BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee

19 February 2014

Present
David Latchman (Chair), Philip Dewe, Stephen Frosh, Keith Harrison, Nick Head, Sue Jackson, Tricia King, David McGhie, Naina Patel, Li Wei, Bob Westaway, Hilary Fraser, Nick Keep, Philip Powell, Megan Reeves, Patricia Tuitt, Miram Zukas

In attendance
Katharine Bock, Roisin Lynch

Apologies
Costas Douzinas, Matthew Innes, Matthew Weait

47 MINUTES
Approved
47.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 21 January 2014

48 ACTIONS
Noted
48.1 An update on progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2013 28)

49 MASTER’S REPORT
Noted
49.1 The College had received a draft award letter confirming approval of its bid for Catalyst funding for a project to develop and enhance flexible provision. HEFCE had asked Birkbeck for input to identifying success criteria on which the College could report to HEFCE.

49.2 Birkbeck had received a response to its appeal against the fine for exceeding the Student Number Control (SNC) for 2013-14. The fine had been waived for those students who had transferred to full time from part time courses, although it had been upheld for the rest of the over-recruited students. The fine would be £1.1M.

49.3 The College would ask for its SNC to be increased for 2014-15. This request would take the form of an appeal against the automatic allocation of student numbers that HEFCE had issued, which had included a reduction based on over-recruitment in 2013-14. Birkbeck would ask for the SNC to be increased in line with the Catalyst
bid already submitted to HEFCE, which was predicated on growth of three year degrees to a 1,000 annual intake.

49.4 It was noted that, although over-recruitment in 2014-15 could not result in further reductions of numbers for 2015-16 and beyond, as the SNC would no longer apply from 2015, it was not yet known what penalty would be applied if the SNC was exceeded in 2014-15. The College would have to monitor its recruitment carefully in case the severity of the penalty was increased.

49.5 Professor Madeleine Atkins, the Chief Executive of HEFCE, would be attending and speaking at the Birkbeck Foundation Dinner.

49.6 It was noted that Tricia King’s Pro Vice Master portfolio title had changed from Student Experience to Strategic Engagement and Recruitment. Governors had approved the Master's proposal to extend the appointment of Professor Costas Douzinas as PVM International Links to the end of December 2014, after which the portfolio would be taken on by Professor Julian Swann.

50 MID YEAR INCOME DISTRIBUTION MODEL 2013-14

Received

50.1 A report on the Income Distribution Model budget 2013-14, taking into account the outcome of the mid-year budget review and confirmation of HEFCE’s fine for over-recruitment (SP 2013 29)

Noted

50.2 The moderated forecast surplus was £2.19M, an improvement of 2.2M since the predictive forecast.

50.3 The main positive changes were due to higher than forecast tuition fees; increased forecast of income from Room Bookings, professional services, and research grants and contracts; reduced forecast of Schools’ pay spending; and the release of contingencies related to student recruitment.

50.4 The main negative changes were due to adjustments for students whose withdrawal was recorded after the 2012-13 year end; confirmation of the fine for over-recruitment; and £0.5M set aside to start a College Strategic Development Fund intended to promote new strategic developments.

50.5 It was noted that the predicted year-end position in relation to tuition fees was based on withdrawal rates experienced the previous year. The withdrawal pattern in 2013-14 was, so far, similar to the previous year, and withdrawals would continue to be monitored very regularly to ensure the contingency was sufficient.
50.6 The Committee heard that a new Finance Director had been appointed and would take up the post in May 2014. Keith Willett was currently Chief Accountant at UEL.

51 AWAYDAY 2014

Received

51.1 A note on initiatives and actions agreed at the February 2014 Awayday (SP 2013 30)

Noted at the awayday

51.2 Strategic Planning Committee received information on student recruitment, student success measures, the size and shape of Birkbeck and comparable research institutions, and five year income and student number scenarios. Members discussed potential strategic directions and options for growth for Birkbeck, and heard a presentation from Mary Curnock Cook, the Chief Executive of UCAS.

51.3 SPC also received a presentation from the Strategic Futures Group that had been set up by the Master to increase participation in strategic thinking about the future of the College by colleagues other than senior management. It was agreed that members of SPC would meet with the SFG to discuss specific areas of their proposal where there was particular synergy with existing work going on in College, especially around Be Birkbeck and public facing activity and curriculum innovation.

51.4 Discussions focused on the next stages of the College’s strategic direction: further development and enhancement of three-year and intensive degrees, including through UCAS; and more work to address and analyse student achievement and success, both linked to the Catalyst developments; as well as further definition of a strategy for growth taking in financial, staffing and estate matters and the balance between teaching and research.

51.5 These discussions would now feed into the Governors’ away morning which would be held on 10 March, at which members of the Strategic Futures Group would also present.

Students and recruitment

51.6 Members noted their concerns about a potential crisis in postgraduate recruitment, and heard that External Relations were working on ways to quickly take the Birkbeck offer into new markets. Progress on this work would be reported back to SPC.

51.7 The importance of ensuring that the new Anniversary Studentships were widely published and presented externally was noted.
51.8 SPC agreed that, in addition to all four year programmes being offered through UCAS where possible, all Masters programmes should also be offered in one year unless there was a specific reason why they should not be. Other options for flexible teaching patterns, such as those presented by the Strategic Futures Group, should continue to be explored.

51.9 Student attainment

It was noted that the Head of Planning and Business Systems would work with other colleagues on the actions on student attainment that had come out of the awayday.

51.10 Consideration of the cultural change around teaching and working with students that was needed to attract and retain the increasingly diverse Birkbeck student body at both undergraduate and postgraduate level would be built into the projects that would be undertaken as part of the Catalyst programme.

52 PORTFOLIO REVIEW

Endorsed

52.1 The School Portfolio Review reports for 2013-14 (SP 2013 31, SP 2013 31A-F)

Noted

52.2 The Dean of the School of Law would circulate a summary report, in addition to the full report already presented, to be approved by Chair’s Action

52.3 Members noted that the new format for portfolio review had been helpful in clarifying the processes and issues involved. It was felt that this year’s approach which included assessment of clusters of cognate programmes using a standard template and data, and the combined evaluation of business viability with evaluation of academic quality, had resulted in a more useful process.

52.4 Where portfolio review recommendations had potential staffing implications, meetings would be held with the trade unions to discuss the issues as appropriate.

53 CATALYST PROJECT

Noted

53.1 There were five strands to the bid, which incorporated and built on some of the projects previously overseen separately by SPC, including the work on online provision and employability:

- Portfolio innovation and flexibility
- Linking work and study
- Student recruitment and progression
- Student achievement and success
- Research, interpretation and dissemination
It was noted that not all of the College’s strategic work had been incorporated into the Catalyst programme. Important work continued to develop outside of the programme.

A project manager had been appointed to coordinate the programme, and work had begun on some of the strands. There would be a formal governance structure with a programme board and termly meetings with the Master. Decisions about the priorities of the programme and the allocations of Catalyst funds would be brought back to SPC as needed. Other funding opportunities could be explored as appropriate.

Members noted that once the final award had been confirmed it would be important to integrate publicity about the Catalyst programme with the College’s general external promotion.

BE BIRKBECK/GUARDIAN PARTNERSHIP

A draft Heads of Terms agreement had been received from the Guardian and was being reviewed by the College’s lawyers. The current plan was for a soft launch in September 2014, with a major launch in January 2015. The new Guardian building which would ultimately be the centre of the scheme would open in autumn 2015.

Five by Fifteen, the consultants who had designed the indicative programme, had been appointed to develop headline events for the soft launch. Some colleagues would be asked to be involved with these events as a model of how the full scheme would work across the institution.

The School of Oriental and African Studies, the University of the Arts and the School of Life were also involved. It was intended that the partners in the scheme would all have areas of core competence on which they would lead. Birkbeck’s internal launch was likely to be done in partnership with SOAS which would help to convey the wide scope and impact that was planned for the scheme.

Members noted that it would be useful for Birkbeck to hear feedback from another involved institution about their agreement with the Guardian to compare it with Birkbeck’s agreement.

The Executive Dean of the School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy would be meeting with the Strategic Futures Group to discuss the synergies between their ideas and the existing Guardian scheme.
55 **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS**

Received

55.1 A report on FOI requests received and responded to in 2012-13 *(SP 2013 33)*

Noted

55.2 The annual rate of requests had risen from 20 in 2007-8 to over 100 in 2012-13. This was in line with the pattern experienced in general by universities. In 2012-13 Birkbeck received 107 requests and applied an exemption justification to refuse a request in two instances. There were two internal appeals, one of which was upheld, and no referrals or appeals to the Information Commissioner’s Office.

55.3 Members noted the College’s exemplary record of providing information promptly.

56 **STUDY ASSISTANCE SCHEME**

Noted

56.1 The College’s Study Assistance Scheme for 2014-15 would launch shortly with the same division of funding as had operated in 2013-14: the College would pay 50%, the department would normally contribute 45%, and the member of staff would contribute 5% as evidence of commitment to study.

56.2 Members heard that the College had been able to support every application that had been made last year and the numbers of staff making use of the scheme had continued to increase.

56.3 SPC would consider the details of the scheme for 2015-16 at a later meeting.

57 **NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY**

Noted

57.1 The launch of a “Survey Season” for the College was about to be announced. This would allow us to prepare for the next round of the National Student Survey (NSS) but would also increase understanding of the needs and concerns of the new and different types of students the College was recruiting.

57.2 Going forward all undergraduate and postgraduate students would be surveyed by the College on a yearly basis. Members emphasised the need for the academic community to understand the importance of these and encourage their students to return them. 2014 NSS returns were lower than at the same point last year. SPC members were asked to ensure that their colleagues encouraged their students to complete their NSS questionnaires. A significant amount of work had also been undertaken to increase the internal publicity around the NSS.

57.3 It was noted that it was extremely important that the feedback given by students in the first and second year surveys was considered and acted upon, or there was a risk
that they would become disillusioned and this would have a negative impact on the results of the NSS. A concern that was regularly raised was the late organisation of exams. It was agreed that this should be investigated further.