BIRKBECK COLLEGE
University of London

ACADEMIC BOARD EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

25 February 2015

Present
Professor David Latchman (Chair), Professor Matthew Innes, Professor Sue Jackson,
Professor Stephen Frosh, Professor Philip Powell, Professor Carol Watts, Professor Nicolas
Keep, Professor Miriam Zukas, Dr Stewart Motha, Dr Joanne Leal, Dr Kate Mackenzie-
Davey, Mr Charles-Michael Berry, Ms Tricia King, Professor Costas Douzinas

In Attendance
Mrs Katharine Bock, Ms Megan Reeves, Mr Keith Harrison, Mr Fraser Keir, Ms Rachael
Boyle, Dr Martin Shipway, Dr Anita Walsh, Dr Dionyssis Dimitrakopoulos, Dr Jim Pitts, Mr
Robert Atkinson, Dr Jasbir Gill.

Apologies for absence
Professor Julian Swann, Professor Patricia Tuit, Professor Hilary Fraser

11 MINUTES AND REPORT TO THE ACADEMIC BOARD
Received and Noted
11.1 The minutes of the Academic Board Executive Committee 5
November 2014 (X 2014 07)
11.2 The report of the Academic Board meeting of the 13
November 2014 (X 2014 08)

12 MATTERS ARISING
Considered
12.1 Members considered issues arising from the use of smart technology (other than
phones) in examinations. Members heard that the use of smart spectacles might pose
future problems to the integrity of the examination process. It was determined that
the registry would look into ensuring that Birkbeck’s regulations did take into
account such advances in wearable technology.

13 CHAIR’S REPORT
Noted
13.1 Members were informed that the presentation of the Master’s Strategy Paper,
previously occurring in the October of a given academic year, would in future take
place in the Spring term.

13.2 The Master’s Strategy Paper had been presented to senior management at the
Strategic Planning Committee away-day in January, and to the College Governors
at their away-day in February.

13.3 The Estates Strategy Overview had been presented to both the Estates Committee
and the College Governors away-day. The Chair reported that the Estates Strategy
would be integral to the overall strategy of Birkbeck moving forwards; with the general strategy informing the estates strategy which would in turn inform the fundraising strategy.

13.4 The Chair would be visiting with each of the individual Schools as well as the Professional Services and the student body, with a view to discussing both the general strategy paper and the estates strategy.

13.5 It was confirmed that the Masters Strategy paper and the Estates Strategy Overview would be included as items on the agenda at the upcoming meeting of the Academic Board.

**14 RESEARCH COMMITTEE**

*Received*

14.1 The report of the Research Committee meeting of the 4 February 2015 (X 2014 09)

*Noted*

14.2 The latest meeting of the Research Committee had been chaired by the Vice Master, standing in for the Pro-Vice-Master for Research. It had been agreed that the reviews of the Research Centres scheduled to take place would be postponed until the May meeting of the Research Committee, so that the PVM for Research could lead discussion.

14.3 The REF outcome will be used to determine future HEFCE QR funding. To provide an early indicator, the Planning Office had produced two detailed predictions, one based on the assumption that assessment methodology for each Unit of Assessment (UoA) remained the same and one based on increased weighting for the highest rated 4* research. Following the Research Committee’s meeting, HEFCE had confirmed that the weighting formula for funding 4* and 3* research would change from 3:1 to 4:1.

14.4 Members heard that HEFCE would reserve the right to make more significant changes in the future. The College would be made aware of the actual funding figures for the HEFCE grants for 2015-16 in late March 2015.

14.5 It was reported that future changes to the REF would include the disaggregation of the assessment components; outputs, impact and environment. Funding would be allocated according to the prescribed percentage weighting of each area, (65%, 20% and 15% respectively).

14.7 In REF 2014 7 of Birkbeck’s submitted 14 UoAs were in the top quartile for 4* outputs, 5 were in the top quartile for environment and 2 were in the top quartile for impact.

14.8 The method for the funding of research students will remain unchanged. HEFCE will also be providing a one off transitional allocation of £24M, not included in the current research total which will remain unchanged. This additional payment is provided as a supplement to mitigate real terms decline in the rate of funding for
research supervision in recent years. This supplement would go to those institutions with large numbers of PhD students.

14.9 The College needs to reach early decisions on the UoAs that will be put forward to the next research evaluation exercise, so that planning and preparation can start as soon as possible. Preliminary decisions on which UoAs the college would be putting forward had been made, with the Master’s approval, and the Executive Deans had been informed. These decisions will be revisited if there are any radical changes in the REF process.

14.10 Members noted their thanks to the Pro-Vice-Master for Research and the REF Working Party for steering Birkbeck through a successful submission for the REF 2014.

14.11 Members considered how Birkbeck could build on the REF 2014 performance in future REF rounds and how the Research Strategy 2014-19 might tie in with the upcoming 200th anniversary of the College.

14.12 A more coordinated approach to staffing across the College in future would be needed, in terms of both research and teaching.

15 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & WIDENING PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE
Noted
15.1 The Spring term meeting of the Student Engagement and Widening Participation Committee had been postponed. The Committee will report to ABExCo in the next term.

16 TEACHING AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE
Received
16.1 The Report of the Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee (X 2014 10)

Considered
16.2 Members considered the recommendation of the Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee for the approval and withdrawal of the following programmes:

Programmes Approved
- MSc Global Criminology
- MSc Business Psychology

Programmes Withdrawn
- Cert HE Creative Writing
- BSc Statistics and Accounting / Statistics and Management
- BSc Environmental Science
- BSc & FD Understanding London
- PG Dip Garden History
- PG Cert International Field Leadership
- MSc Management with European Policy
- MSc Voluntary and Community Sector Studies
- PG Dip Voluntary and Community Sector Studies
16.3 The MA, PG Dip and PG Cert Medical Humanities were listed as withdrawn in TQEC’s report, but had in fact been suspended for 2014-15 and would be recruiting for 2015-16.

16.4 The Planning team had asked all of the departments to flag up programmes in which no further students were expected to progress. This accounted for the relatively high number of proposed programme withdrawals.

**Endorsed**

16.5 ABExCo endorsed the proposed new programmes and programme withdrawals, subject to the amendments outlined in 16.3

**Higher Education Review**

16.6 QAA had been due to undertake a review of the College in 2016-17. However, QAA’s contract with HEFCE for carrying out reviews would end in 2015-16. HEFCE planned to renew its HE review contract from 2016-17 onwards and it was not known what organisation would be doing the reviews. 2016-17 was therefore likely to be a year of pilot reviews, possibly with a new organisation. Birkbeck’s review could be part of the pilot, or it could be postponed until the following year. It was unclear whether the College would have a choice and the final process would not be confirmed until the September HEFCE Board.

16.7 The college has established a task force which includes the PVM for Learning and Teaching and the Academic Registrar in order to plan for the possible circumstances of the 2016-17 review. It was agreed that work would continue in a number of areas including; continuing to map the QAA quality code expectations to what the College is doing, beginning the process of self-evaluation to determine our strengths and weaknesses and the production of a project initiation document which would outline the overall planning process for the 2016-17 review.

16.8 It was noted that efforts were being made to engage with those other institutions that were scheduled for review in 2015-16 and 2016-17, through Academic Registrars and QA practitioner networks.

16.20 It was reported that Birkbeck had met all of the recommendations arising from the previous Higher Education review, although the College was not as strong in the area of student representation as it would like to be.

**17 COLLEGE BOARD OF EXAMINERS**

**Received**

17.1 The annual report of the College Boards of Examiners on the 2013-14 round of assessment (X 2014 11)

**Considered**

17.2 Members considered the proposed actions as recommended by the College Board of Examiners:
- Continue to recommend that all Schools continue to consider the organisation of their postgraduate sub-boards to ensure greater (a) consistency in the application of College rules and (b) efficiencies and economies of scale, in particular sub-boards that have responsibility for only a handful of students.
- Consider the definition of preponderance in the Guidance on the Use of Discretion at the annual meeting of the L&T working group including chair of College Board scheduled for March.
- Remind sub-board chairs, secretaries and external examiners of the guidance and areas highlighted as issues:
  - Re-emphasise to sub-boards that the practice of application of borderline discretion should be conducted in line with the College Regulations and Guidelines. In particular to ensure that; exit velocity and changing of individual marks are not utilised, a consistent approach to preponderance is utilised, and students with marks more than 2% outside of the borderline are not considered for discretion except in substantially exceptional cases.
  - Re-emphasise to PG sub-boards that in order to obtain a distinction at Masters level, a distinction must normally also be attained in the dissertation.
- Ensure PSA reports of assessment profiles provided to sub-boards are adjusted to ensure that reported borderline cases include only those that meet these criteria.
- Amend College-level documents (policy and/or guidance) that may require amendment so as to better reflect CAS regulations.
- The College Policy on Operation of Boards and Sub-Boards of Examiners be updated to include a procedure for sub-boards to formally appeal College Board decisions.

17.3 Members noted that the recommendation to ‘ensure greater efficiencies and economies of scale, in particular sub-boards that have responsibility for only a handful of students’ was very helpful. College Board Chairs confirmed that by “a handful” they meant between five and seven students.

17.4 There were a number of instances at the UG level where students who were not within 2% of the borderline classification were considered and recommended by sub-boards for awarding of the higher classification. In these cases the College Board did not approve these recommendations as no evidence had been presented.

17.5 These decisions of the College Board were subject to an appeal based on procedural grounds, which confirmed the decision of the College Board. The Appeal panel recommended that a further formal appeal process be agreed, to enable sub-boards to appeal College Board decisions.

17.6 This case involved the classification several LLB candidates who had fallen outside of the 2% borderline required to be considered for the awarding of a higher degree classification. In order for the appeal to move forward, supporting evidence had been requested from relevant staff and students in the School of Law. It was heard that the students in question had returned their evidence but that evidence from staff
was not yet forthcoming. The Chair asked the staff concerned to send to him all the evidence supporting the classification recommendation, so the appeal might move forward.

17.7 Members discussed the CAS regulations 47.1 which governs the 2% borderline for considering raised classifications and the use of academic discretion. It was noted that regulations around this calculation would be reviewed for 2015-16.

17.8 It was noted that every higher education institution has slightly different calculations, regulations and guidelines. If a student is found to be in a discretionary position it would be the job of the examiners, including the external examiners, to build and present a case supporting their position. Students becoming disadvantaged due to being caught in the middle of an ideological dispute should be avoided at all costs.

17.9 Members agreed some refinements to the wording in the College Boards of Examiners report around the requirement to provide evidence to support classification decisions and appeals. These have been made in the version of Report submitted to Academic Board.

17.10 It was noted that guidelines around discretion and CAS regulations are presented to ABExCo and Academic Board by way of the Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee; giving ample opportunity for discussion and amendments. Since the disbandment of the CAS Working Party an annual meeting of the Learning and Teaching Working Group with the College Boards of Examiners in which a range of issues, largely relating to CAS are discussed and considered.

17.11 Members also sought clarification of the rules for a distinction at Masters level to be awarded, as defined in the CAS regulations. It was confirmed that two criteria are normally necessary, namely an overall average in the distinction range coupled with a distinction mark for the dissertation. It was confirmed that this regulation applied only to those Masters courses which included a dissertation module. It was agreed that the working would be amended to ‘where applicable’ rather than ‘normally.’

18 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING
Noted
18.1 Wednesday 27 May 2015, at 2pm