Governors Awayday 3 February 2016

At their 2016 Strategic Horizons Awayday Governors considered the following papers, most of which were also discussed by SPC at their awayday:

- The Master’s paper on the strategic direction of Birkbeck
- Financial Position and Projections
- Recruitment and Academic Portfolio
- Key Performance Indicators
- 200th Anniversary, Long Term Development and Fundraising

They also received a note on the key outcomes of the SPC awayday, and a verbal update on the HE Green Paper, Spending Review and the political environment.

Governors noted Birkbeck’s status as a unique institution offering a distinctive proposition, and the need for the College to promote itself in a way that would allow it to recruit students who were suited to the Birkbeck way of studying.

Their discussion focused in particular on the potential for increasing recruitment by exploring new areas and modes of provision, led by the College’s commitment to flexibility and meeting the needs of working students; and the importance of understanding the needs and desires of the student body, particularly around pastoral care, and taking action to improve retention and the student experience. Governors emphasised the importance of establishing priorities and timeframes for this recruitment and retention work, and taking action as soon as possible, noting that while the College was in a robust reserve position due to the work undertaken over the last few years, the College could not afford to be complacent.

The key points of the discussion are outlined below:

Strategic Direction of Birkbeck

- The short term aim with the estate is to improve current facilities, with the medium to long term aim being to develop Birkbeck’s estate with the aim of as many students as possible being taught in wholly or partly owned Birkbeck facilities, close to the main campus, by the 200th anniversary. Governors discussed the need for staff to understand the reasons why the estates strategy was essential, and that decisions also had to be made in the context of the constraints the College was operating under, such as availability of space and planning use limitations. Staff governors noted
the frequency of student complaints about external space and their support for the key aims of the estates strategy.

- Governors encouraged consideration of how Birkbeck Stratford should fit into the estates strategy, and heard that the new PVM Access and Community Engagement would be looking at activity in Stratford as part of her portfolio.

Financial Position and Projections

- Governors noted the need to continue to aim to generate surpluses in order to support our estates strategy and boost student satisfaction. This would be done through cutting costs and increasing recruitment. Governors sounded a note of caution, suggesting that consideration should be given to contingency plans in case it was not possible to recruit in line with the scenarios currently outlined.

Recruitment and Academic Portfolio

- The College was facing a challenging recruitment environment after the removal of the Student Number Control which had increased competition both from Russell Group universities and other University of London Colleges, and from institutions targeting ‘Widening Participation’ type students. The introduction of Postgraduate loans was likely to increase competition in this market as well. Birkbeck was taking action to optimise its recruitment processes and invest in additional marketing resource, but it was also necessary to consider expanding the existing academic portfolio in order to ensure the College’s medium-term financial sustainability.

- Governors heard that there were two directions that could be explored when considering academic portfolio development: broadening our teaching in traditional academic areas adjacent to those we teach in now, such as sociology and anthropology; and introducing more work-related provision such as the proposed developments in the areas of health and engineering, which is likely to involve taking on new staff with expertise who can think creatively in this area. Birkbeck’s focus when considering new provision and modes of delivery should be on flexibility in line with our unique mission.

- Governors asked for more information on the context in which decisions about academic development were being made, i.e. what other institutions are doing. Governors also noted the importance of beginning to take action on the identified issues around portfolio development and recruitment as soon as possible, and asked to receive regular reports on progress in these areas, alongside a plan that identified clear areas of priority and key milestones.
While acknowledging the need to increase recruitment, Governors highlighted the importance of also retaining existing students, particularly in light of the changing student body. Staff Governors suggested that consideration should be given to reviewing our approach to pedagogy and course delivery, particularly at Level 4, as well as broader student support provision, to ensure students are adequately supported at degree level. Birkbeck students are more likely to face particular challenges, such as combining work with study, and provision should be delivered with this in mind. Routes from pre-degree provision should also be made clearer and more support put into place to ensure that these students progress onto degrees and are retained.

Work is ongoing to improve the data we are able to collect from students on the reasons why they withdraw, as well as to analyse the available information on the kinds of students that might be more likely to withdraw. Governors also asked for more information on the student satisfaction data and the hypotheses that are being drawn from it. They reinforced the importance of understanding what students want, including those who are not “traditional Birkbeck students” such as younger students and international students.

Governors drew attention to the importance of pastoral care, particularly with younger students, and adequate training for staff in delivering it. They heard that a project was underway to improve the system of personal tutors in the College. The management team would give further consideration to how to ensure pastoral care and the student experience was fully embedded in the strategic management of the College. Governors asked for consideration to be given to the inclusion of a lay governor representative on the Student Engagement and Widening Participation Committee.

To keep Governors informed about work in these key strategic areas, the Master proposed that the Pro Vice Masters should be invited to attend ordinary meetings of the Governors.

Key Performance Indicators

Governors asked to continue to receive annual reports on progress against the KPIs that are being used to strategically manage the College, and suggested some potential changes to the presentation of the KPIs, and other areas in which they would like to see indicators, for example post-Birkbeck employment rates. Staff KPIs were currently under development.

Policies and the Political Environment

Governors discussed the HE policy environment, and heard that the College continued to lobby on policy developments that were likely to impact Birkbeck
students. There had been a recent debate on adult education and lifelong learning in the House of Lords in which the College President, Baroness Bakewell, as well as several other peers with connections to the College, spoke in support of Birkbeck and part time and mature learners.

- Governors discussed issues around international students, including the potential impact on EU recruitment if fees were to rise for these students as a result of the UK leaving the EU, and the reputational and perception issues around current UK immigration policies on international students that are likely to have an impact on international recruitment across the sector.
- The Committee also discussed proposed changes which would disproportionately impact international staff, such as the increase in the salary thresholds for visas, and the introduction of an annual fee to employers for each Tier 2 visa that was issued.

200th Anniversary, Long Term Development and Fundraising

- Governors considered the fundraising campaign for the 200th anniversary, noting that the milestone represented a significant opportunity which the College must take advantage of, and that a campaign of this magnitude would require extra resource to be successful. It was confirmed that the College’s usual policies on oversight of donations would apply to gifts given as part of this campaign. The college was currently considering fundraising consultants, and another report would be brought to Governors when these had been appointed and a strategy had been developed.