

Academic and Governance Services



Council

21/01 A meeting of the Council was held online on Tuesday 26 January 2021 at 2.15 pm.

The President
The Vice-Presidents (Mr T. Beardmore-Gray, Mrs H. Gordon, and Mrs K. Owen)
The Vice-Chancellor
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor M. Fellowes)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Mr P. Inman)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor E.M. McCrum)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor D. Zaum)

Professor J. Board	Ms S. Maple
Mr K. Corrigan	Mr P. Milhofer
Mrs P. Egan	Ms L. Moses
Professor R. Frazier	Miss R. Osbourne
Professor J. Gibbins	Mrs S. Plank
Professor Uma Kambhampati	Mr S.C.C. Pryce
Miss B. Karki	Mr N. Richards
Mr J. Magee	Mr J. Taylor

In attendance:

Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary
Chief Financial Officer
Director of Quality Support and Development
Head of Residential Catering and Bars (Mr M. Tebbit) (for Minute 21/06 only)
Head of Technology Enhanced Learning (Ms V. Holmes) (for Minute 21/06 only)
Ms Caroline Haley, Commercial Lawyer, Legal Services (for Minute 21/06 only)

Apologies were received from Mrs S. Butler and Dr C. Shaw.

21/02 The minutes (20/73-20/92) of the meeting held on 25 November 2020 were confirmed and signed.

Items for note

21/03 Documents sealed and to be sealed (Item 4.1)

The Council received a list of documents sealed and to be sealed.

Resolved:

"That the Council approve the action taken by the Officers and Members in affixing the University Seal to documents sealed since the last Ordinary Meeting of the Council and authorise the Seal of the University to be affixed to the documents to be sealed as now reported."

21/04 Disclosure of Interests (Item 4.2)

The Council received a list of members' interests and members were asked to notify the University Secretary of any amendments as necessary.

Main items of business: strategic and governance matters for discussion

21/05 Presentation by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) (Item 5)

The Council received a paper from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) (Mr Inman) on the University's future global engagement, which was accompanied by a presentation developing the themes of the paper.

Mr Inman explained that his proposed priorities for global engagement should be understood not as an embryonic international strategy, but rather as contributing to the implementation of the University Strategy. The importance of the University remaining in the upper quartile of the World University Rankings and for the International Outlook section of the Times Higher Education league table was widely recognised within the University. Given the increasingly competitive global environment, the University would need to work hard to retain this position. In order to achieve this, the internationalisation agenda would need to:

- increase international student recruitment;
- increase programme delivery overseas through partnerships and joint ventures; and
- build the University's global brand by leading with its research, ranking and reputation.

He noted the University's current dependence on the business school for its international student numbers and for Transnational Education (TNE) partnerships, which was not uncommon in the sector. However, there were several other high-performing areas with strong research profiles and proven potential for developing highly employable graduates which would be very attractive to international students and to potential international partners.

Drawing on his extensive experience and understanding of the sector, Mr Inman analysed the potential of key markets, focussing particularly on second and third tier cities in South Asia and on Africa, and the potential of areas of activity, focussing on PGT programmes with strong potential for subsequent employment. He set out ten strategic priorities which he proposed for the University's international work, as follows:

1. Investing in excellence to build potential in top-performing academic units
2. Developing a range of professionally focussed postgraduate taught programmes with employability at their heart
3. Scaling up International Foundation Programme activity on campus and overseas with partners

4. Moving to country-focussed student recruitment strategies and establishing Country Groups to bring together University researchers and professional staff already working in priority countries
5. Opening offices in overseas regions
6. Launching marketing and branding campaigns using the University's world-leading research reputation
7. Investing further in the Global Partnership Office
8. Launching a number of offshore transnational education partnership hubs
9. Developing a menu of branded University-wide Global Engagement initiatives, promoted and managed by the International Study and Language Institute (ISLI)
10. Developing distance and/or blended learning programmes, building on the experience of delivering learning in the pandemic and of delivering free online non-credit programmes through Futurelearn.

In response to a question from Mrs Gordon, Mr Inman explained that, in the first instance, he would not be seeking a major investment in global engagement, but would ensure that international work was woven into the implementation of the University Strategy. He would shortly discuss priorities, deliverables and costs with the University Executive Board.

In response to other questions, Mr Inman suggested that priorities which could deliver benefits within a short timescale included increasing student numbers on the International Foundation Programme, and, in the period to September 2021, recruitment to taught postgraduate programmes. Recruitment in South Asia, focussed on second and third tier cities, could also yield significant results in the relatively short term, given the scale of the market and the opportunities now provided by the post-studies work visa. From his experience, he spoke of effective strategies for establishing small, strategically located overseas offices in areas where there were large and sustainable markets. He noted that the University had a long tradition of international recruitment in some disciplines with leading research performance, and argued that this model should be revived and extended to a wider range of disciplines. Research reputations were well established and widely known, and marketing for student recruitment should build on these recognised strengths.

In response to further questions, Mr Inman spoke of emerging markets and the possibility of partnerships in francophone north Africa and in selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria. He also noted that further consideration should be given to the potential for partnerships in the USA following the change in the administration, and in Europe following Brexit. [Section 43]

In response to a question from Mrs Plank, Mr Inman expressed some caution about a strategy focussed on building partnerships with other UK universities. He explained that the highly competitive culture in the UK sector could often generate tensions between partners which were not easily resolved; individual partnerships could be very effective when based on research collaborations and strong relationships, but this was not a scalable model.

Resolved:

“That a paper on the University's future global engagement from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International), now submitted, be received.”

The Council received a report on the governance of the University's professional services, and a presentation from three members of the professional services on their work.

The President noted that the Council's engagement with internal stakeholders had historically focussed on academic staff and more recently on students, represented through RUSU. Earlier this year, he had asked Mrs Gordon and Mr Magee to consider how the Council could engage more effectively with the professional services.

Mrs Gordon and Mr Magee explained that, in order to enhance and sustain the Council's understanding of the professional services' contribution to the University's strategic development, they had invited three members of professional staff to speak about their roles, and they proposed that, in future, the Council, advised by the University Executive Board, receive periodically a report and/or presentations on work across the services. Mr Magee introduced the three presentations.

Mrs V. Holmes, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), explained the value of specialist technologies in teaching and learning and the role of the TEL team, working with Schools, to ensure that these technologies were used most effectively to add value to students' learning. The TEL team also ran an extensive programme of staff development courses and workshops on using technology in teaching. Given the strong relationship and trust between the TEL team and academic staff, Schools were happy to try new technologies and innovate in their approaches to their teaching. During the past year, the use of technology in teaching and learning had increased exponentially due to the pandemic and government restrictions, and the success of the University in delivering assessment and teaching was attributable, at least in part, to the collaboration between Schools and the TEL team. Another dimension of the TEL team's work was the creation and delivery of free, public, online short courses. The courses showcased the University's teaching and expertise, offered a taste of learning at Reading (and thereby assisted with recruitment), and opened up educational opportunities to those who were not able to come to the University. Since 2013, the Online Courses group had developed, in collaboration with Schools, 34 courses with 1.39m enrolments from 193 countries.

Ms C. Haley, a commercial lawyer, spoke of the work of the University's Legal Services team. The team had been set up in 2014 and now comprised eight lawyers, two paralegals, and an administrator. It saw its purpose as protecting the University's assets, helping the University's key stakeholders make informed decisions, and, as far as possible, keeping the University out of court. The scope of its work included negotiating contracts, providing advice on reducing legal risk, and managing legal disputes, which might include construction disputes, employment tribunals, student claims, and disputes over research activity. The team had played an important role in the University's response to the pandemic, advising on: changes to student contracts; the adoption of new software for online teaching; new regulations; matters related to accommodation contracts; and student complaints. The team anticipated an increase in litigation as a consequence of the pandemic, and also a period of significant regulatory change due to: Brexit, changes in data protection law, initiatives from the Office for Students and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, and the development of intellectual property policy.

Mr M. Tebbit, Head of Residential Catering and Bars, explained that the University's bars and dining had a turnover of about £5m per annum and employed 55 professional staff and 250 students through Campus Jobs. During the pandemic, the bars and dining team had delivered healthy, nutritious meals, including fresh fruit and vegetables, to students who were self-isolating, and this and other aspects of their work had been the subject of a BBC Food Programme, which described the catering operation as 'remarkable kitchens in a remarkable

university'. The University's bars and casual dining were seen as sector-leading and were a significant asset in its student recruitment campaign. The operation was committed to providing exceptional student satisfaction, together with financial and environmental sustainability. To this end, the team had looked internationally for examples of good practice, and had adopted the 24 principles for healthy and sustainable menus promoted by Menus of Change, an association of North American universities which leveraged academic research to improve practice and advance culinary literacy. As a consequence, the dining team at Reading had rewritten some 3,500 recipes, embraced plant-based cooking, and increased the use of local suppliers. The University was now self-sufficient in respect of beef and lamb, which provided assurance of the ethical standards and quality of the meat. In December 2020, the University had been admitted to membership of the Menus of Change Collaborative Research Collective, and was its only European member. Mr Tebbit explained that the University's approach to catering distinguished it from other UK universities and gave it a competitive edge. He noted that good nutrition meant healthier students and led to better academic results.

In response to a question from Mrs Plank, Mrs Holmes explained that the expertise and resource within Functions was deployed, where appropriate, not simply to support life and work within the University, but also to serve, support and engage the community beyond the University, locally and globally. She offered as an example the work of the Online Courses team, which had delivered, in collaboration with the Charlie Waller Institute, a short online course on youth wellbeing and the coronavirus, which had been viewed by 20,000 people across the world. Functions were contributing, where possible, to fulfilling the institutional commitment to be an engaged University.

Mrs Gordon noted that the presentations had enriched the Council's understanding and suggested that consideration be given to how the Council might be briefed regularly about the Functions' strategic contribution to the University. The University Secretary and Chief Strategy Officer invited lay members to contact him if they wished to meet with Functions to learn more about their work.

The President thanked Mrs Holmes, Ms Haley and Mr Tebbitt for their presentations and for their contribution to the University's success.

Resolved:

"That a report on the governance of professional services, now submitted, be received."

Matters for report

21/07 RUSU oral update on progress with meeting their priorities (Item 7)

The Council received an oral report on RUSU's progress towards achieving their priorities from Miss Osbourne, RUSU President, and Miss Karki, RUSU Welfare Officer.

Miss Osbourne and Miss Karki reported that there was a serious and widespread concern among students that they were missing out on a normal student experience and that they were being variously disadvantaged. In order to articulate these concerns and to seek some remedy, RUSU had written an open letter to the University which proposed joint action between RUSU and the University to encourage landlords to rebate rent on unoccupied accommodation, a refund of tuition fees or, failing that, the University's support for RUSU's

lobby of the government for students affected by the pandemic, changes to the assessment process to mitigate the impacts of Covid on students' performance, and additional investment in the revival of the social experience for students when the restrictions were sufficiently eased.

They reported that RUSU had written to the local members of parliament arguing for government action to compensate students for the adverse impact of the pandemic, and had received a positive response from the MP for Reading East, who would be meeting with them shortly. RUSU was also participating in the National Union of Students' lobby of the government.

Miss Osbourne and Miss Karki noted that RUSU had seen very high levels of student engagement on this issue through an open forum and other channels. The RUSU Education Officer would be conducting a survey among the student body about their experience of teaching in the current year.

Mrs Owen recognised the challenges for students during the pandemic and spoke of the role of the Student Experience Committee and Council in ensuring that their concerns were understood and fully considered. She also acknowledged the challenges for staff in delivering a quality academic experience in the current context, and paid tribute to the capability and resilience of the RUSU officers in grappling with these difficult issues.

In response to a question from Mrs Plank, Miss Osbourne explained that RUSU was asking private landlords to be considerate in their dealings with student tenants experiencing financial difficulties and to negotiate some relief of rent. She welcomed the suggestion that the demands might be most effectively formulated as three short practical actions which landlords could take. Miss Karki confirmed that students were provided with information from both RUSU and the University on accessing welfare and advisory services, both internal and external.

The President thanked Miss Osbourne and Miss Karki for their report. The Council recognised the difficulties which students were experiencing and the University's work to mitigate the impact of these challenges.

21/08 Report of the Vice-Chancellor (Item 8)

The Council received the Report of the Vice-Chancellor.

Before presenting his report, the Vice Chancellor expressed his appreciation of the constructive working relationship between RUSU and the University. He paid tribute to the RUSU officers for their representation of the student interest and recognised the difficulties being experienced by students. He explained that the University and its members of staff had devoted time, effort and resource to provide as good a learning experience as safety considerations and government restrictions permitted, and that the University was enabling students to achieve the learning outcomes of their programmes. The Office for Students and the Office for the Independent Adjudicator had made clear the obligation of universities to support their students to progress through their programmes and to complete their awards. The University had fulfilled this obligation and would continue to do so. He noted that delivering quality programmes under the current circumstances was more resource-intensive than the normal modes of delivery. The University did not believe that it was reasonable to provide a refund of tuition fees, nor to offer small 'goodwill' payments as had some

universities; it would, however, consider individual complaints that the University had failed to fulfil its obligations.

The Vice-Chancellor affirmed the University's commitment, together with RUSU, to offer a normal student experience in all its dimensions as soon as public health considerations permitted. To this end, the University would be as flexible as possible.

The Vice-Chancellor noted that students were one of the few categories who had not received some financial relief during the pandemic, and that the University was joining with RUSU in lobbying the government for appropriate measures. He noted that loan forgiveness or a reduction in the interest rate were possible proposals, but that these and other measures each had their own complexities and inequities.

In relation to his Report, the Vice Chancellor:

- (a) invited the Council to note the text of the Phase 1 agreement with the local branch of the University and College Union. He thanked Mr Taylor for his invaluable contribution to the negotiation of the agreement;
- (b) noted that the number of applications for admission from the EU had fallen by 64% due to the liability of EU students for the international rate of fees, and that the University had introduced a transitional bursary for EU students to encourage applications for taught programmes for entry later this year;
- (c) noted that that collaboration with the British Museum had been sustained throughout the year, notwithstanding the pandemic, that the first joint University-British Museum grant applications had now been awarded, and that a wide range of further opportunities for staff and students to work with the British Museum were being pursued;
- (d) reported on four recent announcements from the government, which clearly signalled the direction of its higher education policy. The long-awaited report on the independent review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) had been published, and the government's response indicated that it would no longer pursue a subject-level assessment and that the interval between exercises had been extended from one to four or five years. A consultation on a Post-Qualifications Admissions (PQA) system was being held, which would probably lead to the introduction of PQA in two or three years; the principle of PQA was sound, but its implementation would be challenging. A White Paper 'Skills for Jobs' had been published which related largely to further education, but it clearly indicated the government's priorities for education and had implications for higher education. Changes in higher education funding included the withdrawal of the London weighting (which was worth about £65m in total for London universities and would cause some institutions significant problems), a 50% reduction in the grant for art and performance-based courses, and capital funding being allocated on the basis of a competitive process rather than as grants.

In response to questions from Mrs Owen and Mr Milhofer, the Vice-Chancellor advised that any variation in the tuition fee would be complex, given that the transaction was between the University and the Student Loans Company, and would not provide immediate financial relief to students. He acknowledged that some students were suffering significant financial hardship and confirmed that the University made substantial provision through its hardship funds for students in financial difficulties. The funds were currently supporting students to cover rent and to purchase personal computers which they required for their studies. In addition, the

University, through Campus Jobs, had created employment opportunities for students, including work in Covid-testing sites.

In response to a question from Mr Taylor, the Vice-Chancellor noted that the White Paper 'Skills for Jobs' presented opportunities for the University, and that the University would consider how best to engage with the skills agenda outlined. The University was committed to maintaining and developing its relationships with local further education colleges.

Resolved:

"That the Report of the Vice-Chancellor, now submitted, be approved."

21/09 Report of the Strategy and Finance Committee (Item 9)

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee held on 11 January 2021, which included the Financial Report 2020/21 Restated Budget (Quarter 1 Forecast).

The Council was pleased to note progress in relation to the University's negotiations with the NIRD Trust Committee and to the closure of the RET.

The Chief Financial Officer advised that the deficit of £16.1m reported to the Office for Students at the end of October 2020, had now increased to £17.1m. Notwithstanding this increase, the University was reasonably confident that the deficit could be funded without recourse to the Phase 1 agreement on salary reduction.

The Council endorsed the decision to waive the rent for unoccupied accommodation in UPP Halls and in Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) at Martindale Court from 6 January until 22 February 2021, when face-to-face teaching was due to resume.

Resolved:

"That:

1. the Financial Report 2020/21 Restated Budget (Quarter 1 Forecast), now submitted, be received;
2. the Report of the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee, held on 11 January 2021, now submitted, be approved."

21/10 Oral report on progress of the group reviewing Council's effectiveness and its adherence to the new CUC Code (Item 10)

The Council received from Mrs Owen and Mrs Gordon an oral report on the progress of the group reviewing Council's effectiveness and its adherence to the new CUC Code.

Mrs Owen and Mrs Gordon reported that the group had met, and, following a wide-ranging discussion, had agreed to structure its work around three themes: engagement and transparency, externality, and possibilities for Council to operate more effectively. Each of the themes had been assigned to a pair comprising a lay and a University member for detailed consideration and for report to the group's next meeting in early February. The group would

consult Council members following the group's next meeting, and, in due course, would invite comment on its emerging proposals from the University Executive Board.

The President reaffirmed the Council's commitment to continuous reflection on, and improvement of, its practices, and looked forward to the group's report.

21/11 Dates of further meetings of the Council in the Session 2020/21

Further meetings of the Council in this Session had been scheduled for:

Monday 15 March 2021 at 2.15pm

Monday 5 July 2021 at 2.15pm.