THE UNIVERSITY OF READING

PEOPLE AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

25/06 A meeting of the People and Culture Committee was held on Wednesday 11 June 2025 at 10.30 am in Committee Room 2, Whiteknights House.

Present:

Dr Richard Messer (Chair) (RJM)
Claire Rolstone (CR)
Dr Sarah Marston (SM)
Professor Faustina Hwang (FH)
Dr Anne-Marie van Dodeweerd (AMVD)
Susan Thornton (ST)
Nicola Johnson (NJ)
Jay Russell (JR)
Dawn Grout (DG)
Josh Morley (Secretary) (JM)

Apologies were received from Karen Henderson, Trish Reid (TR), Julie Rowe (JR), James Haxell (JH), and Tanya Lines (TL).

25/07 Introductions

RJM began by thanking those soon to be leaving the University, James Haxell and Faustina Hwang, for their contribution to the People & Culture Committee, and also to Alan Twyford for his substantial contribution over many years. RJM introduced JM who was acting as Secretary for today's meeting.

RJM stated that, ahead of next meeting and in line with the ongoing Governance Review, there would be consideration of how the People & Culture Committee was working and what if anything it could do differently, the next meeting due to take place in Autumn 2025, would serve as a good opportunity for the Committee themselves to discuss this.

25/08 Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 27 February 2025 (enclosed)

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 27 February 2025 were approved. There were no matters arising from the minutes.

25/09 Employee Engagement Survey

The Chair of the Committee invited NJ to make her presentation.

NJ noted that a number of Committee members had seen the survey results in detail so today's presentation would focus on the Committee's role in overseeing next steps and the wider perspective of Staff Voice activities. The University Executive Board (UEB) had held two in depth discussions on the survey results, Heads of Schools/Directorates had similarly seen in depth results, information had also been shared to the Staff Portal, and with the Staff Forum and being planned with UCU.

RJM suggested that the Committee's role in supporting employee engagement was twofold, to understand the messaging from the results and ensure that the right actions were taken to support improvements, along with looking at wider opportunities to increase employee engagements more broadly.

NJ noted the response rate of 54% which was not as high as had been hoped and noted that there were lessons that could be learnt , but that from an employee engagement perspective, there was potential to improve on this. One of the lessons could be on timing (the survey was run in February and over the half-term holiday) and that more planning could go into how best to reach staff who do not regularly access their emails.

One of the benefits of the People Insight platform was the focus on the impact of each question on employee engagement, indicated by the darkness of the roundels (the darker, the higher the impact on engagement). If the University focused on formulating actions relating to the questions with darker roundels, this would impact more positively on engagement. NJ highlighted the ten areas with the strongest impact on engagement.

The survey closed on 25 February 2025. Since then, the key dates related to the survey were:

- 31 March 2025 – UEB got first sight of the results.
- 16 April 2025 – Heads of Schools briefed on the results.
- 23 April 2025 – Heads of Departments briefed on the results.
- April onwards – dashboard access extended as required.

Those with access to the data had been advised to take some time to absorb and discuss the results rather than go straight into action planning, with the UEB, Schools, and Directorates now beginning to action plan. It had been recommended that, at a local level, each area devise 2-3 achievable actions over Summer 2025 and record them on the UoR View platform so that CR and NJ have sight of an overview of the actions. NJ expressed the view that there would be more listening exercises needed in certain areas, particularly those areas with lower response rates.

RM asked whether People Insight (PI) had information on how other Universities had taken action at local and institutional levels in a joined-up manner and how effective this had been. NJ explained that the Heads of Schools planned to connect on proposed actions in October 2025 to ensure a joined-up approach where possible.

CR noted that whilst local actions would likely be more specific, institutional actions would be more strategic and focused on achieving the University's vision for the future. CR noted that potentially the institutional actions could then be implemented in different ways across the University but that coordination, in an appropriate manner, was definitely needed. RM suggested that while local action would be carried out at an appropriate pace, the

Committee needed to be live to helping this to happen in a coordinated way. SM asked whether the UoR View platform would help with this, which NJ confirmed would be her role but that we did need to see how people would adapt to using the UoR platform to record actions.

RJM asked whether PI had examples of where other Universities had made use of the platform to plan and implement their actions. CR explained that there were a lot of case studies and webinars provided by PI, as well an interesting report that had been put together in tandem with the Universities & Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) that picked out case studies from other institutions, for example another institution had identified ways of working as a challenge and took improving workspaces and policies around flexible and hybrid working as institutional actions.

The Vice Chancellor and UEB had noted the positive results from the survey, such as the high engagement score, which the Vice Chancellor had acknowledged in his all staff talk the previous day (10 June 2025), as well as a strong sense of purpose, community, and belonging, while the University's commitment to the environment was seen as remarkable. CR then highlighted the areas for the proposed Institutional level actions – reward; wellbeing; workload and systems and reinforcing the sense of purpose and community. CR shared that there had been discussion with UEB on culture, University strategy and communicating a shared vision, adding that there had been a lot of feedback around visibility of leadership at both institutional and local levels.

CR noted that the survey had been conducted during the deferral of the pay award, and that it was important the Committee was clear about what they could and could not do, noting that actions would likely explore other forms of reward, beyond salary. CR shared that a new platform for celebrating success would be launched in Summer 2025 and could serve as an opportunity to introduce new forms of rewards. CR explained that another institution had done a lot of work on transparency of total reward, alongside salary, such as contributions to pension schemes and annual leave entitlement, among others.

There was further discussion around career progression, both for academic and professional services staff; and workload, including the current work underway to develop an academic workload model. It was noted that while supportive of the academic workload project, there were also significant issues around workload in professional services as well which could not be addressed with a workload model.

UoR View has the capacity to run other surveys and the University had recently run an academic workload survey for [redacted, section 40] and [Redacted, section 40] who were pleased with the platform's capabilities. The platform will allow the University to be more coordinated with which surveys take place and when, including both regular employee engagement, pulse, and other surveys. NJ plans to explore moving the University's exit questionnaire to UoR View and noted that qualitative data from focus groups could be used on the platform too.

NJ had recently been approached by another academic through [redacted, section 40] and shared that, as more surveys took place on the platform, there would be more data to call upon.

RJM expressed the view that the UoR View platform seemed to be incredibly helpful and asked whether there were any plans to coordinate staff surveys conducted through UoR View with student surveys. NJ expressed that she wanted more planning to take place around when surveys were live in an effort to avoid survey fatigue. CR shared that some institutions were using the platform as part of their all staff talks and discussions would take place with Internal Communications regarding this.

DG questioned whether in a future engagement survey we could ask questions about stress and the six stressors identified by Health and Safety Executive (HSE). CR confirmed that wellbeing and stress could well be a topic for further in-depth exploration in a future survey. DG stressed the importance of more proactive work around stress following recent involvement by HSE in the sector.

RJM asked NJ whether another all-staff survey was planned for next year. NJ responded that an all-staff survey would not necessarily take place every 12 months and that it would instead likely be every 12-18 months. CR suggested that next year's survey could perhaps be pushed from February to May or even September 2026.

AMVD asked whether regular updates on staff surveys would be provided. NJ stated that regular bitesize updates and good news stories would be shared, adding that some data could also be embedded into staff communications.

RJM stated that UEB was committed to making sure action was taken on an institutional level and felt it was essential the University acted and communicated it well.

RJM thanked NJ for her presentation.

25/10 Athena Swan (AS) – Development of new action plan

RJM invited ST to provide an update on the new AS action plan. ST noted TL's apologies as she was at another meeting and explained that she would provide an update on institutional AS status.

The submission for re-accreditation for Athena Swan was due in summer 2025 and ST had been working with a cross University implementation team to develop the submission including a new action plan. The draft submission had been shared with Advance HE who now offer a service to review and provide feedback on institutional level submissions. ST had met the previous day with the consultant which had helped to identify the areas which needed further work. ST would focus in this discussion on the actions being developed for the new action plan, which would be a 5 year plan.

Action 1 – Pay Gaps

One action area would be around Pay Gaps, particularly the Gender Pay Gap (GPG) but the need to develop other pay gap data was also identified. The University had seen a peak in the GPG in the COVID years but has seen a significant decrease since; current GPG is 14.49%, down from 22.07% with the figures for March25 due in a few weeks. The University will be seeking actions to continue this downward trend. RJM stated that the University should recognise and be proud of the improvements already achieved, noting that work would continue. ST noted that Advance HE were seeking a specific target for the University to aim for but that she was currently hesitant to commit to a specific target without further data. Some further work is currently being planned with Women@Reading to run focus groups with professorial staff in zones 2-3 to help to understand and address barriers to further progression for female professorial staff.

RJM asked whether, with the data and evidence the University had access to, we could expect to make further progress on the gender pay gap. ST confirmed that we did expect to make some further progress to reduce the GPG but that more work was needed as part of the action plan to define further specific actions. CR noted the importance of data and actions in relation to other pay gaps, such as ethnicity and disability.

Action 2 – Leadership Development
ST confirmed that this action would focus on the development of leaders, from a gendered perspective, noting that whilst data is available on female progression to senior leadership roles, less information is available about progression to other roles such as School Directors of Teaching and Learning (SDTLs) and Research Division Leads (RDLs). ST confirmed that further work was already underway to consider induction for leadership roles and more data was needed in relation to perceived anecdotes about female leaders taking on more pastoral aspects of leadership roles. All of this data would feed into the development of specific actions.

SM asked whether the aim of the Athena Swan submission was to achieve a gold award or remain at silver. [Redacted, section 43].

Action 3 – Academic Workload
ST explained that the aim of this action is to tie into the work already underway on academic workload and to identify any gendered aspects to the allocations of workload.

Action 4 – Professional Services Career Development
The aim of this action is to build on recent work in relation to professional services career development. ST was asked whether this action was focused on career development, or promotion, or progression. ST confirmed that this work would be focused on development, as this included a broader scope that just promotion; CR confirmed that consistency in language would be helpful in this regard.

RJM asked about professional services workload which was not covered in any specific actions; ST confirmed there was no specific action on this in the current proposals as the data did not suggest that there were as many obvious gendered aspects to the allocation of work and workload for professional services staff as there potentially were for academic staff. CR suggested that the final actions may be more specifically worded to ensure it did not appear that professional services workload had been overlooked.

Action 5 – Supporting Health and Wellbeing
The final action on health and wellbeing would cover both women and men's health concerns, to build on the work already achieved in supporting women's health. DG mentioned the work she had recently undertaken around men's mental health, working with a group of male colleagues, sharing that the group was exploring issues such as isolation for men, e.g., fathers losing their identity as an individual after having children and often finding work to be the only place they are called by their name, as well as how they protect themselves and their families from cyberbullying.

CR asked whether there was something about women reacting to stress in different ways and taking on more inside and outside of work that could lead to more stress triggers. [Redacted, section 43].

RJM asked who would sign off the AS new action plan. ST shared that it would go to UEB and then to [redacted, section 40] the University's Sex Equality and Disability champion.

RJM expressed that UEB was very committed to this area and he was delighted to see how much work was being done elsewhere and linked to this. Any further comments could be shared with ST.

25/11 <u>Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy</u>

RJM invited NJ to provide an update on work to develop a mental health and wellbeing strategy, which was being developed following the recent award of the Student Minds Mental Health Charter. NJ explained that a small working group had being developing the strategy and the draft was now being considered by both the P&C Committee, from a staff perspective, and relevant student committees. She invited comments from the Committee.

Members made the following comments:

- the student facing sections were very undergraduate focused and did not seem to recognise the wider student population, such as Doctoral students, who may have different needs. It was questioned whether the Doctoral and Research College had been involved in the work.
- there didn't seem to be recognition that students also work and staff also learn/study.
- The development of this specific strategy would lead to the University having a mental health and wellbeing strategy but not a people strategy. Is a strategy document the right document to develop?
- The inevitable focus on student mental health and wellbeing meant less mention of staff across the document which did not reflect our overall commitment to staff wellbeing.

- The strategy did not feel cohesive and there were points where very obvious distinctions between students and staff were made that were perhaps not necessary.

There was a brief discussion about the background to the strategy development, which NJ confirmed had been led by [redacted, section 40] and involved the Student Wellbeing team and some involvement from the Reading SU. DG noted that she had wanted to be involved but was not.

RJM summarised the Committee view that they were not ready to sign off the mental health and wellbeing strategy as drafted, reflecting the concerns raised both about the focus on UG students and that the commitment to staff wellbeing not being sufficiently reflected.

Members of the committee asked whether a combined staff / student strategy was the right way forward, and/or whether alternative options could be considered, such as an overarching statement covering the whole community but with different details for the staff and student community, noting the different statutory commitments to staff and students.

DG confirmed that the mental health charter required a commitment from the University on mental health but did not a require a separate strategy.

RJM asked NJ and CR to consider how they could best provide the Committee feedback and next steps.

25/12 Formal recording of thanks

RJM took the opportunity to formally record thanks to everyone in HR involved in the Human Resource Management System (HRMS) project, noting that colleagues had been resolute, polite, and constructive in something that had proven inherently challenging.

25/14 Any other business

There was no other business. RJM thanked all attendees and noted that he would see most of them in Autumn 2025.

25/15 Dates of meetings remaining for the 2024/25 Academic Session:

All meetings will be held in Committee Room 2, Whiteknights House