Habgood, Ms Josephine Mbuya, and Dr Jaqueline O'Dowd.

57 Declarations of interests in respect of items on the agenda

There were no new declarations.

58 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the Council meeting held on 22 May 2023, and the extraordinary Council meeting held on 26 May 2023, were approved as a correct record.

59 Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

60 Approvals via correspondence

[Redacted]

61 Chair's welcome and introduction

Council membership

An update was noted regarding Council's membership and the intention to bolster the approach taken to the appointment of independent trustees going forward via a revised Council sub-committee structure that would emerge for Council's approval arising from the internal governance review being conducted by the Secretary.

62 Vice-Chancellor update

The Vice-Chancellor provided a verbal update on several areas of activity, noting the positive atmosphere that he had observed when he engaged with colleagues and students around the two campuses. Arising from discussion the following points were noted:

Recruitment and accommodation

- Undergraduate numbers had stabilised, and postgraduate applications continued to rise. Predictions for student numbers in September 2023 were buoyant. Recent Open Days had received a great deal of interest from potential applicants.
- **[Redacted]**
- The University had several investors and philanthropists who were interested by the potential development of the Tingewick Road site in Buckingham.

League Tables

- *The Complete University Guide* and *The Good University Guide* League Tables did not take into account various factors when scoring the University's position which it was felt put it at a disadvantage. Although the University ranked highly in some categories e.g., student satisfaction and graduate outcomes, because the University was presently not a part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), this negatively affected its outcome. There were a small number of universities where other performance categories were absent; however, it did not affect the overall outcome to the same degree as was the case with these two league tables. The Vice-Chancellor was in the process of writing to both bodies to highlight the anomaly with them and hopefully address this position. The importance of the University's league table positioning was recognised as being a key factor, particularly for parents of potential applicants.
- Although the University could opt to exclude itself from the League Tables this was not felt to be an appropriate way forward. It was possible to consider several other global university ranking models, however, this would require a further discussion.
- It was noted that the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) ratings were due to be published during August 2023. **[Redacted]**

Telegraph - Foundation Courses:

- There was a suggestion in a recent article published by *The Telegraph* newspaper of a government crackdown on what were felt to be 'low-quality' courses where graduates struggled to progress into highly skilled jobs. Fee Capped universities may not be able to apply the full student fees (£9,250k) in some cases for 'low-quality' courses and could be restricted by the amount they could charge (£5,760k) for Foundation courses (viewed as classroom based 'year zeros'). Were these plans to come to fruition, it was felt that it could open up potential opportunities for the University.

40th Anniversary Celebrations

- The University held its 40th Anniversary celebrations on 14 July 2023, which over 180 people attended on campus at Buckingham, including trustees, Lord Peter Lilley and Mr Mark Rushton. The occasion had a positive atmosphere and activities included several presentation speakers, music, and a buffet lunch. A local news item was due to follow reporting of the day's events.

Reception at No. 10 Downing Street:

- The Deputy Prime Minister would be hosting an evening Reception at No. 10 Downing Street during September 2023 and the Vice-Chancellor would report more on the outcomes from this event in due course.

RESOVLED:

That the Vice-Chancellor's update be noted.

63 **Trustee updates**

President of the Students' Union

The President of the Students' Union provided a verbal update on a number of areas of activity:

- He was delighted to welcome trustees to the Crewe campus for this meeting.
- The SU Executive continued to consider the development of its new 2024 – 2026 Strategy and had recently held a successful Away Day at which staff were able to collaborate and exchange ideas.
- The SU President had recently attended the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Annual Conference, taking part in the Student Voice Panel which included student feedback on HEPI's 2023 Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES). The results from the Survey were insightful and would be shared with the SU Executive as a means of assisting with future direction.
- In response to a question, it was reported that the SU Executive regularly provide termly update reports on their activities to students via a dedicated area of the University's website. Newsletter articles were produced to highlight various items and to signpost to services and notify students of upcoming events. More general updates were also provided via 'Student Announce' using the University's Outlook email channel, with news appropriately filtered by relevance between the Crewe and Buckingham campuses.

Chair of the Risk, Audit and Compliance Committee (RACC)

The Chair of the RACC provided a verbal update on a number of areas of activity:

- At the committee's last meeting held on 26 May 2023, the University's Auditors, MHA, had presented their Audit Findings Report for 2022. The arising recommendations had since been amalgamated with the Audit Findings reports for 2020 and 2021. The Chair stressed the importance now being placed upon monitoring the timely progression and delivery of the overarching arising Action Plan.
- The University's newly appointed Internal Auditors, KCG Audit Limited, had delivered their audit plan for the remainder of 2023 which had been circulated to committee members.

Chair of the Crewe Steering Group

In the absence of the Chair of the Crewe Steering Group, the Chair of Council provided a verbal update on progress regarding the Crewe campus:

- **[Redacted]**
- **[Redacted]**
- The Steering Group and the Crewe Faculty team would work through the longer-term plans with any recommendations taken to the Executive ahead of submission to Council.

- The Vice-Chair of Council noted the positivity and general achievements at the Crewe campus, under the direction of the Director of Crewe and her wider team, which had led to improvements to the overall student experience, which was now much more comparable to the experience enjoyed by students at the Buckingham campus.

Elected Senate Representatives

The Elected Senate representatives provided a verbal update on the most recent meeting of Senate:

- A decision had been taken to defer entry to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) for the time being, allowing more time to establish an internal Research Strategy.
- A revised Fitness for Study policy had been agreed which tightened up a number of protocols.
- The updated Promotions Criteria had been approved.
- Professor John Drew appointment as a Professor Emeritus had been approved.

RESOVLED:

That the updates provided be noted.

64 Students' Union Advisory Board

The SU President had provided a proposal to establish Terms of Reference for a Students' Union Advisory Board. Arising from a discussion, the following points were noted:

- The proposals put forward were designed to increase the confidence of decision makers within the SU Executive. The Advisory Board would be made up of student representatives, professional and academic services representatives, and external advisors. The proposed Terms of Reference had been considered and received positively by the Executive.
- The Advisory Board would seek to attract external individuals where there were gaps in expertise. Trustees recommended that the Advisory Board place an emphasis on attracting alumni, who would have a natural vested interest in the success of the University and an understanding from the students' perspective. Full vetting and an appropriate selection process would need to be put in place and consideration would need to be given to protecting the University's data and commercial interests by asking external individuals to sign a non-disclosure agreement.
- Any reasonable travel expenses incurred by external advisors connected to their work with the Advisory Board would adhere with the University's Expenses Policy.
- A 12-month review of the Advisory Board would be conducted, with a paper brought back to Council in order to consider how well the Advisory Board arrangements were working.
- The Vice-Chancellor noted that the Terms of Reference referred to 'three full-time Office Bearers', however, the number of officers would be subject to the University's affordability and it was therefore agreed that this be amended to 'up to three' to provide a level of flexibility.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That, subject to the comments made and the minor amendment as set out above, the Terms of Reference for the Students' Union Advisory Board be approved; and

- (b) The outcome of the 12-month review of the Advisory Board be submitted to Council at the appropriate time.

65 Gift Donation

This item was deferred for consideration at a later meeting.

66 Professional Services Directorate Presentation

The Registrar provided a presentation to trustees regarding the merging of the former Professional Services and Student Support Services directorates into a single Professional Services division. Arising from a discussion, the following points were noted:

- The Registrar thanked the Vice-Chancellor and the Chair of Council for contributing to conversations over a period of several months, and to the Director of Student Support Services, for her assistance with designing and implementing the revised structure, now comprising an organisation-facing Assurance and Business Support Services directorate and a student-facing Academic and Students Support Services directorate within one overarching division.
- Market specialists, DataHE had recently been commissioned to provide the University with data research, to provide an updated line of sight on demographics and to forecast disciplinary projections over the coming years which would inform the University's future strategies. Work would include conversations with the faculties and be driven by the University's overarching Strategic Plan, and key implementation plans as a means of ensuring that Professional Services continued to deliver the academic ambitions of the University.
- The ratio of academic to professional services staff was discussed. The University's main payroll was currently split 60:40 professional services/academic; however, once the University's many self-employed academic staff (largely but not exclusively engaged by the Faculty of Education) were taken into account, the ratio was closer to 50:50. The Registrar agreed to work with the Chief Financial Officer and Director of Human Resources to ensure the ratio remained balanced and in accordance with benchmarks..
- Implementation of the new Professional Services division would officially come into effect on 1 August 2023, although preliminary synthesising activities were well underway. All staff directly impacted by the line management changes have had two formal conversations to discuss any concerns and queries arising.
- The Vice-Chancellor noted his own support for the revised structure and thanked the Registrar and Director of Student Support Services for their hard work in making the University's administrative functions fit-for-purpose for the future.
- Post-degree employability rates were considered in terms of how the University made connections with local employers. The University would look to build business partnerships through its Careers Service with key employers at mid-management level. Currently, there were a number of Professional Support staff embedded within the faculties who had their own network connections specific to areas of discipline. The Careers Service was continuing to work to identify what engagement mechanisms would work well for Buckingham students.

RESOLVED:

That the Registrar be thanked for his informative presentation.

67 Office for Students (OfS) Compliance Documentation and Academic Assurance Report

The Registrar had provided four reports regarding the University's assurance of routine compliance with the University's Office for Students (OfS) Conditions of Registrations (as outlined below):

1. Governance and Management Self-Assessment June 2023
2. Consumer Protection Self-Assessment June 2023
3. Student Protection Plan June 2023
4. Access and Participation Statement June 2023

The Registrar thanked the Dean of Academic Affairs, the Registrar's Professional Services Secretary, and other colleagues involved in compiling the four reports.

The trustees thanked the Registrar for the detailed and informative reports noting that an introductory summary would be helpful in explaining 'what good looked like' as a means of providing assurance in respect of where any gaps might exist.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report of the Registrar be approved; and
- (b) That, in future, the Registrar would provide trustees with an additional summary paper to accompany the four reports providing an assessment as to 'what good looks like' as a means of providing assurance in respect of where any gaps might exist.

68 Student Support Services

The Director of Student Support Services provided trustees with a report on the work of the Student Support Services teams. Arising from discussion the following three key points were noted:

- There had been increased interactions between students and the various Student Support Service teams. Work would be ongoing to further increase this interaction.
- The University had successfully obtained Alcohol Impact Accreditation. This work had been undertaken in conjunction with the Wellbeing Skills and Diversity team (WSD) and students. The accreditation recognised the commitment and diligence of both the university and the Students' Union in creating a social culture wherein alcohol consumption was responsible, whilst developing a healthier, safer, more inclusive and productive student community.
- The need to improve data collection had previously been reported to trustees and work to progress this had moved forward and would lead ultimately to trustees receiving more detailed and analytical information in this area.
- It was noted that mentoring / counselling provision was being monitored, with a focus on triaging where possible. Improved data would enable a better understanding of where the real demands were in this area. The higher education sector had recently witnessed high demands for support, partly due to the global pandemic, giving rise to students improving their understanding and awareness of the support available to them.

RESOLVED:

That the report of the Director of Student Support report be noted.

69 Finance Reports

The Chief Financial Officer (CFO) had reported on various Finance matters which included a proposal to increase the Vice-Chancellor's financial delegated authority limit from those set out in the current version of the Scheme of Delegation. Arising from a discussion held, the following points were noted:

The Vice-Chancellor retired from the room for discussion of the Vice-Chancellor's delegated authority limit.

Vice-Chancellor's delegated authority Limit

- The CFO reported on a proposal put forward to increase the Vice-Chancellor's delegated authority limit for all transactions and matters set out in the Scheme with a financial threshold, from the respective current thresholds that were currently in place. The proposed increased amount had been based on the materiality threshold set for the University by its Auditors (presently 2% of turnover – rounded down to £950,000). The proposal would mean that any matters with a value of £0-950k would be the purview of the Vice-Chancellor and any matters with a value over £950k would be the purview of Council or its delegated committee.
- Various authority thresholds existed within the Scheme of Delegation. In consideration of Halpin's external review of governance effectiveness, due to conclude in September, trustees agreed that it would be prudent to defer this matter until Halpin's views of the University's governance were known. It was suggested that, subject to the outcome of Halpin's report, RACC be delegated the responsibility of looking at this proposal in more detail before proposing a way forward for a Council decision.

The Vice-Chancellor re-joined the meeting.

MHA Audit Findings – progress update

- Following the completion of the 2022 Audit and filing of the 2022 Financial Statements, the University was now fully compliant with its Regulators. An overarching Action Plan to address MHA's Audit Findings Reports for 2020, 2021 and 2022 had allocated work to relevant individuals and work had since progressed. A number of additional controls had been put into place to ensure correct procedures would be followed.

Financial Position

- As at the end of May 2023, the University had reported a surplus of £1.1m on a year-to-date basis, £0.4m below budget. Income was £0.2m ahead of budget which was due to the budget contingency for Tuition Fees and Accommodation, with Catering and Bar income exceeding budget, off-setting largely temporary delays in income recognition from Research and Donation income streams.
- Expenditure levels were £0.7m ahead of budget due to higher inflationary pressures, and essential unbudgeted spend had included some repairs and maintenance, audit and legal, and small projects / some transformation spend.
- Overall, the University had maintained expectations for achieving a budgeted surplus of approximately £0.5m, generating more income than had been planned, with the offset of increased spending of a mixture of necessary unbudgeted items.
- Some expenditure for activity attached to the transformation programme, such as the University's IT strategy had commenced; noting that investment in transformation processes would ultimately be key to achieving longer-term efficiencies.
- The strengthening and restructuring of the Finance team had increased its capacity and capabilities and, with the further development of the team that was planned, would enable further improvements to its processes as a means of driving forward efficiencies.

Forecast Budgets

- The Finance Team would soon be engaging with staff with a view to planning budgets and developing more accurate longer-term financial forecasting.
- Currently, there were no unknown financial risks. A decline in the September 2023 intake from current predictions would increase the risk to finances, however, current assumptions predicted budgeted income levels to exceed (by approximately £1.5m) the full-year budget. This was expected to be matched by overspending expenditure, a result of removing most new project expenditure from budgets.
- **[Redacted]**

RESOVLED:

- (a) That the CFO's reports be noted; and
- (b) That any proposed increase to the Vice-Chancellor's Delegated Authority Limit should be considered initially by RACC when the outcomes of Halpin's Governance Effectiveness Review were known

70 Dates of the next meetings

- Monday 31 July 2023 - 11:00 - Joint Senate, Council, Executive, strategy meeting / 12:00 Lunch / 13:00 Extraordinary Meeting of Council
- Monday 11 September 2023 – 11:00 Extraordinary Meeting with Halpin Partnership
- Monday 16 October 2023 – 13:00 (Teams/campus)
- Monday 11 December 2023 – 13:00 (Teams/Campus)

71 Any other business

Trustees requested that an item be listed on the October meeting agenda to discuss the progress of Crewe negotiations more fully.

RESOVED:

That the Secretary to Council would include Crewe as an agenda item for the October Council meeting.

Start time of meeting: 11:00

End time of meeting: 14:15