

THE UNIVERSITY OF READING

PEOPLE AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

25/01 A meeting of the People and Culture Committee was held on Thursday 27 February 2025 at 10.00 am in Committee Room 2, Whiteknights House

Present:

Dr Richard Messer (Chair) (RM)
Claire Rolstone (CR)
James Haxell (JH)
Dr Karen Henderson (KH)
Professor Faustina Hwang (FH)
Nicola Johnson (NJ)
Professor Trish Reid (TR)
Julie Rowe (JRo)
Jay Russell (JRu)
Susan Thornton (ST)
Dr Anne-Marie Van Dodeweerd)(A-MVD)
Dawn Grout (DG)
Dr Sarah Marston, Head of Institute of Education (SM)
Sinead O’Flynn (Secretary) (SO)

Apologies were received from Alan Twyford and Professor Allán Laville

25/02 The minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2025 were approved.

Arising from the minutes:

There were no matters arising from the minutes. However, there was one outstanding matter arising from the minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2024 which the Director of HR had been unable to update on at the last meeting as she had been absent:

Minute 24/26: Staff Wellbeing and Engagement

Members of the Committee (plus guests) were asked to consider the questions posed by the Chair of the Committee and send them to the Director of Human Resources.

The Director of Human Resources to provide the Committee with a verbal update on the responses received from members of the Committee and a broader update on wellbeing developments since the meeting in September 2024.

CR noted it was a timely update given Wellbeing Week and the Employee Engagement Survey (EES) has recently closed. The feedback from Committee members had highlighted the importance of communication at both an institutional and local level to demonstrate support and activities/resources for wellbeing. Suggested ways to support wellbeing had included:

- Local community spaces: social spaces, wellbeing resources hub, the Harris Garden and campus more widely, and centenary projects linked to outside spaces, were all given as examples of ways to support wellbeing.
- Supporting mental health was as important as physical health with some positive work to support men's mental health underway, which is positive alongside events such as the Women's Health Café's.
- Freeing staff time to become more efficient and effective and reduce administrative burdens. Work is already underway to address this, including the governance review and work to improve systems and process.
- Improvement in resources to support change and to encourage teams to improve their mindset towards change, harnessing local change and improvement initiatives to have an impact on local teams and local processes.
- Time out for personal wellbeing, e.g. 'movement minutes' interspersed throughout the day. The Committee felt that this would work best as an informal initiative.
- Impact of wellbeing on early career researchers and parity of contract. The Committee felt this was a separate issue to wellbeing, fitting better with academic issues and career frameworks.
- More local action and planning will be possible after the results of the EES.

DG also commented on work between Occupational Health and Security on wellbeing-focussed team days, and follow-ups. This work has been very positive and the approach worked very well.

SM said that at the Institute of Education, colleagues have reported that their wellbeing can be impacted by worries they are letting people down. Colleagues are often rarely asked how they are. SM believed that while Wellbeing Week helps change the culture, how colleagues interact with each other can also affect wellbeing. DG agreed that leaders set the pace and tone by their actions and/or lack of action. TR suggested a mechanism to remind busy managers to ask after colleagues' wellbeing would be useful.

FH said that our website information on wellbeing is comprehensive but some information is out of date, which risks giving a signal wellbeing is not taken seriously. FH asked if there was resource to review and update the webpages. Updating Wellbeing webpages are a HR responsibility, however there is no resource to make updates and this remains a challenge. DG asked to be informed of any outdated areas.

CR said that ELE, a new digital wellbeing platform, has been launched. It has resources on a wide variety of topics, however many employees are not aware of it, so more communication may be needed. Data on the usage of this resource is available.

Update on the Employee Engagement Survey

NJ provided an update on the recent Employee Engagement Survey which had closed on the previous Friday. The overall response rate was 54%. Within this, Directorate responses ranged between 60% and 80%. School responses ranged between 30% and 50%. RM asked if the response rate was lower than previously, NJ responded that it was, however People Insight have reported that there has recently been less engagement across the sector, this is likely to be in response to current sector challenges.

The institutional results are going to UEB on 31st March. UEB will think about institutional actions. There will be briefing sessions to support Heads of Directorates and Heads of School in mid-April. The briefing sessions will provide access to the dashboard with results for School or Directorate.

TR said it would be good to understand the reasons behind a lower response. CR thought there would be a better feel for the reason once the results are analysed. CR will share more about the results and action planning at the next P&C Cttee Meeting.

SM asked who the survey had been sent to, thinking that a low response rate in IoE might relate to contract type with some colleagues e.g. supervising tutors, who may not think the survey is for them. CR confirmed that all employed colleagues were included and that further information would be available in the results data.

The UoR View Survey Platform will allow bespoke surveys to be created and run internally. The first of these will be about Academic Workload and will be launched in mid-April. The platform will provide a focus for future surveys with staff on a range of topics.

25/03 EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (EDI)

CR updated the Committee on the changes to the APVC D&I role and the creation of a Head of EDI role. Much work has taken place to raise the profile of EDI at the university and focus will now be on delivering against agreed actions.

TR commented that it was not clear to some staff in Schools why this decision had been made and communication on it could have been better.

Susan Thornton, Assistant Director of HR provided an update on current EDI work, including

- Institutional EDI targets and progress towards them
- Current activities and priorities
- Athena Swan
- Advance HE – Holistic Approach to EDI

ST gave a short presentation on the ten EDI targets and progress made to date.

Target 1. Increase in declaration of protected characteristics

- This has increased but remains under target. There will be a drive to increase declaration when the new HR system launches.
- To help increase declarations, it is important to explain why and how we use the data, and reassure that the data is anonymised.

Target 2. Eliminate disability undergraduate awarding gap

- There was a drop between 2022 and 2023 but we continue to have more disabled students who get higher degrees than those who have not declared a disability.

Target 3. Disability Confident Scheme Level 1 by 2024; progress to Level 2 by 2026

- We signed up to Disability Confident Level 2 in December 2024. The Recruitment Team have worked very hard since the sign up. The focus now is to embed Level 2.
- Disability Confident takes a different approach to chartermarks; the level is based on a commitment which is followed by putting measures in place and demonstrating these.
- ST shared that the Disability Line Managers Toolkit modules would be launching soon. These will help support meeting the commitments to the scheme.
- There was a discussion about the pre-circulation of interview questions. Feedback has generally been positive with support for the approach which levels the playing field for neurodiverse candidates or candidates who experience anxiety. Currently, if questions are requested as a reasonable adjustment, they should be sent to all shortlisted candidates. Some further work is required to ensure a consistency of approach recognising the requirements of different roles, job groups etc.
- AMVD said she would welcome further guidance on the use of AI, specifically whether by providing questions in advance, the candidate could use AI to prepare perfect interview answers. JR commented on the importance of using different interview techniques to give candidates the best opportunity

to shine during the process. RM added that he would like to see good practice that is genuinely useful to recruiting managers.

Target 4. Increase LGBTQIA+ and Allies Staff Network membership

- Membership has increased. Further work is taking place on promoting the benefits of membership, including a toolkit and refreshed allyship training.

Target 5. Reduce BAME undergraduate awarding gap

- The BAME awarding gap in 2023-24 was 14.2%. This increased by 3.4% from 2022-23. The Student Outcomes Team Manager is looking at the reasons for the widening gap.
- RM said that Senate and Council were keen to know what measures would be taken to reduce the gap. Anne-Marie Henderson, CQSD Director, has more data, including how we compare across the sector, and intersectional data.
- The Committee acknowledged that that the BAME grouping is an imposed category. This means that nuances can be missed e.g. although the gap increased overall, within this the Black / White awarding gap increased while the other subsections decreased.
- TR added that within different backgrounds e.g. Asian, further, meaningful distinctions can be made e.g. with religion and family levels of academic achievement.
- TR said it would be useful to see how students are behaving to understand the barriers. Our conceptualisation of students as particular type of young person may not be accurate, and this being the case, solutions may be designed with the wrong students / student behaviour in mind.
- ST said that Student Inclusion may be able to provide insight into student behaviour.

Target 6. Attain Bronze Race Equality Charter Mark by 2023 and work towards Silver by 2026

- An institutional Bronze award was achieved in 2023. Progress is being made against the action plan for the next application.
- Actions are owned by different parts of the University at different levels.
- The Race Equality Implementation Group (REIT) monitors progress.
- AMH is the interim Chair of REIT.

Target 7. Equitable success rates BAME/ white in the Personal Titles process

- There is no current data as the Personal Titles process was paused last year. Data from the previous year showed success rates remained the same.
- The Committee discussed ways of making this data more accessible.
- Support from mentors has increased for BAME females.

- TR said, linking to her comment in Target 5, if we inaccurately conceptualise academics, we risk designing the wrong solutions.
- RM said that AL's input has been important for Personal Titles. We need to consider how this continues going forward.
- TR noted a link with the awarding gap, with the pipeline starting with students and pulling through up to Personal Titles.

Target 8. BAME representation in professional services for Grades 6 to 9

- Progress has been made on BAME representation in Grades 6 and 7. There has been a drop at Grade 9.
- Professional Services Focus Groups: This is a broader piece of work on grades, not targeted specifically at BAME representation, though the work has been shared with the BAME Network. Supportive activities identified through focus groups included support for career progression, programmes and workshops on UoRLearn, and the development pathway framework.

Target 9. Athena Swan Charter Mark actions

- Technical Services have been awarded the Silver Charter Mark.
- The Athena Swan SAT is preparing for institutional resubmission in July 2025.
- There is a new process for awards which aims to reduce the data and wordcount. Advance HE suggest limiting key priorities to between 4 and 8. Successful institutions have picked 4 to 5.
- There has been good progress on the previous action plan although noting that some actions were no longer as relevant as when the action plan was developed.

Target 10. Sex-balanced professoriate and maintain sex balance in associate professoriate

- 2022-23 data: 37.3% Professors and 55% Associate Professors were female.
- The impact of the suspension of Personal Titles needs to be considered.
- Compared to the national picture, Reading was 6% better than the sector average but our aspiration goes beyond this.
- TR said that the citizenship criteria is important especially for women, to whom much of this work typically falls. RM added that there are instances where applications have failed due to citizenship criteria not being fulfilled.
- FH said that opportunities for people to develop the necessary skills need to be created earlier in the process.
- CM said that HR look at how to create opportunities for progression in the first part of the cycle. TR added that the PDR leads into the process a couple of years in advance giving time to develop the necessary skills.

Diversity and Inclusion Target Priorities

- The priority is to renew the Athena Swan award.

- ST is the interim Chair for the Athena Swan Self-Assessment Team. KH is also a member of the Self-Assessment Team, other members come from across Academic and Professional Services.

Advance HE Holistic EDI Workshops

Advance HE have held workshops on a holistic approach to EDI. They have developed a student lifecycle and staff lifecycle focussing on equal access rather than isolated characteristics. Toolkits and resources will be forthcoming. Recognition awards / badges for departments are under consideration.

This is a phased approach, it should offer more flexibility and support. Organisations are guided through each phase and advised on using data. The terminology describes characteristics as represented rather than protected.

Framework and departmental toolkit will be released in August 2025. It is likely it will be renamed to Inclusivity Institutional Framework.

CR added that the university should look at using the new framework as we set our targets. CR had initial discussions with Allan Laville, however it is too early to provide a timeline for adoption of this new process.

The Committee discussed the following questions –

- How do you feel the current balance of centrally driven EDI initiatives and local ownership of EDI is supporting the effectiveness of our efforts to foster a diverse, inclusive and equitable workplace?
- How can we better engage more colleagues in EDI efforts, ensuring that everyone – regardless of their role or department – feels empowered to contribute, take ownership and be heard in shaping our diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives?

SM said that the Awarding Gap Committee made a huge difference in the Institute of Education in terms of sharing data and supporting inclusivity. There is more work to be done so the work of the group reaches the School more widely.

TR felt that staff were more likely to act on clear, RAG rated, data, and if they understood how the questions asked fed into the TEF.

KH said it would be useful if HR data helped to understand what populations look like so there is better information for planning.

AMVD said that there are large departmental differences in where teams and roles would get involved. Perhaps EDI can provide practical advice and support how to embed this.

The group discussed what contributions to EDI might look like. Clarity would be welcomed as contributions were likely to vary significantly from person to person. It would be helpful to have stories of how people have engaged in different ways, this might help create confidence to question what is fair and equitable.

DG noted that there was a high level of enthusiasm and it was important to think about how to keep the momentum and coordinate the work.

25/04 Any other business

There was no other business.

25/05 Dates of meetings remaining for the 2024/25 Academic Session:

Wednesday 11 June 2025 10.30 am – 12.30 pm

All meetings will be held in Committee 2, Whiteknights House