

Council

23/01 A meeting of the Council was held in the Meadow Suite, Park House on Tuesday 24 January 2023 at 10.00am.

The President
The Vice-Presidents (Mr K. Corrigan and Mrs K. Owen)
The Vice-Chancellor
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor E.M. McCrum)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor M. Fellowes)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor D. Zaum)

Mr S. Alexander	Professor U. Kambhampati
Mr S. Ali	Miss P. Lindsey
Mr S. Allen	Ms S. Maple
Professor E. Beleska-Spasova (<i>vice</i> Professor J. Board)	Mr A. McCallum
Mrs S. Butler	Mr P. Milhofer
Mrs P. Egan	Mrs S. Plank
Professor R. Frazier	Mr N. Richards
Professor J. Gibbins	Dr C. Shaw
Mr J. Jack	

In attendance:

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary
The Director of Finance
The Director of Quality Support and Development

Apologies were received from Professor J. Board, Ms L. Moses, and Dr J. Young.

23/02 President's introductory remarks

The President welcomed Professor Beleska-Spasova and Mr Jack to their first meeting of the Council. She noted that Professor Kambhampati was completing her term of appointment and thanked her warmly for her invaluable contributions to the work of the Council.

The President reported that consideration was being given to the future order of the agenda and the possibility of deferring matters of governance not requiring discussion to a point later in the business.

The President expressed appreciation of the presentation, prior to the meeting, on the proposed Shinfield and Arborfield Development as part of Wokingham Borough Council's Local Plan. The presentation, given by Mr N. Frankland, Strategic Estates Manager, was informative and helpful in providing background to a potential development on University land.

23/03 The Minutes (22/65-22/84) of the meeting held on 23 November 2022 were confirmed and signed.

23/04 Matters approved by the President on behalf of the Council since its last meeting (Item 4)

The Council noted that the President had approved, on behalf of the Council and following scrutiny by the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, the Annual Financial Return required by the Office for Students.

Routine matters of governance

23/05 Documents sealed and to be sealed (Item 5.1)

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."

23/06 Disclosure of Interests (Item 5.2)

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

Items for discussion

23/07 Items for future Council meetings (Item 6)

The Council received a paper on items for consideration at future Council meetings.

The University Secretary and Chief Strategy Officer explained that the current paper, having taken account of members' feedback following the discussion at Council's meeting in November, set out a schedule covering key topics identified.

In response to a request for further suggestions, members variously commented that it would be helpful if:

- the papers or presentations on each topic could give a clear sense of its priority for the University
- Council received updates on the progress of projects and initiatives at regular intervals following their approval by Council
- there was provision in Council's agenda for longer-term horizon-scanning (for example, changes in demand for campus-based v online delivery)
- commercialisation (beyond commercialisation of research) could be considered by Council in the near future

- Council received an overview of the full range of the University's ambitions and possible initiatives, the connections between them, and an indication of the magnitude of investment and returns anticipated
- beyond the period covered by the paper, topics for discussion might include: Henley Business School, the film studios, and research
- consideration of topics was tracked so that Council could assure itself that it was fulfilling its responsibilities for oversight of the range of the University's business;
- a deep dive into financial challenges and their mitigation would be a main topic for the next meeting.

The University Secretary and Chief Strategy Officer thanked Council for its suggestions, invited members to provide further comment, and undertook to circulate an updated paper in due course. He would be particularly interested in comments on topics which might be deprioritised.

23/08 Update on progress of the Strategic Foundations Programme (Item 7)

Following an introduction from the Vice-Chancellor, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) (Professor Fellowes) gave a presentation on the progress of the Strategic Foundations Programme.

The Vice-Chancellor reminded Council that the Strategic Foundations Programme (SFP) had been conceived before the onset of the pandemic with the purpose of delivering the University Strategy, including its commitment to financial sustainability. The SFP had therefore been designed to address the University's underlying financial position prior to the pandemic; this position had now been exacerbated by the financial impacts of the pandemic and the current high levels of inflation. He advised that a paper outlining options for achieving savings to address the most recent circumstances would be considered by Council in March.

The Vice-Chancellor indicated that other comparable universities were struggling with similar challenges and some had embarked on large-scale redundancy programmes. Unlike some other institutions, however, Reading had positive options available and a possible pathway to growth: the University had a strong endowment and a significant investment portfolio; undergraduate Home applications remained buoyant; and the SFP allowed the University to realise further value from its assets and activities.

Professor Fellowes explained that the University Strategy, which focussed on excellence, sustainability, community and an engaged university, was designed to ensure that the University was able to prosper, notwithstanding the range of economic and geopolitical threats which University and the sector faced. The University needed to operate on solid foundations, making best use of its resources to help colleagues and students to succeed. Professor Fellowes outlined the SFP's objectives, the projects to achieve those objectives, and the projects' progress.

The objectives were:

Sustainability

- Making better use of our financial and physical resources, contributing to the financial savings needed to deliver the University's financial KPI, '10% cashflow from operating activities as a percentage of income' by 2026.
- Supporting increased institutional resilience in an increasingly volatile environment through enhanced strategic planning processes that align to the UoR strategy.

Excellence

- Enhancing teaching and research excellence, through improvements to the design and delivery of our teaching portfolio as well as through improved mechanisms to set effective expectations and manage workloads for academic staff.

Community

- Ensuring that academic workloads were manageable and expectations clear, and reducing complexity in our teaching portfolio and associated processes to benefit both staff and students.
- Increased engagement of colleagues with setting objectives and identifying opportunities for improvement.

Projects often contributed to more than one strategic objective. They were progressing well and achievements to date included:

- a. Lettings had been agreed with external partners in London Road and Whiteknights, with associated moves of University staff to release the required accommodation.
- b. The Smart Working Framework, which supported staff wellbeing and released space, had been developed and implemented, and now sat under the HR remit.
- c. The Strategic Alignment Process, which supported Schools in developing their strategy and securing sustainability, had been piloted in one School and was now operational in another.
- d. The existing Resource Allocation Model had been reviewed and Henley's contribution revised.
- e. The Framework for Individual Expectations had been developed and pilots with two Schools completed.
- f. Under the Portfolio Review:
 - i. A new Semester-based Academic year (AY) had been agreed and planning of implementation was in progress
 - ii. Guidance on the redesign of programmes had been developed and disseminated and redesign was under way
 - iii. Programme Review had been completed - reducing the number of programmes we run by 26% (based on 2018 baseline)
- g. Updated Student number targets agreed and embedded across the institution
- h. Analysis of market demand (DataHE) had been completed, while work on wider programmes and opportunities was continuing
- i. Primary growth areas had been identified as business, psychology, biological sciences, law, computer science
- j. Contract for Online provision had been signed with external partner
- k. Establishment of an India office was currently going through procurement process
- l. Work to ensure that Professional Services were resilient, adaptable and efficient was under way.

In response to questions, Professor Fellowes explained that, although the implementation of some of the Strategic Foundations work had been delayed as a result of the pandemic, substantial financial benefits were already being achieved, including rental income from external partners. The Scrutiny and Finance Committee would receive at its next meeting a detailed breakdown of the SFP's financial benefits and the progress towards their achievement. Professor Fellowes advised that space utilisation across the University was reasonably efficient and compared favourably with others in the sector, although there

remained scope for improvement. There was continuing demand from external partners for space on the University estate.

In response to a question on the capacity of academic staff to engage with SFP work, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) (Professor McCrum) confirmed that staff were working hard to redesign their programmes under Portfolio Review to meet a deadline towards the end of March and it was expected that pressure would reduce after that point. She expressed appreciation of colleagues and their commitment, given the demands of teaching and research and the challenges of supporting students in the aftermath of the pandemic.

In response to a question on joint Honours programmes, Professor McCrum explained that the Portfolio Review was addressing the historic problem that joint programmes tended not to integrate the two subjects, which compromised the coherence of the programme and the student experience. Schools were being asked to ensure coherence across joint programmes and consistency in practices. Joint students would also have the opportunity following Part 1 to transfer to the single Honours programme in either of their subjects.

In response to a question about changes in the international student recruitment market, Professor Fellowes indicated that, due to a range of factors, the Chinese market was not expected to return to pre-pandemic levels and that the opening of the University's India office offered important opportunities. The planning process took account of evidence of changes in international markets, and the University sought to avoid over-dependence on a single market.

23/09 Update from RUSU on progress with meeting their priorities (Item 8.1)

The Council received the RUSU Impact Report 2021-22.

Mr Allen, RUSU President, and Miss Lindsey, RUSU Welfare Officer, paid tribute to last year's RUSU officers and their achievements in challenging circumstances as the University community emerged from the pandemic during the course of the year. They drew particular attention to:

- the advice and support provided to students as they returned to a campus-based experience,
- how they reignited engagement in clubs and societies and fostered a sense of community,
- the introduction of the 360 safety bus, the campaign to combat harassment, and
- the work to promote the student voice.

The Council commended the work of the RUSU officers and their achievements in 2021-22 and its further development by the current RUSU officers.

In response to questions, Mr Allen and Miss Lindsey explained that students were members of RUSU unless they opted out. They indicated that, relative to other students' unions, Reading students' participation in sport was probably below average, in part due to limited facilities, but that RUSU's advisory service was highly rated by students. The University's sports facilities were at capacity and, while the opening of the swimming pool and sports facilities by Reading Borough Council at Palmer Park relieved some of the pressure, further investment in sports by the University would be welcomed.

The Council noted that RUSU officers had a major impact on student experience notwithstanding their limited period in post. Mr Allen confirmed that the RUSU officer team was closely involved in the induction of its successors and shared their experience and advice on how to achieve objectives within the time constraints of the role.

Resolved:

“That the RUSU Impact Report 2021/22, now submitted, be received.”

23/10 Reflection from Professor Kambhampati on opportunities and challenges for Schools (Item 8.2)

Professor Kambhampati offered her reflections on some of the challenges currently faced by Schools.

Professor Kambhampati noted that key elements of the University’s planned solution to its operational deficit had major implications for the workload of academic staff: increasing student numbers, without a corresponding increase in staff, involved more classes, more support, and more marking, and increasing numbers of international students, in particular, placed more demands on staff as international students required greater support as they re-orientated to a different academic culture and different social environment.

Professor Kambhampati noted that, in addition to meeting the increasing demands of teaching, academic staff were required to perform to the highest standards in research and to undertake a substantial and diverse administrative load, including applying for research funding, outreach, supporting careers development of students, and external engagement to maintain and raise the University’s profile. Academic staff strove to improve their School’s and the University’s performance in the National Student Survey, Teaching Excellence Framework, Research Excellence Framework, and league tables. Promotion depended on high levels of performance across these areas; while she expressed appreciation of the clarity of the promotion criteria and the transparency of the process, she noted their high expectations of staff performance.

Professor Kambhampati commended the support provided to Heads of School in understanding the market for Home undergraduate students, but would welcome greater support in understanding shifts in the international market for postgraduate students and the different strategies required to have impact on different markets. There was a need to identify the University’s strategic markets based on high-quality intelligence, to recognise changes at an early stage, and to re-orient resource and support. She noted that application numbers currently looked relatively strong, but, particularly in the postgraduate taught market, extrapolation to estimates of enrolments would be premature.

Professor Kambhampati also referred to some of the opportunities in which the University had been successful. She spoke of the Army Higher Education Programme (AHEP), which the University had been delivering in collaboration with the British Army for a number of years and for which it had recently won a renewal of the contract. AHEP enabled army officers to achieve a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree in Leadership and Strategic Studies alongside, and drawing on, their professional military development.

In response to questions, Professor Kambhampati explained that her School was currently engaged, along with a number of partner universities, in a project sponsored by UKRI to address institutional and individual barriers experienced by Black, Asian and minority ethnic

women at various stages of the postgraduate research lifecycle and in their access and progression in academic careers.

23/11 Reflection from Professor Gibbins on the commercialisation of research (Item 8.3)

Professor Gibbins offered his reflections on the commercialisation of research.

Professor Gibbins explained that, as part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), universities were required to submit case studies demonstrating the impact of their research on society, including its technological, economic, health, cultural and policy impacts. The University had a long and well-founded reputation for its Knowledge Transfer Partnership and engaged with industry through contract research, collaborative research, and Intellectual Property development. However, it was clear from an analysis of the REF case studies of those institutions evaluated as 4* (the highest rating) that business development and the generation of spin-off enterprises were important factors in a university achieving a high impact rating for its research, and that many universities beyond the 'golden triangle' of Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College and beyond the Russell Group were developing spin-off companies which attracted equity investment, including Bath, Swansea and Strathclyde. While engaging in other means of knowledge transfer, Reading had not developed spin-off companies to any significant extent and had not done so recently—its most recent spin-off company had been created in 2010.

Professor Gibbins reported that the University was now building its expertise and capacity to commercialise its research. In 2021, the University had welcomed its first Royal Society Entrepreneur in Residence, who was working across the Agriculture, Food and Health theme to develop capability within the University to identify commercial opportunities in research, to upskill students, academics and professional services in commercialisation, and to create a business development model which would accelerate routes to market. The University was participating in the Innovation to Commercialisation of University Research (ICURE) programme, which supported universities in establishing an infrastructure to support research, and had appointed an Entrepreneur Lead and a Business Relationship Manager.

Professor Gibbins noted that the University's research had considerable potential to be commercialised and that there was much to be done to create the infrastructure to support this ambition.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) (Professor Zaum) expanded on the potential for commercialisation across the University's research activities and spoke of its benefits, including opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In response to questions, Professor Zaum explained that the University was looking at different models for managing commercialisation, taking account of examples at other institutions while recognising differences in scale and focus. Professor Gibbins indicated that, from his observations, a key success factor was for the staff involved to have the capacity and to be flexible with their time. He noted that there would be advantage in starting at a modest scale and learning from experience before engaging in major commercialisation projects.

Items for note

23/12 Report of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee (Item 9)

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee held on 9 January 2023.

Mr Corrigan, as Chair of the Committee, explained that the Group Q1 forecast deficit stood at -£19.4m, and that improvements of £5.7m were needed in order to achieve the agreed budget deficit of -£13.7m. The Committee would review the position in the light of the forthcoming Q2 forecast and would agree at that point measures to be taken to address the shortfall on the budget. In response to questions, the Director of Finance explained that the University was extremely careful to ensure that its covenants were not breached, and that, in the current circumstances, banks were content, as a matter of general practice, to agree variations in respect of pandemic-related factors.

Mr Corrigan reported that the Committee had approved a revised Treasury Policy 2022/23 and would consider whether provisions on debt metrics should be included in future iterations.

Resolved:

“That the Report of the meeting of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee held on 9 January 2023, now submitted, be approved.”

23/13 Report of the Vice-Chancellor (Item 10)

The Council received the Report of the Vice-Chancellor.

The Vice-Chancellor reported that the University had achieved a bronze award in Advance HE’s Race Equality Charter scheme, and noted that Reading was the 38th university to achieve the award, with none yet having achieved a silver award. He thanked Dr Al Laville, Dean of Diversity and Inclusion, who had led the application, and all those who had contributed for their work.

The Council congratulated Professor Paul Glaister on his appointment as CBE for services to education.

In response to a question on the People and Planet Awards, the Vice-Chancellor noted that, having achieved a ranking of fourth, the University had already met its KPI for 2026 (which was to be ranked fifth) and indicated that, in the light of this achievement, there would be merit in setting an alternative KPI which was more broadly based and international in its scope and would offer a challenge better aligned to the University’s objectives. The Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings were global performance tables which assessed universities against the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, and used indicators to provide a balanced comparison across research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching. A proposal on revisions to the KPIs would be brought to Council shortly, given changes in the external environment and the discontinuation of some of the measures currently used as KPIs.

In response to a question from Mr Allen, RUSU President, on the forthcoming industrial action by the University and College Union, the Vice-Chancellor confirmed that the University was working to minimise the impact of the strikes and marking boycott on students’ learning, while respecting the right of employees to take industrial action.

Resolved:

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

23/14 Update on the University's strategic partnership with the Royal Berkshire Hospital (Item 11)

The Council received a report on the activities of the Strategic Partnership between the University of Reading and the Royal Berkshire Foundation Trust (RBFT) during the first year of its operation.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor advised that a paper on strategic decisions in relation to a medical school would be considered by Council at its meeting in March 2023.

Resolved:

“That the Update on the University's Strategic Partnership with the Royal Berkshire Hospital, now submitted, be received.”

23/15 The University's submission to the Teaching Excellence Framework (item 12)

The Committee received a final draft of the University's submission to the Teaching Excellence Framework exercise.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) (Professor McCrum) reported that the final version of the University's TEF Submission had now been submitted, together with the Student Submission which had been prepared by RUSU. A small number of minor amendments had been made to the final draft of the University's submission subsequent to its circulation to Council.

Professor McCrum explained that the TEF was mandatory for most higher education providers in England and was designed to measure excellence in the Student Experience and Student Outcomes on the basis of metric data and a qualitative commentary by the institution. The OfS would notify providers of their rating and feedback in July/August 2023 and invite any factual corrections; outcomes would be published in September 2023. The University would shortly conduct a 'lessons learned' exercise in relation to the preparation of the submission.

In response to questions, Professor McCrum outlined the OfS's process for assessing submissions. The OfS had recruited a panel of assessors representing the range of provision across the sector; a provider's submission would be read by three or four assessors and their judgement would then be moderated. Whereas in the TEF exercise in 2017 the rating was based, in the first instance, on a metrics-generated hypothesis, which exceptionally was varied in the light of a provider's submission, in TEF 2023 the rating was informed by metrics, but was based primarily on the provider's submission. The datasets used in TEF mostly related to the four most recent years for which data were available, but the cohorts referenced in the data varied depending on the measure: for example, continuation (a measure of students continuing from the first year of study to the next) related to entrants in 2016/17-2019/20, whereas progression (a measure of graduates who have progressed to graduate-level employment or further study) related to graduates in 2017/18-2019/20 (who generally would have been entrants in 2014/15-2016/17). The measures were therefore significantly time-lagged and ratings would necessarily reflect provision and issues from several years ago.

Mr Allen, RUSU President, and Professor McCrum thanked Mr Oscar Minto, RUSU Education Officer, who had been responsible for preparing the Student Submission.

Resolved:

“That the University’s submission to the Teaching Excellence Framework, now submitted, be received.”

23/16 Dates of meetings of the Council in the Session 2022/23

Further meetings of the Council in the Session 2022/23 had been scheduled for:

Monday 13 March 2023 at 2.15 pm

Monday 3 July 2023 at 2.15 pm.

The University Secretary and Chief Strategy Officer noted that the acoustics in the Meadow Suite were, on occasion, difficult, and undertook to seek a solution for the next occasion when Council was held there.