



Minutes: Council

Time and date: 11:30, Tuesday 3 December 2024

Location: Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, First Floor, Rooms CRB3 A, B & C, Chandos Road Building, Chandos Road, Buckingham, MK18 1EG / Virtually via MS Teams

Present: Mr Mark Qualter (Chair of Council), Ms Annabel Awosika (Student – from Minute 6 onward), Ms Anthea Bailey (Professional Services), Mr Toby Corbett (President of the Students' Union), Professor Harriet Dunbar-Morris (Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic)), Mr Andy Dunkley, Professor Timothy Evans, Mr Nick Hillman, Mr Chris Hollis, Mr Graham Jones (Senate Representative), The Lord Peter Lilley, Ms Josephine Mbuya (Alumnus), Mrs Sarah Myhill (Senate Representative), Ms Katie Nykanan, Professor Jacqueline O'Dowd (Senate Representative), Professor Göran Roos, Mrs Milly Soames, Mr Phil Wolfenden

In attendance: Mr David Cole (Chief Financial Officer), Mrs Maureen Hampson (Governance Secretary), Ms Diane Jackson-Gould (Director of Human Resources – for Minute 14 only), Mr Chris Payne (Registrar and Chief Administrative Officer)

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

Apologies for absence had been submitted by Nadia Strone and Kristina Church.

Apologies for late arrival had been submitted by Göran Roos.

2 Declarations of interests in respect of items on the agenda

There were no new declarations.

3 Minutes of the previous meetings

The minutes of the Council meeting held on 7 August 2024 were approved as a correct record.

The minutes of the 14 October 2024 meeting were approved as a correct record, subject to the following two amendments:

[Redacted]

4 Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

5 Approvals between meetings

It was noted that the following matters had been approved between meetings of Council (these had been intended for noting at the 14 October Council meeting but were deferred owing to the circumstances relating to the Vice-Chancellor):

(a) The appointment of the following members to the Council Strategy and Transformation Sub-Group:

- Katie Nykanen
- Göran Roos
- Nadia Strone
- Phil Wolfenden
- Sarah Myhill

(The SU President also served on the group ex-officio)

(b) The appointment of Andy Dunkley as the Chair of the Finance and Resources Committee (and 'Treasurer').

(c) That the University's Prevent Statement 2024 had been approved for submission ahead of the Office for Students' deadline of 12:00 on 2 December 2024.

6 Appointment of Student Member of Council

RESOLVED:

That the appointment of Annabel Awosika as the Students' Union (SU)-nominated member of Council be approved.

Annabel would become President of the SU from 1 January 2025 and a further nomination to serve as the SU-nominated member of Council would be sought from the SU.

(Annabel Awosika joined the meeting.)

7 Chair's welcome and introduction

[Redacted]

8 Pro Vice-Chancellor update

The Pro Vice-Chancellor reported the following:

[Redacted]

- Applied Business Academy (ABA) students had attended sessions on the Buckingham campus and in the University's Gower Street premises in London. The Office for Students had been complimentary about the way in which the University has responded to ABA having closed for business and the arrangements that had been put in place by the University as a result.
- The University had been successful in winning the Higher Education Award for Outstanding Collaboration for the Critical Incident run by the Medical School. The Medical School also successfully delivered the four-year medical degree project.

- A successful Collaborations Conference had been held with collaborative partners in Sarajevo.
- An increased focus was being placed on National Student Survey planning and ensuring the University was the right size and shape to deliver the Strategic Plan given sector head winds to which the University was not immune. This had included the ongoing portfolio review process.

9 Update reports

The Council received updates from the Students' Union President and the Chairs of the Audit and Risk Committee and the Finance and Resources Committee.

Students' Union (SU) President - update

- The SU President expressed confidence in the University's current efforts with student services, addressing concerns that had been raised at a previous Council meeting. Notable improvements were observed in well-being within the SU's departments, leading to better communication and continuity across the University. Adjustments to processes had resulted in positive outcomes, with capable individuals filling new roles within these services.
- The President noted a reduction in issues needing escalation to the Council, highlighting the increased effectiveness of the University's processes. The relationship between the Students' Union and the University had significantly improved, which was expected to benefit students and the institution moving forward. Gratitude was expressed for the support provided over the past two years.
- When reflecting on priorities, the President emphasised the importance of increasing student consultation in decision-making, a goal largely achieved through collaboration. Looking ahead, a focus would be maintained on evolving academic assessments to be more dynamic and reflective of current needs, taking inspiration from practices in the Business School. There was an emphasis on aligning these changes with regulations while catering to the rapidly evolving demands of the student body, particularly in the context of Buckingham's unique two-year programs. The University was also actively working on portfolio reviews, curriculum reform and assessments.

Chair of Audit and Risk Committee - update

- The Chair provided updates from its recent meetings. The meeting on 27 August had focused on the University's governance, structure, and Digital Transformation program. Assurance was received that the associated risks were being understood and managed, although the process of improvement would be lengthy.
- The subsequent meeting, held on 7 November, had covered various topics that will be discussed at the February 2025 Council meeting. The meeting had strong attendance and positive contributions from all participants. Progress was noted in resolving the 2022/23 external audit findings, and while the financial risks faced by universities remained under the scrutiny of the Office for Students (OfS), the University was not presently a primary focus of their inquiries.
- The Committee approved the 2024 audit approach, which incorporated one-off work related to the adoption of the new TechOne systems. The strategic internal audit plan for 2025 was also approved, reflecting adjusted priorities. A newly appointed Improvement Plan Manager

was now in place to oversee progress on action plans that resulted from internal audits. A portal had been introduced to provide real-time updates and richer reporting.

- Progress was reviewed on recent internal audits including those on faculties, and on student retention and continuation. **[Redacted]**
- The integration of ABA students following the termination of a collaboration had been a success, with the OfS expressing satisfaction at the way in which the matter had been handled by the University. The Prevent annual return was approved and had been filed on time, and the business continuity strategic plan showed significant advancements.
- Looking forward, the Committee would increase its focus on academic risk and quality assurance, with a meeting in May each year focused toward increasing trustee understanding of these areas and ensuring appropriate oversight of any risk areas, something that aligned with the increasing focus of the OfS on addressing future student needs.

Chair of Finance and Resources Committee (FRC) - update

- The Chair reported on the meeting held on 20 November. The update highlighted ongoing sector-wide pressures on income and costs affecting the University. The cash reserves, totalling £12 million as of September, included £5 million in borrowed funds, leaving limited financial flexibility. Liquidity remained manageable, with net equity covering 76 days of trading, but concerns would arise if this dropped below 60 days.
- 2025 Budget projections, while cautiously optimistic, included risks tied to student numbers and other uncertainties. A reduction in costs from discontinuing payments for the University of Leicester's Medicine syllabus had significantly eased financial pressure. However, challenges remained across Finance, HR, and Estates, each undergoing their own transformation projects. In Estates, strategic planning for the University's six-acre property was identified as a priority, along with aligning its use with the University's Vision and Mission.
- The Committee approved a £500,000 project seed fund for Dentistry to be proposed within the total 2025 budget, designed to support the initiative without overcommitting financially at this stage. Other ongoing challenges included **[Redacted]** an HMRC inquiry under IR35, and increasing sector scrutiny from the OfS. While the University was not a primary focus of OfS inquiries, financial assistance from the regulator for the University was unlikely.
- Changes in scholarship processes were also discussed, shifting from automatic to application-based awards to enhance their value. HR efforts focused on aligning benefits and addressing cost pressures, including National Insurance increases. In Estates, further capital expenditure, estimated at £3–4 million, was needed for improvements, though cash constraints required careful planning to avoid breaching covenants and/or jeopardising loan facilities.
- The University's health and safety culture was noted as needing improvement, transitioning from 'compliance' to integrating such an approach within daily practice. Digital Transformation had seen progress, with the Finance team now on the new platform, but significant work as part of a long-term roadmap remained.
- The Chair emphasised the importance of aligning transformation efforts with the University's Vision and Mission while maintaining strong financial discipline. **[Redacted]**

10 Financial Matters

The Chief Financial Officer provided updates on the proposed 2025 Annual Budget and 2014 Financial Forecasts and the Modern Slavery Statement and Policy. The following points were noted:

The 2025 Annual Budget and Financial Forecasts

- The CFO emphasised the challenges stemming from recruitment cycles since September 2023. While the growth of the Medical School had previously driven significant income increases due to its longer course duration, this growth was stabilising as the program matured. Across other areas, recruitment remained challenging, with only some successes in apprenticeships and innovative tuition structures. Income growth had slowed considerably, declining from 13–14% in prior years to a projected 3% in the coming year.
- It was also noted that inflationary cost pressures, such as rising utility and insurance costs, alongside deliberate expenditure increases to support strategic goals. In response to the challenging picture, recruitment-related marketing efforts had been accelerated, pulling forward to 2024 costs originally due to be incurred in 2025. However, despite these measures, the anticipated growth in student numbers had not materialised at the desired pace, impacting overall financial performance.
- The budget included key adjustments, such as the conclusion of the Leicester licensing agreement for the Medicine School, which would save £2.8 million. However, this benefit was offset by ongoing cost increases, including higher medical placement fees and rising labour costs due to cost-of-living adjustments. Proposed changes to staff pay were on similar principles with previous years, aiming to balance affordability with addressing wage pressures.

[Redacted]

The Modern Slavery Statement and Policy

- The Modern Slavery Statement required approval annually. It was an annual statement that had to be published. There were no substantial changes from previous years, aside from updates to references. A review had been conducted, but it was noted that further improvements were still necessary.

RESOLVED:

- (a) The 2025 Annual Budget and Financial Forecasts be approved; and
- (b) The Modern Slavery Statement and Policy be approved.

11 Student recruitment and admissions

The Registrar and Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) gave a presentation based on updates and findings regarding the latest positions in Student Recruitment and Admissions. The following updates were considered:

[Redacted]

- Looking ahead to 2025, the University planned to invest more heavily in marketing campaigns, including brand awareness efforts that had been deprioritised since 2020. Faculty-specific marketing strategies were developed in collaboration with Deans and Program Directors,

employing multi-channel approaches. School engagement campaigns had also expanded, with a dedicated officer helping increase engagement by 8% in 2024 compared to 2023. These initiatives aimed to strengthen student recruitment efforts and enhance the university's visibility in a competitive market.

- The Registrar also outlined efforts to identify unmet demand, using HE data and Faculty marketing input for portfolio reviews. Undergraduate offerings were reviewed last year, with a postgraduate review planned. Areas like Mathematics and Sociology were highlighted as potential growth opportunities for the University [Redacted] The portfolio review also explored expanding postgraduate programs, generating promising ideas now being developed despite some data limitations.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation on Student recruitment and admissions and the update on actions taken in response to recruitment challenges be noted.

12 A Sustainable Future: Strategic Options

The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) presented a paper prompting a discussion on strategic options for ensuring a sustainable future for the University. [Redacted]

There was agreement on the need for a balanced approach, keeping all options open while ensuring that the University's long-term vision and potential were at the forefront of its decision-making.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the paper be noted; and
- (b) That all the options presented continue to be evaluated and be subject to further discussion at the appropriate time.

13 Strategic and Transformation update

The Registrar and CAO delivered a presentation updating on Strategic and Transformation projects, focused on operational and academic areas, with an emphasis on Digital Transformation initiatives.

The admissions framework was identified as a major undertaking, with ongoing efforts to define the institution's target operating model. While progress has been made, further work was needed to fully articulate the vision and finalise the plan.

The presentation highlighted the interconnected nature of projects, where changes in one area can influence others. A structured approach was being employed to ensure alignment and efficiency, but there remained a need for greater clarity around the end-to-end student experience. Significant business analysis was underway, addressing both the applicant and student journey from experiential and technical perspectives. Teams were collaborating to integrate systems and processes into a cohesive framework aimed at enhancing the overall experience.

Consultation with stakeholders, such as the Students' Union Executive team, had been part of the process for initiatives like the academic calendar project. Feedback from these discussions had informed decisions and would continue to do so. The Registrar and CAO also acknowledged the importance of aligning the University's portfolio with its marketing and branding strategy, emphasising the need to guarantee a seamless and engaging student experience from recruitment through to graduation. Early efforts in developing or redeveloping systems such as learning management

platforms were progressing, but acceleration of certain elements may be constrained by the capacity for change. Establishing foundational systems remained a priority for achieving meaningful advancements.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation updating on Strategic and Transformation be noted.

14 Biennial Staff Survey 2023

The biennial staff survey was completed in October and November of 2023, with results shared in February 2024. Since then, efforts had been ongoing to address the five key areas highlighted in the report: reward and recognition, internal communications, systems and processes, senior management, and staff morale. Work had commenced across all areas, though some initiatives remain in progress, as outlined in the action plan.

It was acknowledged that while action had been taken in response to staff feedback, communication about these efforts could have been more robust. Moving forward, plans were underway to launch a campaign in the New Year to provide updates on actions taken, emphasising the value of staff feedback.

During the discussion, it was noted that some survey responses indicated a decline in areas such as staff perception of the University as a 'good place to work'. However, it was highlighted that surveys offered only a snapshot in time and could be influenced by external factors, including individual circumstances.

RESOLVED:

That the progress on the implementation of the recommendations arising from the Biennial Staff Survey 2023 be endorsed.

15 Risk – annual review

The risk register had been updated to a new format, developed earlier in the year as part of a review of risk management by Internal Auditors, KCG. This new format had extended to local risk registers, which had undergone significant recalibration over the past three months. These registers were aligned with the institutional risk register, covering Academic, Corporate, and Professional Services areas. This calibration process had identified overlapping and feed-in risks across these levels.

[Redacted]

Progress had been made in developing a risk culture at the University, but there was recognition that this was an ongoing journey. Training with KCG revealed that, while the institution had advanced in risk management maturity, there was still significant work to be done. Progress was evident in aligning the risk register with operational, tactical, and strategic decisions, and in implementing action plans from internal audits. However, gaps remained in understanding and responding to internal audits, with a need to embed risk-management into personal objectives and broader accountability structures.

Academic line management structures presented additional challenges, with unsustainable reporting lines in some Faculties. This highlighted the need for structural evolution to improve risk management, and to move toward a university-wide approach to strategic goals. Efforts to address these issues included emphasising strategic leadership and change management in PDR processes.

While progress was evident, the university acknowledged the need for continued effort and resource allocation to achieve a fully mature and integrated risk management framework.

RESOLVED:

That the revised Risk Registers be noted.

16 Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom Code of Practice

The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) provided an update on the Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom Code of Practice. Initially brought to the Council for approval in August, its adoption had been paused when the Labour government had paused the Higher Education Freedom of Speech Act, of which this Code was one of its requirements. However, the institution, aligning with its values and approach, decided it was important to proceed with the implementation of a Code of Practice that placed an emphasis on freedom of speech within the law and academic freedom.

The original draft was revised to remove references to the now paused Act, and to add content around the approach to be taken to meetings and events. The updated Code reflected the institution's priorities, and the Pro Vice-Chancellor sought Council's approval to finalise and implement the code, emphasising the University's commitment to being a beacon for independence, freedom of speech and academic freedom.

In closing, a member of Council noted how global conversations around freedom of speech had evolved significantly in recent months, aligning more closely with the institution's values than anticipated earlier in the year.

RESOLVED:

That the Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom Code of Practice code be approved.

17 Independent HE (IHE) Code of Governance

The Governance Effectiveness Review Steering Group (GERSG) had recently considered Halpin's recommendation to align with the Committee of University Chairs' (CUC) Code of Governance, a set of good governance principles that were widely adopted across the sector. However, since the institution had become a member of Independent Higher Education (IHE), it was suggested that the IHE's Code of Governance might be a more suitable alternative, reflecting a more flexible approach for an institution of Buckingham's size and independent status. The GERSG had proposed that the adoption of the IHE Code be considered by Council.

A paper was presented outlining the proposal to adopt the IHE Code, highlighting its advantages in allowing institutions to develop their own, rather than adhering to predefined, values. This flexibility was seen as an opportunity to align governance with the institution's independent ethos.

The proposal included a draft compliance assessment to be reviewed annually by Council, detailing how the institution currently met or planned to meet the requirements of the IHE Code going forward. Notable changes that were required via the IHE Code from current practice were a requirement to publish a register of interests and the publication of a Value-for-Money Statement, setting out how the University's income was reinvested. Both documents would be published online to meet with the Code's requirements for transparency in these areas.

Additionally, the IHE Code referred to senior staff remuneration requirements as set out by the Office for Students who in turn made reference to taking into account the Committee of University Chairs'

(CUC) Senior Staff Remuneration Framework. For this reason, the University would continue to work toward meeting the CUC requirements in this area. Adjustments to governance documents, such as ordinances and financial statements, would be required to reflect adherence to the IHE Code. Specific elements, like the Code of Practice for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom, which had been approved earlier in the meeting, would be integrated into the compliance framework.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the IHE Code of Governance be adopted;
- (b) That the Value for Money Statement be approved for publication; and
- (c) That the IHE Code of Governance Compliance Assessment be approved for publication on the University's website and be scheduled for annual review by Council.

18 Governance Effectiveness Review Steering Group – update

The Secretary to Council briefly updated the Council on the Governance Effectiveness Review Steering Group's progress. The group, comprising Council members, was overseeing the implementation of the review's recommendations. Significant progress had been made, with many improvements successfully implemented during the first three phases of the project. Currently in phase four of six, the project was due to conclude by summer 2025.

An appendix outlined areas where progress was either on schedule or experiencing delays. Council continued to show strong interest in advancing this work, with quarterly results regularly published on the website to maintain transparency.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

19 Date of the next meeting

The next ordinary meeting of Council would take place on Monday 24 February 2025.

20 Any other business

Toby Corbett – SU President

The Chair acknowledged that this was Toby Corbett's final Council meeting and took a moment to recognise his significant contributions on Council. Toby was regarded not only to have been an outstanding SU President, but also the only individual thus far to serve a two-year term, reflecting his effectiveness in the role. Since his re-appointment in December 2023, Toby had demonstrated exceptional dedication and commitment, actively having participated in various committees, including the Finance and Resources Committee, the Nominations and Governance Committee, and the Inclusion Committee, and had contributed significantly to trustee recruitment efforts, all while balancing a demanding SU role. The Chair noted Toby's growth into a skilled and diligent leader who had navigated the challenges of being an SU representative with remarkable skill, representing student interests with great care. His achievements were acknowledged, and Council expressed gratitude for his service. The Council joined the Chair in conveying their best wishes for Toby's future endeavours.

Maureen Hampson – Governance Secretary

The Chair acknowledged that this was Maureen's final Council meeting before retirement. Having served Council since 2017, Maureen had worked with numerous colleagues over the years and had been an incredible support to both staff and trustees. The Chair personally expressed deep appreciation for Maureen's helpfulness, efficiency, and the positive impact she had had from the very beginning of their working relationship. Maureen's ability to ensure everything ran smoothly was highly valued, and her absence would be keenly felt by all.

The Chair, on behalf of the Council, extended sincere thanks, and wished Maureen a long, happy, healthy, and fulfilling retirement.

Start time of meeting: 11:30

End time of meeting: 16:30