

Council

26/20 A meeting of the Council was held at 10.00 am on Monday 9 March 2026 in Carrington 201, Whiteknights Campus.

Present at the meeting:

The President (Mrs Helen Gordon, in the Chair)
The Vice-Presidents (Mr Kevin Corrigan & Mrs Kate Owen)
The Vice-Chancellor (Professor Robert Van de Noort)
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Professor Parveen Yaqoob)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Dr Caroline Baylon)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Elizabeth McCrum)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Dominik Zaum)
Mr Steve Alexander
Mr Shamshad Ali
Professor Elena Beleska-Spasova
Professor Adrian Bell
Mrs Sian Butler
Professor Richard Frazier
Professor Jon Gibbins
Ms Martina Hudson
Ms Tiam Koravand
Mr Jackie Liu
Mr Angus McCallum
Mr Peter Milhofer
Mr Paul Milner
Ms Sally Peck
Mrs Sally Plank
Dr Michelle Sancho
Dr Janet Young

In attendance:

The Chief Financial Officer (Mr Vin Wijeratne)
The Chief Operating Officer (Ms Laura Clayton)
[Redacted, section 40], Kings College (for Minute 26/25)
The Director of Estates (Mr Andrew Casselden) (for minute 26/27)
Ms Tasha Easton, Governance (minute secretary)
Ms Louise Sharman, University Secretary

Apologies:
Mrs Sue Maple

26/21 President's opening remarks

The President welcomed Professor Adrian Bell to the meeting as the new elected member representing the Senior Leadership Group. She also noted that this was the last meeting for Ms Tiam Koravand and thanked her for all of her input during her term. Ms Hudson hoped to stay on for another year, and her contributions were also noted by the Council.

26/22 Vice-Chancellor's opening remarks

The Vice-Chancellor gave an update on several areas, as follows:

Sector context and government:

- **Restructuring continued apace across the sector**

It was reported that several Russell Group universities were undertaking restructuring exercises. It was noted that current financial challenges could not be resolved through recruitment of home students with lower grades. It was emphasised that tariff thresholds needed to be maintained whilst also managing the reduction in international student numbers.

No government support was expected and there was low confidence across the sector. There continued to be concerns about visa processing, with some students not receiving visas in time to commence their studies at the start of the academic year. It was further noted that the institution's main competitors remained Russell Group universities.

- **Upcoming tri-annual valuation of USS**

It was noted that 31 March of this year was the anchor point for the valuation. USS was reported to be over £15 billion in surplus, and consideration was being given to potential options for utilising this surplus. These options included:

- reducing contribution rates for employers and employees;
- improving benefits, which had been reduced over the past few decades; reviewing the securities that universities had provided, such as the current 30-year notice period, to assess whether these could be lowered.

The Vice-Chancellor had met with the Chair of USS. It was highlighted that all parties wished to maintain a stable USS and avoid any actions that might create instability or lead to further industrial action. It was noted that USS already operated with conditional indexation linked to high levels of inflation. Other countries were adopting more sophisticated approaches, which could give USS greater confidence in making long-term

investments. There was a stated desire for a workable method of conditional indexation to be in place by 2029, the date of the next valuation.

There was a mix of views from different universities, with some wanting to reduce contributions and others preferring to keep it the same. It was acknowledged that a surplus of this scale could not remain without a clear plan.

Mrs Plank queried whether, as a trust, USS could invest directly in the sector in some way. It was confirmed that the obligation of the trustee was to invest where the highest return could be achieved. USS was described as being interested only in investing very large sums, given the size of the fund.

- **UCL £21m settlement on student claims for impact of IA and Covid-19**

The Vice-Chancellor gave an update on student claims companies pursuing claims for students reportedly affected by Covid 19 and industrial action.

- **Student loan repayment – Plan 2**

It was reported that the freezing of the repayment threshold for student loans had been much discussed in the media and in Government. Whilst there were no immediate financial implications for the University, the Council noted that over time this could contribute to a degradation of the student premium.

Concerns were raised about the confidence of future student cohorts in the student loan system, with the expectation that this impact would increasingly be felt across the sector.

Update on the Six mitigation areas (with RAG ratings):

- Global Sustainability Leaders scholarships (green) – It was reported that 240 scholarships had been recruited out of a potential 300 for 2025 entry. The average tariff of award holders was AAA+, and the widening participation rate was higher than expected. There had been an 8.7% growth in eligible applicants this year.
- Learning and Engagement Analytics Project (LEAP) (amber) – Delayed but under development
- Savings in Schools (green) – Additional savings allocations on track.
- Savings in Directorates (amber) – Professional Services Programme under review by Chief Operating Officer, learning lessons from HRMS and CAFM.
- Realising Henley’s potential (green) – Strategy on track, savings on track, Tianjin starting September 2026.
- Internationalisation and Global Engagement (green) – Malaysia, India and China hubs in progress, Global Rankings Strategy in operation.

Update on the Top 10 strategic projects (non-mitigation) (with RAG ratings):

- Strategy (2026 onwards) (green) – Progressing according to timeline.
- Greenlands (green) – The Programme Board had been established and had commenced its work. An independent Chair for the Greenlands Trust Committee had been appointed.
- Loddon Garden Village (and TVSP extension) (green) – The final stage of the local plan update was expected to begin shortly. [Redacted, section 43].
- ECMWF (green) – The HQ building was progressing, [redacted, section 43].
- Natural History Museum (green) – New centre at TVSP progressing, [redacted, section 43].
- [Redacted, section 43].
- [Redacted, section 43].
- Agri-Food Futures (green)– Senior appointments made or in progress, work on new research platform/farm in progress.
- Estate and Digital Strategies (amber) – [redacted, section 43]. URS project for approval later in the papers.
- Academic Workload Model (green) – Draft model to be piloted in Spring 2026.

Mr McCallum queried how strategic the various land related developments were, noting that many were not a part of the University's core aims and did not align with the draft University Strategy. The Vice-Chancellor agreed that land developments were not part of the University's Strategy but that these developments were critical and important, and that there would need to be consideration of how they supported the Strategy going forward.

26/23 Disclosure of Interests

The Disclosure of Interests was received and noted. Council members were asked to pass any updates to the Secretary.

26/24 University Strategy

The Council received a presentation from the Chief Operations Officer on the draft Strategy. The presentation highlighted the following points:

- The University was in the engagement phase and was arranging external support from a consultancy to assist with the work, which would be aligned with the Brand Review. A workshop with Senior Leadership Group was scheduled for this week. Thematic plans were being developed including relating to people and data, and where gaps currently existed.

- A vision document would be presented to Council in September 2026, along with an overarching Strategy aligned to the attributes previously discussed, supported by an appropriate budget.
- Implementation of the thematic plans would be brought forward, including those relating to Innovation and Research Development; Internationalisation and Global Engagement; and Teaching, Learning and Student Experience.
- The process would be realigned with the planning and budgeting cycle so that, from the launch of the new Strategy, Schools and Directorates could respond to the strategic direction of the University.
- Deliverables around the Vision document, the overarching Strategy Plan, Thematic and Enabling Strategic Plans and School and Directorate Action Plans would be met over the next year.
- Engagement opportunities would be provided for both internal and external communities, led by External Relations in line with the Brand Review. It was noted that another workshop would be organised for any Council members who wished to attend.

Mr McCallum noted the absence of support functions in the attributes, even though financial sustainability was still present. It was noted that the thematic and enabling plans would include other support areas, but that financial sustainability had been separated out as it was not a standalone area and underpinned all other areas.

Mr Alexander asked about relevant strategic committees and what governance arrangements would look like and who would oversee the programme. The Chief Operating Officer explained that she had met with the Chief Legal Officer, who was leading the Governance Review, to consider how this work would map onto governance structures. Boards already existed for three areas (People and Culture, Digital Environment, Physical Environment) and governance for Data would need to be added as well. The outcomes of the Governance Review would be brought to Council in July 2026.

Ms Plank asked whether the Strategy was likely to be self-funded or whether Council should prepare itself for a financial ask to support this. The Chief Operating Officer noted that the Strategy would cover both savings and investment and that more detailed conversations around costings would begin over the next week or two.

Ms Butler asked how the work would support resilience in a rapidly changing external environment over which the University had little control. She suggested that broad scenarios could be developed as a checklist to support thinking in this area.

Mr Corrigan referred to the attributes and financial sustainability and stated that he would like to see value for money for students clearly drawn out, noting that it needed to run as a thread throughout the Strategy.

Mr Ali raised the issue of capability and delivery, specifically around competitiveness. He asked how developing these attributes could support the University in becoming more competitive. The Chief Operating Officer agreed to reflect on this.

Mr Milhofer thanked the Chief Operating Officer for her presentation and asked whether there was a dedicated team in place to support this work. He also asked when implementation was likely to begin. The Chief Operating Officer confirmed that staff had been brought in to help run the programme. More work was required to determine the exact sequencing of implementation and an articulation of this was expected by the end of April. It was noted that the risk register would need to run alongside the process.

Dr Young asked whether the plan was intended to be incremental and evolutionary, or whether larger changes were envisaged. The Chief Operating Officer explained that part of the challenge was the absence of concrete goals at this stage.

Professor Bell welcomed the inclusion of financial sustainability and asked about environmental sustainability. He noted that environmental considerations had driven decision making in the past and queried prioritisation between environmental and financial factors. He was informed that questionnaires would shortly be issued to gauge appetite around changes and priorities. These would be considered by UEB, SLG, and subsequently Council.

Professor Beleska-Spasova asked whether there was an understanding of how far the University was from mapping the attributes in order to identify gaps. She queried how areas for investment or areas falling below thresholds would be identified. It was noted that evaluation, mapping of goals, and gap analysis were included in the roadmap but had not yet been undertaken. Consideration would need to be given to how investment could move the University towards its desired position.

The Chief Operating Officer outlined the timeline, noting that work with a student panel was underway. There would be a major discussion item around the Strategy at Council in July 2026.

Resolved:

That the update on the University Strategy be received.

26/25 Understanding University Costs – what can TRAC tell us

[Redacted, section 43].

TRAC and the University of Reading

Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) gave a presentation on how TRAC was being used at the University of Reading. A summary was provided of the sector level picture and how this translated to the University context. It was explained how TRAC data was being used, how it underpinned larger projects and activities, and the ways in which the University could utilise this data more effectively and in different forms.

A link had been provided to Council members ahead of the meeting where academic and financial performance data on different academic units in the University could be accessed.

The presentation outlined what the TRAC position looked like for the University, it was noted that:

- [Redacted, section 43].
- Three years of data were available, although comparative data for 2024–25 was not yet available. [Redacted, section 43].
- [Redacted, section 43].
- [Redacted, section 43].

Mr Liu asked whether the University could compare this data against the sector. It was explained that this was not possible because the University had produced this detailed breakdown internally.

Mr Alexander noted that a substantial amount of activity was centralised, with estates costs representing the largest single area. This was not considered out of line with other universities. Some institutions retained professional services functions within Schools, whilst others had centralised them; there was considerable variation across the sector.

It was reported that 42% of TRAC expenditure was controlled by Schools. TRAC was backward looking rather than forward looking, but it linked directly to the financial model. The expectation was a 59% contribution from non-research income, with most Schools expected to deliver a 5% surplus. A small number of Directorates also generated income (such as Estates and Campus Commerce). These did not make a formal contribution but operated through cross charging.

Mr Ali queried whether back-office costs were at the right level. It was acknowledged that these costs needed to be reduced to improve recovery. Even though the University did not

have a Medical School or Engineering, there was still a significant science presence. The Chief Operations Officer reported that she hoped to bring outline options for risk appetite in this area to Council in July. Professional services costs were larger than anticipated, and significant structural change would be required. Consideration was needed of what could be automated and how this would be resourced.

There was a substantial variation in FEC recovery across Schools. Schools generating surpluses tended to be teaching focused, particularly those delivering large, classroom-based subjects. There were also variations in research cost recovery. A number of science-based subjects generated a significant teaching surplus.

[Redacted, section 43].

[Redacted, section 43].

[Redacted, section 43].

[Redacted, section 43].

[Redacted, section 43].

Ms Plank commented that TRAC was useful for benchmarking because it was consistent across the sector. However, for control of financial levers, she suggested stripping away indirect costs and asking Schools to manage only the areas within their control, whilst making Heads of School accountable for these, and UEB accountable for central costs. Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) confirmed that Schools were being asked to manage their salary budgets, not capital expenditure. Salary costs were managed through SSRs and benchmarking Schools against their discipline peers. Salary costs were driven by staff mix: the proportions of professors versus more junior academics, which was influenced by progression rather than operational need.

The government agenda on specialisation was noted; the University could choose to focus on areas of research strength, but many of these sat at the bottom of TRAC recovery and were financially unaffordable due to infrastructure costs.

Margin percentages for individual Schools

Margin percentages for individual Schools were considered. Contribution levels varied significantly, with cross funding ranging from 64% to 20%.

Time allocation between teaching and research was discussed. There was significant variation in both time and financial allocation. Drivers included the balance between research and teaching, and the complexity of programme delivery.

Professor Beleska-Spasova noted that Business Schools typically carried their own professional services functions, meaning that any contribution might be weighted differently. A significant level of cross subsidy existed across the University.

Performance charts

Performance charts were noted, showing how TRAC was beginning to be used operationally. Alongside TRAC data, the University was also using NSS and completion metrics, and, on the research side, the REF 2021 performance and research income.

Some of the strongest financial performers, such as Law and Economics, were not leading academic performers. This was partly because the University could not invest in them at the level necessary, as they supported other areas. A more structured approach to SSRs and curriculum review was required to ensure sustainability and alignment with strategy.

Within SCFP, Pharmacy operated under a cap on student numbers. It generated a surplus but faced challenges with student experience. Investment in research was difficult as the School must support itself and its wider activities.

Mr Ali noted that decisions about which Schools received investment and how investment was used were fundamental to the overall strategy. Staffing decisions, including SSRs, were informed by available data and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) confirmed that this must form part of any strategic discussion.

Professor Bell observed that across the three-year period, horizontal movement was driven by progression rates and NSS, which update annually. As REF remained fixed for a period of time, changes to research data related mainly to citations and research income. The NSS could shift the position significantly, but multiple metrics helped stabilise the picture.

Mr Alexander asked about cross School subsidy and whether it occurred actively or passively. It was explained that subsidy was built into the resource allocation process: a small number of Schools generated surpluses that were held centrally and allocated to Schools running deficits. The aim was to reduce deficits, but these were largely driven by student numbers, which could change.

Dr Sancho asked how interdependencies were managed to ensure that efficiency measures did not negatively impact reputation and student experience. Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) acknowledged the challenge: the University had run significant deficits for several years and must now make strategic choices that protect reputation and the student experience. SSRs and benchmarking were important tools for demonstrating how Schools could deliver teaching within available funding. Work was underway to ensure professional services kept pace with changing technologies whilst maintaining service levels.

Dr Sancho cautioned that the University should not assign value to particular Schools or disciplines and that students should be able to make their own choices relating to teaching. Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) noted that the University must consider sector comparison and value without positioning Schools against each other.

Mr Milner observed that certain areas hold value as part of the broader portfolio. He asked whether consistent academic underperformance should lead to reconsideration of provision. Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) acknowledged that if an area consistently underperformed, the University should consider whether it should continue to offer it,

comparing performance to sector norms rather than between internal Schools. Ignoring underperformance undermined the University's ability to invest effectively in other areas.

Mr Alexander noted that whilst finances were measurable, reputational impact was more difficult to quantify and asked how reputation could be measured. The sector generally referred to league tables for this, noting that whilst many humanities subjects did not cover their financial costs they performed well internationally, often appearing in the top 100–150 internationally. This had a positive impact on the University as a whole but was difficult to build into the University's considerations.

Professor Beleska-Spasova noted that benchmarking indicated that the University's professional services were larger than the sector average. Modelling had been undertaken to understand the implications of reducing these costs, which would improve cost recovery, but reductions must not undermine academic metrics. Whilst TRAC could be viewed from a School level perspective, this might not reflect where core issues lie. If administrative costs decreased, more investment could be directed to research, improving reputation and enabling higher fees. The University must ensure it was focusing on the areas that delivered the greatest impact, particularly those with multiple benefits.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) noted that external perception focused on programmes and research rather than professional services. Strategic choices around identity and prioritisation must therefore be anchored in academic activity and whether the University was spending money in the right places and in the right proportions.

The President noted that Council would need to consider how best to use this data and noted the different ways that the data could be viewed. Whilst difficult decisions would be required, members were not yet aligned in their interpretation of the data, which reflected their differing roles and perspectives.

The Council discussed next steps for utilising the data. Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) noted that there were many ways to use it internally, but consideration was needed of how to present this to different committees. Council was asked to reflect on how the data could be used as a performance management tool with UEB and escalated appropriately. Further reflection was needed on how it should inform decision making, and what could be built into regular reporting to Council. There remained differences in interpretation, but the University must continue moving toward a shared understanding.

Resolved:

That the presentations on TRAC be received.

26/26 Financial Matters

2025/26 December Monthly Management Accounts Reporting Pack

The first monthly management accounts reporting pack for December 2025 was presented. Once established, this was intended to be a fundamental schedule to be used with the annual budget and quarterly forecast to track financial performance, in order to secure the University's return to a financial surplus by 2028-29 or sooner. Following feedback from Strategy and Finance Committee (S&FC), one change had been made: green indicators showed performance in line with or better than target, while red indicators reflected performance of 5% or more below target.

During the 25/26 Q2 forecast work, the budget for 25/26 and the latest outturn position against Q1 forecast were reviewed. Council and S&FC had previously been informed that the 2025–26 budget reflected a deficit of £(33.3)m. However, after the 24/25 outturn position was £12.8m better than the 24/25 Q3 forecast, the 25/26 annual budgeted deficit had subsequently been revised to £(26.8)m following the preparation of the 25/26 Q1 forecast.

However, during 25/26 Q2 forecast process, two cost saving targets (financial saving challenges) totalling £6.2m were identified which had been implemented by the Finance Team:

- 1) £3.2m in the 25/26 budget
and
- 2) £3m in the 25/26 Q1 forecast

The CFO reported that on finding these two cost saving targets as part of the Q2 forecast process that University could no longer meet its revised 25/26 Q1 forecast annual deficit of £(26.8)m and regrettably the 25/26 Q2 forecast revised the annual deficit to £(30.0)m, representing a £(3.2)m worsening of the position to Q1 forecast but still represented a £3.3m favourable position to the 25/26 budget.

The Chief Financial Officer reported this as highly disappointing and shared that the detail of the £6.2m had come to light only after the last S&FC meeting. Further he acknowledged that this matter raised questions and concerns about the budgeting, forecasting and financial reporting processes and the controls in place, which would need to be fully investigated and addressed.

The Vice-Chancellor reported having spoken with Mr Milhofer in his capacity as Chair of Audit Committee that KPMG in their capacity as our Internal Auditors would be asked to examine the matter urgently. This was viewed as an opportunity to obtain an independent and unbiased analysis to understand what had occurred and to determine whether this was a one-off incident or indicative of practices that require systemic change.

The President thanked the team for their transparency and swift action. She assured Council that, in response to these changes in the numbers, a rigorous and correct process would be followed and reported back to the relevant committees. She also shared that following

publication of KPMG's findings consideration would be required how this matter may impact the planning round.

Mr Corrigan noted that the revised figures could potentially have an impact on cash, as the overall deficit of £(3.2)m might create pressure. However, the Chief Financial Officer explained that whilst the Q2 forecast was still being finalised, it was expected that there would be a significant underspend in capital expenditure against Q1 forecast and budget, which would more than offset the increased year end deficit.

Monthly Management Accounts - reporting pack

A short update was given on the December 2025 monthly management accounts reporting pack. It was noted that, previously we had been relying solely on quarterly forecasts, however the monthly pack enabled the University to keep a more regular view on its finances in terms of performance. The monthly pack had previously suggested that all indicators were positive, with a series of green variances and a supportive year-end outlook. It was highlighted that the monthly reporting had been instrumental in surfacing issues discovered during the 25/26 Q2 forecast process.

The Chief Financial Officer reported that revenue continued to look favourable to Q1 forecast and was expected to remain so by year end. The main challenge remained the quantum expenditure and ensuring it was controlled to remain in line with forecast.

It was also noted that, as raised at Investments and Development Committee, concerns remaining around the timing of receipts relating to the sale of NIRD properties. Work continues to progress on this matter by the Estates team, with the expectation that the position will be clearer over the coming weeks. However, given the scale of anticipated capital expenditure underspend against budget and forecast being reflected in the Q2 forecast, this issue is considered less acute.

Mr Ali asked about RUMAL, noting the significant uplift in income and surplus, and queried whether this represented a genuine improvement. It was reported that the Q1 forecast had anticipated a £400k shortfall relating to staffing and IT investment. The process for obtaining returns from RUMAL needs improvement, but it was confirmed that the position did reflect a performance improvement based on stronger fee income.

Professor Bell queried the investment fund, which had returned a negative figure in December, and asked whether this was typical. It was noted that, as the University invests for the long term, monthly fluctuations are not the main focus. However, concerns were raised regarding the performance of the manager of the liquid fund, which had not met expectations. Investments and Development Committee continues to challenge the fund manager on performance, management and decision making. Further discussion could take place outside the meeting if required.

The meeting expressed thanks to the Finance Team for establishing a monthly reporting position, which was seen as highly positive. It was recognised that this process was likely to bring further issues to light.

Resolved:

That, having regard to the relevant minute of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, the first monthly management accounts pack be accepted as a baseline for future and regular performance reporting.

Outcome of the planning round 2025-31The outcome of the planning round 2025-31 report was received, along with a presentation from Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum).

By way of context it was noted that the Planning Report had two purposes. The first was to support the University's Strategy; however, as the Strategy was currently being revised, there was an awareness that some elements of the plan might not align with the final Strategy, and that more significant changes than usual might be required once the Strategy was approved. The second purpose related to planning in a year of significant volatility. Changes included those arising from student loans and taxation changes, migration policy and international fee levy, the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, and wider political and economic uncertainty.

A commitment had been made to Council in November 2024 to return the University to a surplus position, and a revised plan was approved by Council. The University had accelerated the deficit reduction targets that were agreed.

The University agreed targets for Schools in November 2025 and Schools submitted their individual plans for consideration in January 2026. Recruitment numbers had been reviewed, noting that undergraduate recruitment was almost complete and work was further advanced into postgraduate recruitment.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) reported that significant changes had been made to assumptions regarding international recruitment. [Redacted, section 43]. It was confirmed that the University was not looking to achieve this through reduced tariff thresholds; instead, these figures reflected applicants making choices based on existing tariffs.

The partnership with Tianjin was expected to commence in September 2026, [redacted, section 43].

Further financial assumptions included costs associated with the international student levy of [redacted, section 43] and salary sacrifice related changes of around [redacted, section 43] from 2028–29.

[Redacted, section 43].

Managing volatility

[Redacted, section 43].

[Redacted, section 43].

[Redacted, section 43].

[Redacted, section 43].

Investments supporting strategic priority areas were summarised as:

- Research Excellence – [Redacted, section 43].
- Supporting Student Success – [Redacted, section 43].
- Professional Strengthening – [Redacted, section 43].
- Supporting Growth – [Redacted, section 43].
- Digital and Physical Infrastructure

Mr Corrigan noted that Scrutiny and Finance Committee had asked for consideration of downside scenarios and queried how sensitive the University was to such scenarios: specifically, what level of recruitment decline, or cost increase would trigger concern.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) responded that the University was currently tracking toward the better end of the main scenario rather than moving toward the downside scenario. Student numbers were being monitored on a weekly basis. However, government actions—such as changes to visa policy—could not be predicted and could have a material impact.

The President observed that if external events occurred that were outside the University's control, decisions might need to be revisited. However, the University could only act based on the information available at the present time. If the global position changed further, assumptions would need to be re-examined.

Mr Milhofer asked what wider impacts were associated with a drop in international recruitment beyond tuition fee income—for example, the implications for recruitment agencies and use of physical space. It was explained that the University attempts to account for all such factors. Whilst fee income would decrease, agency fees had already been factored in. Halls of residence were generally full, so a significant impact on room occupancy was not expected.

Mr Corrigan asked how far mitigations are being executed and their effectiveness. Although some measures had already been embedded the Committee wanted to receive updates on these at every meeting.

Mr Milhofer requested that the next iteration include an update on where international students were coming from, noting that this had not been reviewed for some time. It was agreed that Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Dr Baylon) would produce this analysis.

[Redacted, section 43].

[Redacted, section 43]. Demographic forecasts suggest that by 2030 domestic cohorts will begin to decline, although current application numbers indicate the capacity to support a larger intake. Post 2030, absolute numbers are expected to fall.

[Redacted, section 43].

It was agreed that an update on mitigations could be brought to the Scrutiny and Finance Committee meeting in June 2026.

Resolved:

That, having regard to the relevant minute of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, the outcome of the planning round 2026-31 be accepted, as the basis on which the budget for 2026-31 can be prepared for approval at its next meeting.

26/27 Finishing the URS refurbishment

At the outset of this item the Council noted that as the proposal was in excess of £10M and in accordance with the Phase 1 agreement, the proposal had also been shared with the Senate, UCU, and the Staff Forum for their comments.

- Comments from the Senate were included within the Senate Report - the Senate was unanimously in favour of the proposal.
- Following Joint University/UCU on 5 March 2026 the President of Reading UCU had requested that it be communicated to Council that Reading UCU was unhappy with the level of detail presented and the level of analysis that had been made visible to them. Reading UCU would expect further detail to be presented for any meaningful dialogue with the union. Reading UCU did not believe that the University had satisfied the arrangement of the collective agreement in terms of discussing the matter with them. Reading UCU was neither agreeing nor disagreeing at this time but would await further information.
- No response had been received from the Staff Forum.

A presentation was provided on the URS refurbishment by the Chief Operations Officer, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor McCrum), and the Director of Estates. The Council was being asked to:

1. Approve re-starting and completing the URS refurbishment project
2. Approve the drawdown of a further [redacted, section 43].
3. Approve entering into the necessary building contract.

The presentation highlighted:

Strategic Importance

The project was strategically significant in relation to Vision 2040 and the Strategy to 2030, with strong alignment to these institutional objectives. The building was iconic and important both on campus and within the region, and was Grade II listed. Completion was essential in order to provide a flagship academic building, particularly as competitor

institutions had invested heavily in their estates. Delivering this development was considered crucial for attracting high-quality staff and students.

The building was located at the heart of the campus, and the project supported the University's sustainability targets. The plan would improve the EPC rating from G to B, marking a major step toward achieving decarbonisation ambitions and enhancing the University's position on sustainability. Leaving the building unfinished was reputationally damaging.

Student Experience

The development of URS created an opportunity to provide a central, flexible teaching and learning hub. A number of contextual factors were highlighted concerning the student experience. Growth in undergraduate numbers—[redacted, section 43].

Changes in student behaviour were noted, including an increase in commuter students and the need for many to work alongside their studies. Employability was becoming a key determinant of choice of institution. The competitive environment and changes in pedagogy, including the role of technology, all had implications for space requirements and utilisation.

The URS project would enable the University to create much needed capacity, including larger spaces, and to move away from suboptimal rooms currently being used.

Improvements to timetabling would support more student-centred patterns, especially for commuters and working students. The project also allowed investment in modern learning spaces aligned with the future direction of teaching.

Spaces would be equipped with cutting edge technology, including augmented and virtual reality capability, and would support collaboration, employer engagement and flexibility. Design had also focused on accessibility and the needs of neurodiverse students, including careful consideration of acoustics, lighting and inclusive design advice.

The School of Built Environment would be based in URS, supporting a stronger sense of community and belonging. Space would be provided for design laboratories as well as commuter and student study areas, including collaborative zones, quiet spaces, showers and food preparation facilities.

Chancellors was being used as a temporary building. It was a 10-year-old modular structure whose planning permission lapsed in 2021. It contained 15% of centrally timetabled teaching as well as being a key assessment centre. There was an urgent need to vacate this building.

Mr Alexander queried whether having a plan was sufficient to prevent enforcement action from the Council. It was confirmed that planning officers had agreed not to pursue enforcement on the basis that the URS development was progressing and the University was committed to this as part of its Estates Strategy.

The listed status-imposed obligations for upkeep of heritage assets, including a public right of way that must be maintained.

Project Delivery and Risk

The Director of Estates confirmed that a phased construction tender was in progress, enabling the project to be separated into three phases should the University need to halt or pause at any stage.

The project sat within the wider Estates Strategy and had knock on implications for other developments, including potential commercialisation opportunities and improved timetable efficiency by reducing travel time between buildings. The newbuild alternative was estimated at [redacted, section 43]; this project stood at [redacted, section 43]. The URS development enabled the University to explore future estate optimisation opportunities and make more efficient use of space.

The President reminded Council that the project had been paused to allow time to consider other funding options. The expenditure of [redacted, section 43] over three financial years was already within the capital project budget. Tender prices were held until March 2026.

Dr Sancho asked whether projected costs might rise, particularly due to material prices. It was acknowledged that there was always risk, but the project had mitigated this by stripping the building back, removing asbestos and identifying services—typically the factors that created unexpected cost escalation. From a tendering and commercial standpoint, protections were in place. The project was not reliant on significant steel works, reducing exposure to cost increases. The team expressed confidence that costs would not rise unexpectedly.

Mr Liu asked whether RSU supported the proposals. Both Ms Koravand and Ms Hudson confirmed that RSU was in support and that the building would provide enhanced space for international students, supporting their integration, and a better student experience, particularly for disabled students. Flexible spaces were needed as teaching shifted toward more workshop-based activity.

Ms Koravand queried the source of funding. It was confirmed that [redacted, section 43] per year was allocated to capital expenditure and the project would use the portion allocated to Estates.

Ms Plank expressed support but emphasised affordability as the main constraint. She noted the recent audit findings on systems projects and asked how Council could be assured that the project would be delivered on time and on budget, given past experience with major projects.

The Chief Operating Officer explained that one of the first audits underway related to project and programme governance across the institution, with lessons learned informing improvements. A Project Management Office now reported directly to her, ensuring a more coordinated approach to prioritisation of over 100 ongoing projects. Further information on management of projects would be presented at the Council meeting in July. The Chief Operating Officer would also be submitting a case for investment to Council to ensure

project teams were appropriately skilled, which had been an area of concern for previous projects.

The Chief Financial Officer added that Estates was amongst the most rigorous functions in terms of project management and risk reporting, and expressed good confidence in their delivery capability.

Mr Milhofer raised questions about the removal of Chancellors. It was confirmed that removal and reinstatement costs were estimated at [redacted, section 43]. As a modular building, it did not involve heavy infrastructure: it had low voltage electrical supply, no gas, and limited structural complexity. This cost was included within the general Estates budget as part of the strategy.

Professor Beleska-Spasova asked how the allocation of Capital funding aligned with the Strategy. The Director of Estates reported that the capital programme had been reviewed in November 2024, with digital and estates strategies asked to return in June 2025 with re-profiling recommendations. This had resulted in delays to some projects, the breaking up and re-phasing of others, and some descoping. These adjustments had been accounted for, and the URS project did not compromise any strategic aspirations.

Professor Gibbins highlighted the positive impact on student experience, particularly for students commuting from London or across Reading, who often find it difficult to locate suitable space on campus. The new facilities would allow them to make full use of the University environment.

Council agreed to the recommendations set out in the paper.

Resolved:

That, having regard to the relevant minute of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, the Council approve:

- a) Re-starting and completing the URS refurbishment project
- b) The drawdown of [redacted, section 43]. (which will be spent across three financial years and has been accounted for in the allocation to capital projects)
- c) Entering the necessary building contract.

26/28 Report of the Senate: Academic quality and standards assurance provided to the Council by the Senate, including a request to approve the Annual Learning and Teaching Report

Council received the report of the Senate held on 25 February 2026 and a presentation from Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor McCrum) on Academic Standards. Senate's comments on the University Strategy and Finishing the URS Refurbishment were submitted to Council.

The Council was asked to approve the Annual Learning and Teaching Report, and note that the Senate considered matters under 'Assurance on Quality' to identify how these reports provide assurances as to the quality of provision.

Professor McCrum gave a presentation on the Governance of Quality and Standards. The presentation highlighted:

- Why academic standards matter
 - Ensuring students receive the education they deserve and that standards were maintained over time
 - Protecting institutional reputation, including with employers
 - Managing regulatory risk, which was becoming increasingly important
- Our Responsibilities
 - The CUC Code of Governance, the governing body must actively seek and receive assurance that academic governance was robust and effective
 - OfS Condition B - the University had responsibilities to ensure that the standards and quality of awards remained appropriate and continue to meet the ongoing conditions of registration
- Oversight - The University had a strong system of internal oversight, with numerous checks and balances and clear processes governing how internal and external data fed through assurance systems. External oversight was also in place.
- Some key Governance Questions for Council's consideration – Was there effective and strategic oversight for managing quality and standards? Were Council assured through the data and reporting that quality and standards were being identified and managed effectively
- Risk - The University was aware where the key risks were and actions were being taken to address these. Examples were provided where risks had materialised previously and corrective actions had been implemented—for instance, issues with continuation rates, where interventions had already resulted in improvements.
- TEF - It was noted that under the revised TEF arrangements, quality would influence fee levels. The University's main exposure lies in student outcome measures and student experience metrics. To be eligible for TEF, institutions must exceed certain baseline thresholds. Once above the thresholds, performance is benchmarked by demographic and subject area. The University overall meets or exceeds benchmarks, although there are some specific areas requiring attention. [Redacted, section 43].
- Partnership activity - The University was exposed to some risks through partnership activity; however, the partnerships with FE colleges in place were performing above benchmarks.
- International Engagement - Work continues to enhance quality and visibility in international partnerships. Data from NUIST and Malaysia shows good and improving quality, and local partners have their own regulatory standards to meet.

- Degree Standards - Degree standards remained consistent over time. Analysis over a ten-year period showed that the value of awards had been maintained.

Ms Owen welcomed the assurances provided.

Ms Plank noted that the University's graduate outcomes data showed a decline that was steeper than the sector and asked for context. It was explained that the University had a large cohort in subjects where the labour market was saturated, such as Psychology and Business. However, graduate employability was only one measure; TEF would balance this with measures such as longitudinal earnings and qualitative questions about preparation for life after study—[Redacted, section 43].

Mr Alexander asked what areas the University might need to focus on. [Redacted, section 43].

Professor Bell asked about government discourse around low value degrees and employability. Professor McCrum highlighted that some disciplines did not have straightforward employability routes immediately after graduation but nevertheless lead to meaningful professions.

Ms Butler asked about preparing students to complete feedback surveys after graduation. It was reported that students were well prepared before they leave, and response rates to surveys relatively strong. Ms Koravand added that Reading performed well in supporting students transitioning into the workplace, with activities delivered through Careers Services and RSU.

The Council thanked Professor McCrum for the report and presentation, noting it was assured and approving the Annual Learning and Teaching Report.

Resolved:

1. That Council is assured on the matters of academic quality and standards, as reported to it by the Senate
2. That the Annual Learning and Teaching Report, so submitted, be approved

26/29 Report of the Appointments Committee

The Council received and noted the report of the Appointments Committee and approved the appointment of Dr Sancho to the Appointments Committee and to People and Remuneration Committee.

Resolved:

1. That Council approve the appointment of Dr Michelle Sancho to Appointments Committee, and People & Remuneration Committee
2. That the Report of the Appointments Committee, so submitted, be received

Items for report

26/30 Report of the Vice-Chancellor

The Council received and noted the report of the Vice-Chancellor.

The Vice-Chancellor reminded Council that the University's Centenary Court was on Tuesday 17th March.

Resolved :

That the Report of the Vice-Chancellor, so submitted, be received

26/31 Report of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee

The Council received the Report of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee.

Resolved:

That the Report of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, so submitted, be received

26/32 Report of the People and Remuneration Committee

The Council received the Report of the People and Remuneration Committee.

Resolved:

That the Report of the People and Remuneration Committee, so submitted, be received

26/33 Report of the Investment and Development Committee

The Council received the Report of the Investment and Development Committee.

Resolved:

[That the Report of the Investment and Development Committee, so submitted, be received](#)

26/34 Report of the Student Experience Committee

The Council received the Report of the Student Experience Committee.

The Council received an update on recent work relating to student safety, sexual violence and interfaith activity.

It was reported that issues raised in previous discussions at Council had been followed up with the Director of Student Services. Provision of emergency rooms had been clarified, with flexibility in availability, and arrangements made with local hotels to provide additional support where needed.

Further work is planned to enhance the services available to students. There would be emphasis not only on the Report and Support process but also on ensuring that support was available to students who choose not to report incidents.

Ms Koravand noted positively the speed of response when concerns were raised with Council and the University more widely. She reported that an interfaith event had also taken place in collaboration with the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire. It was noted that the growth in the number of Muslim students suggested an appropriate institutional response. The Director of Student Services had provided reassurance that by the end of the academic year there would be improved provision to support this.

Mr Corrigan referred to the recent safety and sexual violence report. Mandatory training had achieved a 75% completion rate and had been described as successful. He queried whether this should be considered satisfactory for mandatory training and how to ensure training was undertaken.

It was explained that the University had considered whether 100% completion should be required, but mandatory completion for all was not possible, as the material can be triggering for some individuals. Best practice is to strongly encourage completion, but penalties for non-completion would not be appropriate. The aim is to create a culture of change, rather than focus solely on completion statistics.

Ms Koravand stressed the importance of ensuring that these conversations continue and that responsibility for this work is effectively handed over to the next sabbatical officer team.

Resolved:

That the Report of the Student Experience Committee, so submitted, be received

26/35 Report of the Report of Audit Committee

Council received the Report of the Audit Committee.

Mr Milhofer reported on the first meeting with KPMG and highlighted the findings from the report on CAFM, [Redacted, section 43]:

- [Redacted, section 43];
- [Redacted, section 43];
- [Redacted, section 43];
- [Redacted, section 43];
- [Redacted, section 43];
- [Redacted, section 43].

It was noted that upcoming audit items would include project business cases, the appraisal process and risk management processes.

[Redacted, section 43].

Resolved:

That the Report of the Audit Committee, so submitted, be received.

26/36 Report from NIRD

[Redacted, section 43].

Resolved:

That the verbal report of the NIRD Committee, be received.

Items for note

26/37 Minutes (26/01 – 26/19) of the meeting held on 20 January 2026

Minutes (26/01 – 26/19) of the meeting held on 20 January 2026 were confirmed as a correct record.

26/38 Matters arising not elsewhere on the agenda, if any

There were no matters arising that had not been covered elsewhere.

26/39 Decisions taken by the President on behalf of the Council

The Council noted that there was nothing to report on this occasion.

26/40 Documents sealed and to be sealed

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

26/41 Any Other Business

Council was informed that the University had submitted a bid for Reading to become City of Culture. It was noted that the bidding process was expected to be highly competitive, with an expected minimum of ten other cities likely to enter. Successful designation would bring financial support to develop a significant programme of cultural activity, anticipated for 2027–28. The University was formally supporting the bid through Reading’s Economic and Destination Agency (REDA).

26/42 Dates of meetings of the Council in Session 2025-26

The remaining meetings of the Council for the Session 2025-26 had been scheduled for:

- Wednesday 1 July 2026 10.00am

26/43 President to lead on brief reflections on the meeting of Council that has just concluded

Members reflected in small groups on the business and nature of the discussions of the meeting, whether Council had the right information, heard the right voices, and whether the Council did justice to the major issues discussed.