BIRKBECK COLLEGE
University of London

ACADEMIC BOARD

3 March 2015

Present

Professor David Latchman, Professor Matthew Innes, Professor Sue Jackson, Ms Tricia King, Professor Philip Dewe, Mr Peter Williams, Mr Robert Atkinson, Mrs Chiara Barontini, Professor Miriam Zukas, Professor Catharine Edwards, Dr Peter Wood, Dr Fiona Candlin, Dr Eddy Davelaar, Dr Matthijs Van Den Bos, Dr Joel Mckim, Dr Tim Markham, Dr Julian Sims, Professor Ron Smith,

In attendance

Mrs Katharine Bock, Ms Roisin Lynch, Mr Frasier Keir

15 MINUTES
Received and confirmed
15.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Academic Board 13 November 2014 (AB 2014 11)

16 REPORT TO THE GOVERNORS
Noted
16.1 The Report made to the Governors following the meeting of the Academic Board 13 November 2014 (AB 2014 12)

17 MASTER’S REPORT
Noted
17.1 Members heard that from Autumn 2015 there would be changes to the members of staff holding Pro-Vice-Master portfolios. Specifically, Professor Stephen Frosh, the current PVM for Research would take over the International portfolio, while Professor Julian Swann, the current PVM for International, would take over the Research portfolio.

17.2 For future PVM vacancies a nomination process would be implemented whereby individuals might nominate themselves or others to be considered for the vacant portfolio. There would follow a screening and interview process, as is currently in place for the position of Vice Master. This would result in a fairer and more transparent appointment process. It is the Chair’s intention that a talent pool of academics willing to take on administrative roles such as PVMs, ADs or general committee work be developed and supported via career development schemes provided by Human Resources.

18 COLLEGE STRATEGY
18.1 Members received the following strategy documents:
   - The Master’s Strategy Paper (AB 2014 13)
   - The Estates Strategy Overview (AB 2014 14)

18.2 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.

18.3 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.

18.4 The Master 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.

18.5 It was noted that however the College moves forward strategically it will do so with the founding vision of George Birkbeck firmly in mind.

19  ACADEMIC BOARD EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES

Received
19.1 The minutes of the Academic Board Executive Committee 25 February 2015 (AB 2015 15)

Amended
19.2 Members of ABExCo present agreed to the amendment of minute 17.7. The amended minute would read:

   “Members discussed the CAS regulation setting out the classification formula and the use of academic discretion. It was noted that the regulation would be reviewed for 2015/16.”

Confirmed
19.3 Members of ABExCo present confirmed the minutes of the meeting of the Academic Board Executive Committee 25 February 2015 subject to the above amendment.

Noted
19.4 The Academic Registrar would track the CAS regulation review 2015/16 and update the Board as necessary.

20  RESEARCH COMMITTEE

Received
20.1 The report of the Research Committee (AB 2014 16)

Noted
20.2 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
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.

20.3 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.

20.4 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. It was noted that Birkbeck had substantially improved in the intensity weighted tables and even when grade inflation was taken into account the overall performance of Birkbeck in the context of changes within the institution during the REF period was very positive.

21 TEACHING AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE

Received

21.1 The report of the Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee (AB 2014 17) Noted

21.2 QAA had been due to undertake a review of the College in 2016-17. However, QAA’s contract with HEFCE for carrying out reviews of academic standards and quality 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, and it was likely that the College would be required to take part. Accordingly learning and teaching continues to remain high on the College’s agenda.

21.3 Efforts to increase the student response rate for the National Students Survey are underway; Birkbeck would need a response rate over 50% in order to make the results valid, currently the College’s rate is at 30%. In comparison to last year at this point the College had reached 19%, against a sector average of 29%, the College is currently maintaining a 12% response rate.

21.4 With approximately two and a half weeks left until the deadline the Academic Registrar is working with Assistant Deans to implement improvements to communications in order to boost the NSS response rates. Staff are being asked to encourage students to fill out the survey which can be completed in five minutes on smart phones or similarly enabled devices.

21.5 It was noted that Birkbeck Governors maintain an interest in the NSS results and had expressed concern over the fact that despite scoring very highly in overall satisfaction (question 22), scores for questions 1-21 are somewhat lower. If the College was to be put into the league tables at this moment with the current responses it would be ranked 99th out of 120 institutions.
21.6 Members recognised that issues needed to be addressed concerning the methods by which the College engages students and encourages them to complete the survey. It was agreed that efforts in this area would take priority over the next few weeks. It was also noted that as well as aspects of College management and infrastructure there would be areas of improvement in relation to the work of individuals, for example, the rate at which feedback and work is returned to students.

21.7 Academic Board approved TQEC recommendations for the following new and withdrawn programmes:

**New Programmes**
- MSc Global Criminology
- MSc Business Psychology

**Withdrawn Programmes**
- 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
- PG Cert Voluntary and Community Sector Studies

21.8 Members offered their congratulations to Dr Tim Markham on his appointment as Deputy Pro-Vice-Master for Learning and Teaching.

22 **COLLEGE BOARD OF EXAMINERS**

Received

22.1 The annual report of the College Board of Examiners 2013-14 *(AB 2014 18)*

Noted

22.2 Members endorsed 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 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.

22.3 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.

22.4 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.

22.5 This case involved the classification of an LLB Law degree which 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 noted that the Vice Master had been asked to Chair a panel which will look specifically at the issues and circumstances surrounding these particular students.

22.6 It was noted that the Academic Registrar had been working to ensure that these regulations would be as robust as possible in the future. The College is likely to be taking part in an academic standards and quality review in 2016-17 for which Birkbeck’s standards must be, and be seen to be, high.

22.7 The Student Representative requested statistics on the outcomes of marking. It was agreed that the PVM for Learning and Teaching would follow-up with the Student Representative on these matters outside of the meeting.

23 VISITING PROFESSOR APPOINTMENTS
Received and approved

23.1 Recent visiting Professor appointments (AB 2014 19)

24 CHAIR’S ACTIONS
Received and Approved

24.1 A report on the action taken by the Chair on behalf of the Board since the last meeting (AB 2014 20)
25 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**
Noted

25.1 The date of the next meeting of the Academic Board: 
Wednesday 17 June 2015, at 2pm