The focus of this exceptional meeting of Senate will be to seek senators’ engagement in the direction and principles associated with our Phase 2 programme, and the delivery of the University strategy. This short report summarises other key developments related primarily to the start of the academic year.

COVID-19: OUR RESPONSE

Start of the Autumn term

Work continues apace on our phased return to campus with many students arriving to halls during Welcome Week ahead of the official the start of term (recognising that teaching is already in full swing in the Institute of Education and elsewhere). Campus is certainly filling up and starting to feel much busier and, thanks to significant work from many colleagues, COVID-related safety measures are visible across all areas of our campuses.

In line with the latest DfE advice for Universities published in mid-September, we are implementing our blended approach for teaching (online and in person) this year, which is what the government refers to as the ‘Tier 1’ and ‘default’ option. The teaching timetable was published last week and on average students can expect about 50 per cent of their engagement to be face to face (and on some programmes, considerably more).

Our approach was supported by the Prime Minister’s statement this week: “...we will ensure schools, colleges and universities stay open,” and reiteration by the DfE that there is an expectation that there will be some provision of face to face teaching. Indeed, we are confident that in most areas we can continue to operate in line with ‘Phase 5’ of our Phased Return Roadmap. Further advice and guidance will follow on from the PM’s statement, particularly around events.

Some teaching colleagues have expressed concerns about face to face teaching and we continue to work with them to explain the importance of our approach, and the safety measures that are in place. In parallel, a small number of students have voiced concerns about their perception of a low proportion of scheduled face to face teaching, with some requesting to be released from accommodation contracts.

We have communicated extensively with students about their responsibilities. The overarching message for all of us in our University Community is to ‘take responsibility, be kind and respect each other’ (a message you may have seen displayed prominently on the Palmer Building). In my start of term message video to students released next week, I will emphasise again the importance of social distancing and particularly the ‘rule of six’ guidance. Given that large number of students will be have moved back into private accommodation, we will also be sharing our phased return plans for this academic year with our local community.
**Government Visit**

This week, the Government’s Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP, visited the University of Reading at her request to see our COVID-19 preparations for the new academic year. While Parveen Yaqoob, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and I took the opportunity to show the Minister many of the measures that the University has already put in place, we also put to her concerns from our community, including the need for additional testing provision, and the financial impacts facing the University as a result of the COVID crisis.

**Test and Trace**

Last week we completed our local outbreak control plan, which we submitted to the Government. This week we are working through the detail with the local Health Protection Board. In parallel, we are actively pursuing setting up a local testing centre on Whiteknights campus for our students and colleagues and the local community, because our nearest test centre is Newbury Showground, a considerable distance away. We are hopeful that we will get the green light for this shortly, although this may not be in place for the start of term.

**OTHER DEVELOPMENTS**

**Student Recruitment**

Student enrolment is underway as I write. We are expecting to recruit to 92% of our undergraduate home target (3365 against a target of 3666), and between 66% and 86% of our international target (between 603-784 against a target of 913). This position is slightly better than that modelled as part of the Post COVID-19 Recovery Programme Phase 1, but still considerably below the original planning assumptions.

While numbers coming back to halls and enrolling at this stage (mid – Welcome Week) look promising in the circumstances, uncertainty does remain for international students around attrition levels (i.e. students dropping off between confirmation and enrolment), in particular results where exam/English tests have been delayed or where prospective students have not yet received their visa. We have been also uncertain about the likely re-enrolment rates for our continuing undergraduates compared to previous years given the ongoing pandemic.

Similarly, with students on postgraduate taught programmes, it is difficult to predict with any certainty how many students will enrol, in part due to the challenge of forecasting attrition levels. We are expecting home full-time (excluding teacher training) recruitment to be roughly to target (658). However international student numbers may be somewhere between 550 and 1100 against a target of 1091, depending on attrition rates.

**Thames Valley Science Park**

The University continues to negotiate final details for a Film Studio with Commonwealth, a US-based investment fund that now owns Blackhall Studios (although the local name will probably be ‘Shinfield Studios’). While discussions have been going well, they are very protracted, and the team is keen to ensure that the arrangement is finalised in the next few weeks, and all options for the development are explored. Discussions over the creation of a new TV studio and wider
digital media complex at the site are also progressing well, and early engagement with Wokingham Borough Council around planning requirements have been positive.

University of Reading Malaysia

Our student recruitment for our Malaysian campus for the September intake is in line with the business plan agreed last year by Council. PVC International Paul Inman has joined the RUMAL board and has become its Chair. I would like to put on record my personal thanks to PVC Research & Innovation Dominik Zaum, who has held the Chair of RUMAL since the beginning of this year in addition to his other responsibilities.

League Tables

Three league tables have been recently published. In the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2021 published last week, our overall position has risen seven places, moving to joint 31 in the latest league table. The rise of seven places also means that Reading rises to the third highest-ranked South East university. The ranking draws on the most recent data from the National Student Survey and the new graduate outcomes measure, both of which recorded some improvement for the University relative to the sector average.

The University also improved its position in the Guardian University Guide for 2021 to 62, a rise of six places on 2020. The rise in our ranking was similarly driven in part by an increase in our NSS performance, albeit from a relatively low base, and graduate outcomes data. By subject, the university ranked in the top quartile for four (out of 28) subject tables; 16 subjects have improved their position from last year while 12 have fallen within their subject table.

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings is notable in that it provides a measure of the University’s global performance and reputation, and is therefore one of the measures for which the University has set an ambitious but achievable target to be within the Top 25 UK institutions by 2026. In the latest rankings, the University of Reading remains within the 201-250 range for the fourth consecutive year and is ranked joint 30 among UK Institutions. Of the five broad indicators used within this league table, the university performed best in 'International Outlook' and ranked 81 in the world (75 last year). The weakest indicator was 'Industry Income' where the university is at 789 in the world; a fall of 150 places from last year.