

Senate

22/1 A reserve meeting of the Senate was held via Teams, on Wednesday 5 January 2022 at 2.15 pm via Teams.

Present:

The Vice-Chancellor (Chair)

Professor Adrian Bell
Dr Katrina Bicknell
Professor Helen Bilton
Professor John Board
Professor Ingo Bojak
Dr Simon Clarke
Professor Phil Dash
Professor Peter Dorward
Dr David Field
Professor Richard Frazier
Professor Clare Furneaux
Dr Francesca Greco
Professor Becky Green
Dr Chris Jones
Professor Rodney Jones
Dr Daniela La Penna
Dr Allan Laville
Professor Elizabeth McCrum
Dr John McKendrick
Dr David Marshall
Dr Mary Morrissey
Professor Simon Mortimer
Dr Jeanne-Louise Moys
Professor Keiichi Nakata
Professor Adrian Palmer
Professor Helen Parish
Dr Karen Poulter
Dr Sharon Sinclair-Graham
Professor Amy Smith
Professor David Stack
Professor Vesna Stojanovik
Professor Katja Strohfeldt

Dr Maria Vahdati
Professor Carol Wagstaff
Dr Shixuan Wang
Dr Hong Wei
Dr Karin Whiteside
Professor Adrian Williams
Dr Hong Yang
Professor Parveen Yaqoob
Professor Dominik Zaum

Students:

Bethany Nugus, RUSU Education Officer
Ben Knowles, RUSU President
Amy Sheffield, RUSU Activities Officer
Grace Loweth, RUSU Welfare Officer
[redacted, section 40]
[redacted, section 40]
[redacted, section 40]

In attendance:

Ms Louise Sharman (Secretary)
Dr Richard Messer

Joy Collier
Dr Dan Grant
Gemma Green
Kate Green
Vicky Holmes
Professor Orla Kennedy
Becky Nadal
Sam Williams

The Vice-Chancellor welcomed members to the reserve meeting of Senate and outlined the format of the meeting. The reserve slot was being used for a discussion on the Portfolio Review Pathway, in particular proposals from Blended Learning and Programme Expectations projects.

22/2 Portfolio Review Pathway Proposals from the Blended Learning and Programme Expectation Projects

The Senate received a paper from Pro-Vice-Chancellor Professor McCrum on the Portfolio Review Pathway, specifically the Blended Learning and Programme Expectation Projects.

It was noted that the Portfolio Review Project was overseeing a centrally driven programme of portfolio review, supporting Schools to reduce programmes and modules, establish simplified programme expectations, reduce assessment load, improve teaching practices by adopting an augmented blended learning approach and consider the timing of teaching and assessment across the academic year. The proposals submitted to Senate were developed by the Blended Learning and Programme Expectations project teams – two of the four inter-related projects under the Portfolio Review Pathway.

Both project teams had been proactively engaging with key stakeholders to inform their proposals. The recommendations from both projects had been previously presented to UBTSLE for discussion and feedback, and the final proposals were approved by UBTLSE on 30 November 2021.

The first proposal set out an approach for blended learning suitable for the institutional context, and outlined the steps and resources needed to adopt a University-wide model for blended learning at Reading which moved beyond the emergency response approach employed during the pandemic. The second outlined a proposal for establishing and implementing University-wide programme expectations, whilst remaining cognisant of some outstanding issues requiring further investigation prior to/during the implementation in order that full benefits were realised.

It was noted that the papers provided early sight of the Programme Expectations and Blended Learning proposals, so the University could begin working towards expectations as soon as possible. There were still unresolved aspects within the proposals that would be addressed during the implementation phase. Senate was asked to consider and provide feedback on the proposals for onward submission to Council.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor Professor McCrum, Professor Kennedy and Vicki Holmes gave a presentation to Senate. The following key points were outlined:

- Portfolio Review Pathway Benefits – the pathway gave an opportunity to look strategically at the programmes and modules offered with a view to: improve academic and professional service staff workloads; offer a more coherent portfolio to prospective students; improve the quality of the student experience and increase student satisfaction; reduce the demand on and make better use of resources; create capacity to realise teaching excellence and support institutional priorities.
- A key element of the Portfolio Review had been on-going partnership with stakeholders. Engagement activities had included: multiple project consultations with key stakeholders; consultation workshops; regular breakfast briefings; engagement with Communities of Practice; online surveys; engagement with RUSU, Student Panel focus groups and student representatives.

- In response to feedback from colleagues implementation would be phased for all projects over the next three academic years, with changes to the academic year structure now taking place from 2024/25. This extended timeline would help support implementation.
- Programme Expectations – the project aimed to support the design, delivery and enhancement of new and existing programmes and modules by: refreshing and revising the Curriculum Framework to reflect the aims of the University Strategy; Establishing expectations to reduce assessment load and facilitate more effective, engaging, proportionate and evenly distributed assessment; developing proposals for simplified and more consistent programme and module structures and delivery, including progression rules.
- Recommendations from Programme Expectations Project included:
 - A programme level approach designed according to a revised Curriculum Framework, defined learning outcomes, and teaching and assessment strategies aligned at programme level
 - Recommendations around module size and shape;
 - Optionality and module allocation – ensuring realistic option choices
 - Assessment volume and distribution – 2 summative assessments per 20 credits; assessments completed in the semester studied
 - Assessment type and variety – reduced reliance on traditional examinations
 - Progression – revised standard progression requirements for Part 1
 - Preparing to support implementation through training and guidance.
- The Blended Learning approach during the COVID-19 pandemic had been designed specifically to enable the continuation of teaching and learning. The approach combined face-to-face and online learning experiences in a way which would allow a rapid switch to fully online learning as necessary. The Blended Learning approach for the future would: look beyond the pandemic, learning from experiences; develop an informed and evidence-based approach for blended learning suitable for the University's context; there would be no one single approach.
- Recommendation from the Blended Learning Project included:
 - Every programme would be blended
 - The majority of a programmes contact time would be face-to-face with an aim for circa 30% of a programmes contact hours to be through online teaching and activity
 - Programme level design was essential
 - Within a programme, the ratio of online and face-to-face contact hours could vary between modules
 - The discipline would have discretion to determine which elements would be face-to-face and which would be online.

Senators were asked to join breakout groups to discuss the following questions:

- Were there any considerations that had not been covered within the Blended Learning and Programme Expectations proposals that Senators felt would be important to address during implementation?
- Any comments on how these considerations might be achieved during implementation?
- What types of support would be most helpful in supporting colleagues to implement these proposals?

Co-leads of the projects and colleagues from the Planning and Strategy Office attended the groups in order to capture feedback. Pro-Vice-Chancellor Professor McCrum informed the Senate that all feedback raised would be fed into the implementation phase.

The following key points were reported by the groups:

- In regard to Blended Learning there were concerns that peer learning could be lost in an online environment. Further guidance was needed on peer learning which was important in terms of achievement and D&I considerations.
- It was important not to lose sight of the fact that some employers were the customers rather than students e.g. Apprenticeships.
- There was a need to be careful around how flexibility was sold in a Blended Learning environment – it would need to be clear that students that they couldn't do what they wanted when they wanted. It would be important to pitch this carefully highlighting the effective use of contact time.
- Staff training and development was important to ensure consistency. Specific, disciplinary/departmental training would also be important to share good practice.
- It would be important to disseminate innovative practices to colleagues.
- It was recognised that this was a considerable programme of work, all colleagues were under pressure and high workloads – it would be important to phase this work and support colleagues through the implementation phase.
- A narrative to explain how the changes have come about, linking into value for money, would be important in any communications with students. Linking face-to-face with online learning was a holistic learning experience rather than two separate types.
- There was a need to look at mental health/neurodiversity and online learning. What impact would Blended Learning have on students? There was also a need to engage with vulnerable groups to ascertain what the right balance would be for them. The RUSU Disabled Students' Officer should be consulted further.
- In regard to Programme Expectations further consideration should be given to joint programmes and how module baskets would be configured, optionality, timetabling etc. It would be important to schedule cross-School meetings early in the process.
- The desire for optionality was problematic for some programmes – there was a wish to increase student choice but core curriculum needed to be delivered in Parts 1 and 2.
- Work was required to model solutions around long thin modules, especially how this could work for joint programmes.
- Consideration would also need to be given to when modules were assessed. In some areas it was important to develop competency and then assess at the end of the year rather than the end of term/semester.
- It would be helpful to map the proposed changes onto the requirements of external accreditation where necessary.
- There was broad support for regular discussion and consultation throughout the Portfolio Review Pathway to ensure that all colleagues were brought along on the journey.
- Had consideration been given to the risks around Blended Learning? The University was proud of being a campus-based institution and it was a strength. Had student views been sought? There were also risks around changing optionality which was important in student recruitment.

- In regard to Blended Learning it would be important to ensure that it was done well from the start including staff training, technology, appropriate teaching spaces. If done well it had the potential to improve the student experience but if done badly it could be damaging.
- An environment for group learning was required outside of classes.
- Inter-School conversations, particularly for joint programmes, would need facilitating to ensure there were no barriers.
- More information was requested around the timing of assessments and how flexible this would be.
- Would a reduction in 10/20 credit modules harm the distinctiveness of some programmes?
- For Joint Honours/Study Abroad there would be a need to ensure that students did not end up taking an odd number of modules.
- For Blended Learning it would be important to communicate to students that this was not a cost-cutting exercise and that there were good pedagogic reasons. It would also be important to explain what contact hours meant and what a module might look like in terms of contact hours.
- Further consideration would need to be given to accessibility and digital poverty to ensure that students were not excluded from the full experience.
- It was recognised that the aim of the Portfolio Review Pathway was to reduce workload for colleagues and improve the student experience, but it was important to acknowledge that in the short-term this would impact workloads. Colleagues would need support in developing online resources, training, disseminating good practice, and supporting students.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor Professor McCrum and the Vice-Chancellor thanked the Senate for their constructive feedback on the proposals. It was noted that all comments would be collated for the implementation phase and that an update would also be given to the Council. The Senate noted that consultations and discussions would continue, and that work would start as early as possible with Schools to prepare for the proposed changes.