Minutes of the ACADEMIC BOARD EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

17 June 2014

Present
Professor Phillip Dewe (in the chair), Professor Stephen Frosh, Professor Li Wei, Professor Phillip Powell, Professor Nicholas Keep, Mr Robert Atkinson, Professor Miriam Zukas, Dr Jasbir Gill, Professor Hilary Fraser, Ms Tricia King, Mr Bob Westaway, Ms Megan Reeves, Mr Charles Michael Berry, Dr Kate Mackenzie-Davey, Ms Naina Patel, Mr Nick Stewart, Professor Susan Jackson, Mr Keith Harrison.

Attending
Ms Katharine Bock, Ms Rachael Boyle.

Apologies
Professor Patricia Tuitt, Professor Matthew Innes, Professor David Latchman, Professor John Kelly, Dr Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, Dr Alex Colas, Professor Costas Douzinas, Professor Julian Swann, Professor Matthew Weait.

14 MINUTES AND REPORT TO THE ACADEMIC BOARD

Noted:
14.1 The minutes of the meeting of 20 February 2014, which had been confirmed by members present at Academic Board on 12 March 2014. (X 2013 12).

14.2 Academic Board’s Report to the Governors following its meeting on 12 March 2014. (X 2013 13).

15 MATTERS ARISING

Fit to Sit policy
Confirmed:
15.1 The Student Representative requested clarification on the makeup of the Fit to Sit panels. It was confirmed that the Chair should be a member of the Academic Board who was also an academic member of staff.

16 MASTER’S REPORT

16.1 In the absence of the Master, the customary Master’s Report was not delivered at this meeting.
17 RESEARCH COMMITTEE

Considered:

Noted:
17.2 As part of its rolling review of Research Centres, Research Committee received reports from three research centres and found them all to be active and fulfilling the College’s research centre criteria.

17.3 The Committee noted the active programme in the Centre for Multilingual and Multicultural Research and discussed the potential for more links with Psychological Sciences at Birkbeck.

17.4 The Centre for Planetary Studies promoted collaboration between Birkbeck staff in the Earth Sciences department and staff from several departments at University College London (UCL). Its presence was essential in enabling academic staff to attract research grants and likely to enhance the joint REF return between Birkbeck and UCL in this subject area.

17.5 Research Committee noted the broad range of work carried out via the Birkbeck Institute in diverse areas of humanities, social and moving image research and discussed the possibility of its work extending to involve other Schools conducting social research.

17.6 Members noted the planned merger of the School of Arts’ Modern Languages departments and the movement of staff from Modern Languages to Film Studies. The Committee reaffirmed the importance of the role of the Research Centre in promoting and maintaining cross-departmental research during and after these changes.

17.7 Also in the School of Arts, Research Committee noted recent appointments in the department of English leading to the start of a promising new Open Access initiative.

17.8 HEFCE’s policy on Open Access would be in force from April 2016, with institutions being asked to adopt it as soon as possible. This policy applied to research outputs, not impact cases. To be classified in the next REF, outputs must be published in an institutional or subject repository within three months of acceptance for publication. It was noted that the new policy would place significant responsibility on staff taking action when their publications were accepted.

17.9 The Committee noted that this would necessitate a culture shift with the onus of taking action on individual academic colleagues. Academic Board had previously agreed a mandate that all research accepted for publication was to be submitted to the Birkbeck institutional repository BIROn. More work would be needed to ensure that this practice was being followed across the board. Clear policy was needed, detailing the responsibilities of the Library staff and the responsibilities of members of academic staff.
17.10 There was also a need to widen knowledge about BIROn, to make it as easy as possible to access and to promote the culture of researchers depositing their work. Guidelines on the status, format and appearance of documents and the process of uploading to the repository would be produced.

17.11 ABExCo noted that other universities had enacted policies in which staff were expected to place their research in the institution repository in order to be considered for promotion. It was also suggested that links to BIROn should be placed on the front page of the Birkbeck website and that the feasibility of direct links between the repository and the lists of publications on individual staff web pages be explored.

Research Students
Noted:
17.12 Negotiations were ongoing with the CHASE consortium led by Sussex University, which had secured an AHRC Doctoral Training Centre (DTC) in the last round and was collaborating with compatible institutions outside the DTC. If agreed, this would have financial implications because the College would be expected to contribute funded studentships in order to benefit from the collaborative research culture and preserve links with AHRC leading up to future DTC rounds.

17.13 A strategic review of administrative support for PhD students was underway, aiming to improve arrangements for financial management of research studentships, the admissions and registrations processes and the collation and presentation of research data. The research grants and contracts office functions would extend to cover research student grant management.

17.14 Members discussed the need to tighten the management of PhD students’ registration and completion. It was determined that the matter would be referred back to the Research Students Sub Committee, with departmental feedback and the views and recommendations of students being taken into account.

Research Strategy
Considered:

17.16 The draft Research Strategy 2014-19 was positively received by Research Committee. While the previous strategy had been an operationally focussed document, the new strategy, developed through consultation with various stakeholders and committees, incorporated a description of research values and principles as well as a section on implementation.

17.17 The decision had been taken not to define any overarching research themes. Consultation had established a consensus that at Birkbeck the primary driver for research was the contribution of individuals. The strength of the College was to enable academics to pursue research activities in their areas of interest, rather than in prescribed top-down themes.

17.18 No performance targets had yet been defined. It was noted that such targets would be a challenge to define given the current changing external factors. Members
observed that setting financially based objectives to secure more research income would be unlikely to have an impact on the quality of research activities. Preparation for the 2020 REF could be a more meaningful objective. Consideration and definition of appropriate research performance targets would continue.

17.19 The draft Research Strategy was also being considered within Schools. The plan was for a final version to be presented for formal approval at the November meeting of the Academic Board.

17.20 The next step would be to develop an action plan. Implementation of the strategy would require input from various College departments which would be invited to contribute ideas for how actions should be implemented, rather than following a prescriptive top-down approach.

17.21 The publication of the Research Strategy 2014-19 would provide an opportunity to promote the College’s research on the website.

18 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE

Received:
18.1 The report of the Student Engagement and Widening Participation Committee. (X 2013 16).

Noted:
18.2 A consultation process involving focus groups of students and recent alumni, as well as student facing staff, was taking place to support development of a new marketing narrative for the College. This was in response to the challenge of increasingly competitive student recruitment and greater diversity and complexity in the student body following the growth of the three year intensive undergraduate degrees and the one year intensive postgraduate degrees.

18.3 A new Birkbeck Briefing for external and internal stakeholders was also being drafted. The briefing set out to celebrate the successes of the College and the hard work of its staff as well as raising important concerns about the recent downturn in part time student numbers and the lack of policy response. It was particularly aimed at politicians and policy makers as well as alumni, fellows and Governors.

18.4 The SEWP Committee was developing a new Widening Access and Retention Strategy. The work was progressing in five main themes: using data better, defining the Birkbeck-specific meaning of the term student engagement, developing wide ranging systemised support to benefit large numbers of students, targeting students who needed more intensive support and exploring the support needs of new types of students.

18.5 The aim of the data work was to enhance and augment the currently available management information on retention and completion, to help make retention work more effective. Systematic analysis of underlying data would look for patterns and trends and help to identify the types of student or situation for which intervention
or extra support might improve engagement and retention. There was also potential to map this data with the National Student Survey.

18.6 The definition of student engagement would be developed in line with Birkbeck’s world of broad access, flexible provision and study patterns and non-traditional students. The first step would be to define the process of agreeing the definition.

18.7 SEWPC and the Student Union were both reflecting on the social and personal impact of successful engagement. There was consensus that an engaged student was confident and connected; able to navigate College services and meet their financial commitments and felt prepared for their assessments. SEWPC supported the measurement of these “softer” aspects of engagement as well as attendance and the use of the library, Virtual Learning Environment and other facilities.

18.8 Systemised support should increase the College’s effectiveness at identifying what students needed most at specific stages in their journey. Attention would need to be paid to the balance between widely accessible generic support and effective specialist support and individual advice.

18.9 SEWPC would continue its discussions on these matters as the Widening Access and Retention Strategy developed further.

18.10 SEWPC reported its discussion of the Catalyst programme, aiming to enhance intensive flexible provision, including the three year undergraduate and one year postgraduate degrees, as well as the support and opportunities available to students. The overarching aim was to enable the College to modernise while remaining true to its mission. Activities included further development of lecture recording and online elements to support blended programmes combining online and face to face learning, projects to improve student engagement and retention and opportunities for students to link work and study.

18.11 SEWPC heard that the government was changing the Disabled Student Allowance and shifting responsibility for bearing the cost of adjustments for disabled students from the government to the individual institutions. It noted that the lecture recording element of the Catalyst programme could help to promote access to lecture content for students who found it difficult to always attend the College in person.

19 TEACHING AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE

Received:

Noted:
19.2 TQEC discussed the projects in the Student Achievement and Success strand of the Catalyst programme: Academic English, study skills and learning development; opportunities for students to continue to engage outside scheduled term time classes and activities; and supporting progression between undergraduate levels.
Following the adoption of a new approach to annual School portfolio review, combining assessment of business viability with academic quality review, TQEC would develop a process for considering the reviews from a College level academic quality perspective. Discussions were underway with Assistant Deans with a view to putting a new system in place for 2014-15.

**Endorsed for approval by Academic Board**

TQEC / College Programmes Committee’s recommendations on new programmes, amended programmes and programme withdrawals, as listed in Appendix A of TQEC’s Report.

**Endorsed for approval by Academic Board**

Amendments to the Common Award Scheme (CAS) regulations:

19.51 Introduction of a requirement to cap reassessments at the pass mark, with a provision for programmes to request exemption on the basis of professional practice expectations. The Committee approved this amendment on the proviso that it would apply only to the next cohort of students and not to continuing students.

19.52 In circumstances where an undergraduate student had taken more than 240 credits at level 5 and 6, provision for the sub-board of examiners to recommend that the lowest scoring credits would not be considered in the overall degree classification.

**Noted:**

ABExCo also considered but did not approve a proposal to increase the upper limit of credits accepted as Accredited Prior Learning (APL) to 240 credits. It was confirmed that the proposal was consistent with University of London regulations and that the relevant programme director’s academic discretion would be exercised for each individual APL case.

19.7 The issue of variability in the exercise of academic discretion was discussed. The proposed amendment would be difficult to describe clearly to prospective students and the potential for inconsistent admissions rulings presented a risk to the College.

19.8 Members also discussed potential implications for the development of joint provision partnerships with overseas institutions. ABExCo noted that acceptance of an individual student’s prior learning as credit on admission to a degree, governed by APL policy, was different from the development of an agreement with an academic partner, governed by a partnership agreement and programme specifications and regulations.

**Action (Academic Registrar):**

19.9 Gather information on the APL policies of other comparable institutions and report back to TQEC and ABExCo.

**Endorsed for approval by Academic Board via Chair’s Action**

19.10 Amendments on the regulations for the admittance of students under 18 years old.
Noted:

19.11 The proposal allowed for students who would reach the age of 18 in their first year of study to have a designated member of staff (one in each department) as a personal tutor. The designated member of staff would undergo the necessary security clearance. For younger students an individual risk assessment, involving the parents, would be carried out in each case. It would also be necessary to take into account controls on access to the internet on college premises and for teachers of classes with students aged under 18 to be made aware, in relation to any group work and age restrictions on reading material and media clips used in teaching and learning materials.

Secretary’s note:
Some further work on the detail of the under 18 policy is currently taking place in consultation with School based staff. Academic Board is asked to delegate authority to its Chair to approve the policy once this work is complete.

20 COLLEGE BOARD OF EXAMINERS

Received:
20.1 The annual report of the College Board of Examiners on the 2012-13 round of assessment (X 2013 18).

Noted:
20.2 The Committee noted the value of training and development for staff acting as secretaries to Boards and sub Boards. Consideration was being given to consolidating some of the sub-boards and committees, allowing for a centralised secretariat for the smaller boards and an overall greater consistency and efficiency.

21 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT VISA REQUIREMENTS

Noted:
21.1 There had been a recent change in Home Office regulations on tier 4 visas. The Home Office had introduced an additional requirement for sponsor universities “to contribute to supporting immigration control”. In particular, the Home Office was asking for steps to be taken to ensure that every student at the College had permission to be in the UK and had stated that failure to do this may lead to the revocation of sponsor status.

21.2 The Committee debated the implications of this new regulation for Birkbeck. It was reported that other universities had routine face to face admissions procedures including document checks, but noted that unlike Birkbeck other universities did not run large scale open enrolment modular courses. The online enrolment procedures for these courses would need to be reviewed and amended. While individual members expressed personal disquiet at the Home Office’s new expectations, it was agreed that the College must comply with its requirements, not only to continue to admit international students but also to employ high calibre staff from outside the UK.

Action (Academic Registrar):
21.3 Obtained clarification from the College’s named contact at the Home Office on the exact implications of the new regulation and the precise procedures the College would need to adapt to ensure compliance.

22 DATES OF MEETINGS 2014-15

Noted:

22.1 Dates of ABExCo meetings in 2014-15:

Wednesday 5 November 2014 at 2pm
Wednesday 25 February 2014 at 2pm
Wednesday 27 May 2014 at 2pm