Staff Forum

A meeting of the Staff Forum was held at 10.30am on Tuesday 16 June 2015 in URS 2n10, Whiteknights Campus.

Present:

Michelle Hargreaves (Chair)
Debby Livermore
Tracy Lunn
Dawn Turner
Joanne Dormer
Sinead O'Flynn
Professor Robert Van De Noort – PVC
John Brady
Julia Munro
Professor Richard Ellis
James Magee
Marguerite Gascoigne
Jessica Bennett
Maureen Martin
Mary Williams
Chris Harris
Gail Gilbert
Chris Malcolm
Rachel Thorns (Secretary)
Alex Benneyworth (Note Taker)

Apologies were received from:

Rhiannon Vaughan
Juliette Dack
Steve Boon
Sue Mott
Carole Allison

15/10 Welcome and Introductions

The members of the Staff Forum were welcomed and introductions were made.

15/11 Review minutes/actions from last meeting

The minutes were approved with no changes.

Actions in relation to last meeting minutes held on 17 February 2015.
Action 5: John Brady to remind HR Partners of need to make contact with relevant Staff Forum employee representatives.

Michelle Hargreaves stated that not all HR Partners have made contact with their relevant Staff Forum Representative. Rachel Thorns asked Michelle Hargreaves to provide a list of the Staff Forum Representatives that have not had contact with their HR Partner and agreed to follow this up.

Action 7 Michelle Hargreaves to provide feedback to John Brady in relation to what difficulties staff were reporting to have with the information currently available about the Statute reform and how it may impact them.

Michelle Hargreaves confirmed this action was now complete.

(15/8 Equality & Diversity), Action 3 Rachel Thorns to organise facilitation of a training session with IT for Staff Forum Representatives to enable them to update the Staff Forum website.

Michelle Hargreaves advised that Jo Dormer had organised for the Staff Forum Representatives to attend CMS training for beginning of July.

15/12 Working Groups - updates from employee representatives on progress with actions and activities

Subgroup 1 (Facilities, Communication & Training): Travel, Expenses, Benefits Hospitality and Gifts Policy

Dawn Turner advised working group made up of Staff Forum Representatives had met with Carol Sherriff and Lisa Jefferies from finance and minutes had been distributed of the meeting alongside the agenda of today’s Staff Forum meeting. Dawn expressed the minutes were not entirely accurate. Dawn advised the purpose of the meeting was to discuss two main areas, mileage expenses and the lower limit but it was explained that the lower mileage costs were currently being considered by UEB to make the final decision.

Dawn updated the Forum that they discussed purchase cards and that only a few individuals hold purchase cards and it tended to be the administrators who don’t make the purchasing decisions, who are worried about line manager spend and the potential personal impact it may have on them. It was agreed that better communication was needed.

Marguerite Gascoine expressed that it would be useful if the minutes contained a list of actions and agreed to discuss with DT outside of the Staff Forum meeting to meet to agree points of action.

Marguerite advised for the administrators to encourage the academics to discuss the policy with procurement. It was agreed by all that it would be useful if guidance notes sat alongside the policy to assist managers.

Action 13: Marguerite Gascoine and Dawn Turner to meet to agree list of actions for the Staff Forum working group on Travel, Expenses, Benefits, Hospitality and Gifts Policy
Living Wage - Debby Livermore met with Mr Chris Foye, PGR student who along with the RUSU President are heading up the University of Reading Living Wage Campaign whose aim is to make the University of Reading an accredited Living Wage Employer.

It was noted that the Staff Forum Representatives support the campaign that is being considered for approval.

John Brady reminded colleagues that Unison raised this matter two years ago and the University took the decision not to proceed given the potential cost implications but would keep the matter under review.

RUSU brought the paper to the Staffing Committee in February 2015 and it was agreed the matter needed to be discussed with Estates and Facilities as the vast majority of staff who may be paid at a lower rate than the Living Wage are located in this area and would come back in October with recommendations.

It was acknowledged a consideration would be the impact of the National Pay Bargaining as it would change the grade structure in line with the Living Wage.

John Brady advised it would be useful to involve the Staff Forum representatives but it was agreed that there was a body of practical work to do in order to work out the impact to the University of becoming an accredited Living Wage employer. John advised the body of work would be completed over the summer, and once completed would then include the Staff Forum. John advised that RUSU currently employs individuals who are paid below the Living Wage and that they attributed this to affordability.

Michelle Hargreaves advised that the Staff Forum representatives were investigating various methods of promoting the Staff Forum.

Chris Harris raised concerns regarding the University communication and outlined a recent experience with outreach and a local school where due to communication breaking down an educational visit did not go ahead and an opportunity was missed to provide students with a University of Reading experience.

John Brady expressed that it was a very specific issue and separate from central University communications and it was agreed that this specific issue would be addressed with the relevant office.

*Action 14: CH/MSH to progress*

Chris Malcolm also raised an observation in relation to the timings of PAS communications as feedback had been gained that they tended to be on a Friday afternoon when a proportion of staff had left for the week or were about to leave and if staff had concerns it was difficult to speak to an appropriate manager if they had already left for the day.

John acknowledged it was a valid point but the timings were not intentional as all global communications go via the Communications office and prioritised accordingly. John advised that all global communications are sent to the Heads of School to preview so
they are aware of the communication and any potential questions that may be asked. John advised there would be a global communication coming out in July and advised that consideration would be given on the timings of the communication and thanked everyone for raising the matter.

Subgroup 2 (University of Reading Charter, Statute and Ordinances consultation)

Maureen Martin advised that University of Reading policy for staff to be accompanied in formal meetings with their Line Manager currently states ‘Union Representative or colleague’, and that the Staff Forum representatives had recommended that this includes Staff Forum Representative. The Staff Forum representatives had received verbal confirmation from John Brady that he had agreed with the recommendation and that the change would be made but to date the Staff Forum Representatives were waiting for formal confirmation this had been accepted.

John Brady advised could see the value of an employee being accompanied by a Staff Forum Representative and was happy for an employee to choose to be accompanied by a Staff Forum representative but from a legal aspect the policy needs to remain the same in stating ‘may be accompanied by Union Representative or colleague’.

Maureen asked whether consideration had been given to include in the Disciplinary policy annex a list of examples for misconduct as currently the policy only contains examples of what constitutes Gross Misconduct. Maureen advised that staff were unaware of what constitutes misconduct and provided an example that staff were unaware being persistently late to work would be considered misconduct and could lead to disciplinary action being taken.

John advised, from discussions with Julie Rowe – Director of Legal Services, that it is not possible to provide an indicative list of misconduct and it was a legal requirement to provide what constitutes gross misconduct where an employee could be summarily dismissed. John stated that conduct issues don’t lead to dismissal unless escalated through the University’s process. John was very clear that a list of misconduct would not be put in the policy but maybe consideration could be given to look at other ways of providing some guidance to staff and managers but expressed his surprise that members of staff may not be aware that a lack of punctuality would not be considered to be misconduct.

Maureen advised it may be the way the issues are managed by management with individuals and John commented that the issue was appears to be not to do with the policy but down to the way managers are choosing to deal with the particular issues.

John confirmed that a meeting would be held with the Staff Forum Representatives with Julie Rowe to discuss contractual amendments for grades 1 – 5 when the contracts had been finalised, but the changes were not that dissimilar to the new contracts for grades 6 – 9.

*Action 15: JB to arrange meeting with Staff Forum Representatives to discuss contractual amendments for Grades 1 - 5*
The University Strategy – Key Organisational Change projects

**Efficiency & Effectiveness – Professional and Administrative Services (PAS)**

John Brady confirmed that two phases of PAS, Information and Gathering had been completed and that recommendation’s had been made to UEB and that he was currently waiting for the recommendations to be formally approved. As part of the process John confirmed that the governance had to be agreed. John confirmed that Head of Schools briefings and a staff communication would go out outlining the next steps and the implementation phase.

John explained that he was embargoed from saying more but when the time was appropriate the communication would outline the detail of the proposed new structures.

John advised that the Voluntary Severance Scheme had contributed to £1.5 million savings and it was likely that the University would re-open the VS scheme in September 2015. John went on to say that PAS was about process improvement and it was intended that internal recruitment would take place to make appointments against the new structures / services.

It was asked if a selection process had been agreed to manage the staff reductions and John advised it would be agreed through the consultation process, UCU and the Staff Forum Representatives but as a guideline the University in the past selected positively for roles rather than through selection for redundancy and that the University would go through a major internal recruitment exercise.

John advised that by end of the summer 2015 he could be much more precise on the number of jobs/roles required.

**Update on the process being followed in relation to the proposed closure of School of Systems Engineering.**

Professor Robert Van De Noort advised that the Review Panel led by him and supported by Professor Dianne Berry and Dr Elizabeth McCrum had made recommendations which have been endorsed by UEB. Robert advised that the recommendation proposed that the School of Systems Engineering would close as it was not competitive compared to other institutions but that teaching and research activities would continue in certain subject areas in different parts of the University. The UEB recommendation will go to the University Council on 13 July 2015 for final approval and, assuming it is approved, a Restructuring Committee will be set up in line with the University Review and Restructuring Policy.

Robert updated the Forum that it was estimated, on the basis of the Review Panel’s recommendation, that 10-15 academic staff and 20 support/administrative staff would be potentially “at risk” of compulsory redundancy. Robert was asked if he was aware of a Facebook petition from past students and staff of the School who are against the School of Systems Engineering closing. Robert advised that he was aware of the Facebook page but advised that if individuals had concerns the most appropriate route to express their concerns was through approaching a member of Council and that it would be Council’s
decision whether they wished to take account of the comments made on the Facebook page.

Robert advised that if the recommendations were approved that the proposed changes would take place in Summer/Autumn 2016.

15/14 National Pay Bargaining

John Brady advised that a final offer of a flat 1% had been made but to narrow the pay gap for points 1 to 8 it had been agreed to increase this percentage up to 2.65%. The increase would be effective from 1 August 2015 however the Living Wage discussion is to be reviewed in September / October 2015 so John advised that whatever the University does may get taken over fairly quickly.

John explained that in his experience it was common for UCU to reject the pay increase offer and that they may recommend industrial action to its members. Historically Unison and Unite did not make any real recommendations and considered that 1% was likely to be the best they could achieve through negotiations.

John advised that he was likely to know outcome to the consultation with UCU by the end of June 2015 but that consultation and discussions may continue on beyond 1 August 2015 but that he was hopeful the matter could be resolved by the end of the calendar year.

15/15 USS – Changes to the Pension Scheme

John Brady advised that the University had entered into consultation with the proposed reforms with members. John explained that the changes mostly affect staff at Grade 6 and above, but there is a very small group of ex-members of the Henley Management College affected, hence raising with the Staff Forum, and that formal consultation had closed on 22 May 2015. John confirmed that during the consultation period the University had received a total of 24 responses and halfway through the consultation a reminder had been sent out. The comments made by members had been forwarded to USS and the proposed changes would take place on 1 April 2016.

15/16 UCU Joint University and Staffing Committee Meetings

John Brady advised that the UCU Joint University Committee had met recently and that the Staffing Committee was due to meet next week. Discussions which took place at the UCU meeting were in relation to zero hour contracts. John confirmed that the University mostly uses this type of contract for sessional lecturers but advised that zero hour contracts had received a lot of negative press. For the University it was appropriate for the circumstances and 300/400 sessional lecturers were on zero hour contracts.

John advised that main reason the University used a version of zero hour contracts for sessional lecturers was for administrative convenience as it allowed colleagues to remain on the payroll and have ongoing access to facilities such as e-mail and the library.

John advised that the Staffing Committee would also be discussing:
• Personal titles 2014/2015 - spotlight on equality issues and a small working group had been set up to look at this in particular.
• The revised travel policy and Privy Council approved charter statue on travel, charter reform project.
• Proposed discounts on travel by train but no detail as of yet
• Proposed University closure dates for the University for 2017/2018.

15/17 Equality & Diversity

Sinead O’Flynn advised that there was no update as there hadn’t been any Equality & Diversity meetings since the last Staff Forum meeting in February 2015.

John Brady expressed there had been a high level of activity with the approval to appoint a Dean of Diversity and Inclusion and an appointment should be made by early July 2015. To assist the Dean of Diversity and Inclusion John advised that the University was currently recruiting for an administrative post to support the Dean.

Rachel Thorns advised that HR Partners would be championing different areas; RT would be championing Gender, Katie Donaldson – Race and Cathy Smith – LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender).

Richard Ellis advised that the University failed to be successful in our application for the renewal of Bronze Award for the Athena SWAN Charter Mark but that an extension had been provided to enable the University to re-submit our Bronze application in April 2016. Richard advised that working groups had been set up as the University had a lot of work to do before the re-submission but appointing a Dean of Diversity and Inclusion formed part of the changes and the University’s commitment to tackle issues relating to gender equality.

15/18 AOB

• John Brady advised that under the PAS “enabling technology” that annual leave requests would move to an online system. Cherry Bennett, Assistant Director HR (Operations) is leading the project and the online form system would go live in October 2015.

John advised that Cherry Bennett and John Leary are looking for volunteers and to contact them directly if interested in being involved in this project.

• Professor Richard Ellis advised that Trevor Pitman, Technical Manager in the School of Biological Sciences has been awarded the British Empire Medal for services to higher education.

Date and time of next meeting: Tuesday 27th October 2015 10.30 am – 12.30 pm, Room G06 Palmer building, (Whiteknights Campus)