BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the meeting of the GOVERNORS

24th September 2012

Present
Mr Harvey McGrath (Chair), Mr Richard Abbott, Mr Robert Alison, Mr John Biggs, Ms Julia Collins, Professor Philip Dewe, Mr Hugh Ferrand, Ms Annabel Jones, Professor David Latchman, Mrs Joy Manners, Mr Eamonn Moyles, Mr Stuart Popham, Mr Paul Shelton, Professor Julian Swann, Dr Ruth Thompson, Mr Peter Zinkin

In attendance
Mrs Katharine Bock (Head of Governance and Corporate Support), Mr Keith Harrison (College Secretary and Clerk to the Governors), Ms Roisin Lynch (Corporate Support Officer), Mr David McGhie (Director of Planning and Estates), Mr Peter Westley (Director of Finance)

Apologies for absence
Dr Alex Colas, Dr Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, Professor John Kelly, Ms Liz Meek, Mr Pierre Smith Khanna

1 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS
Noted
1.1 Governors were asked to disclose in advance any actual or potential conflicts of interest in relation to the matters under consideration. None were disclosed.

2 THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION OF BIRKBECK
Considered
2.1 The Master’s annual strategy paper, setting out recent achievements and the key issues facing the College (G 2012 01)

Noted
2.2 The College had a highly successful year in 2011-12, both academically and financially. Despite many difficulties outside its control following the introduction of the new system of part-time student loans, Birkbeck was in a good position to ensure sustainability in 2012-13 and future years.

2.3 The Master noted key successes:
• Acquisition of degree awarding powers. The College intended to continue to award University of London degrees, but having its own degree awarding powers was a significant national recognition of status of the College.
• Ranked 149th in the 2011-12 THE World University rankings.
• Numerous awards and fellowships to staff for research excellence
- A joint ESRC Doctoral Research Centre, in collaboration with the IoE, LSHTM, and SOAS.
- PhD studentships from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and the Medical Research Council, in collaboration with UCL, King’s College, LSHTM and the RVC.
- Success in the initial application to the Arts and Humanities Research Council in collaboration with LSE, Queen Mary, Warwick, the IoE and SOAS.

Research

2.4 The College was preparing for the 2014 Research Excellence framework (REF). There had been a detailed dry run for REF 2014, and all subject areas within the College planning to submit had assessed the publication output of all members of staff who could potentially be submitted. The College would make its submission at the end of 2014 and the outcome would be known at the end of 2015.

2.5 The REF results were likely to impact the ability of the College to apply for research funding in the future. For example, a recent grant to support open access publications had focused on the thirty universities with the largest numbers of research grants. There was also a risk that some departments would be unable to compete for Research Council studentships if they did not have a sufficient proportion of high rated submissions, which would have an impact on reputation. The College needed to take a more selective approach in deciding which staff to submit compared with previous research assessments. Greater selectivity would allow the College to get a higher ranking.

2.6 Governors asked about the risk of losing academics to other institutions during the run-up to the REF. They heard that most other institutions were taking the same approach as Birkbeck and were likely to have similar thresholds for inclusion. Many academics chose to work at Birkbeck because of its unique mission and teaching schedule. Inclusion or otherwise in the REF would not be linked to academic promotion criteria. There was a staff mentoring system, to help academics to improve their chances of higher ratings and to support staff not submitted in this round, to help them get into a position to submit in the next.

2.7 The REF outcome would have an impact on HEFCE QR funding, which at £10M had become a significant part of the College’s budget and should be increased or at least maintained. The amount of QR funding available and the metrics used to distribute it would not be announced by HEFCE until after the REF process was complete.

Estates

2.8 Continued improvement of the Estate was necessary, but difficult in an era of reduced Government capital funding. The College’s recent sound financial performance had allowed for some investment in the estate, including teaching and research facilities. The strategy was to use the recent surpluses as nest eggs for the future development of the Estate. It would not be appropriate to commit to any expenditure with large recurrent costs.
2.9 External funding was also important. The refurbished School of Arts entrance had been funded through philanthropic donations and Higher Education Innovation Fund resource. The Fundraising Team was developing proposals to expand Psychological Sciences’ BabyLab research facility to include a ToddlerLab.

2.10 The ToddlerLab - and the feasibility of constructing a large lecture hall identified as a strategic aim last year - were part of a Master Planning exercise being undertaken by external consultants to investigate possibilities for the development of the Bloomsbury site. The report would be circulated in the autumn term. Several potential sites in the Torrington Square area had been identified. Successful development would depend on partnerships with the University and other institutions in the area, and on funds being secured.

2.11 Birkbeck was working with SOAS to redevelop the North Block of Senate House. SOAS would lease the building and Birkbeck would hire the space for evening use. Teaching facilities would have electronic signs switching between SOAS and Birkbeck branding as required. This development was a model for future expansion of teaching rooms: the College would take advantage of its unique evening teaching model by forging partnerships with institutions teaching in the day, getting involved in the design of the space rather than simply renting rooms.

2.12 With insufficient space to teach all students on premises owned by the College, student feedback on teaching space was mixed. Birkbeck had nevertheless performed very well in the National Student Survey, coming joint first in London both for overall satisfaction and for teaching. This was a testament to the quality of teaching students received.

The Challenges of 2012-13

2.13 The College had achieved financial recovery following the ELQ crisis and restructuring and had achieved its objective to post a significant surplus in 2011-12. This had been achieved thanks to record student recruitment and careful ongoing monitoring of recurrent budgets. It was now looking forward to the challenge of the new fee and funding system.

2.14 Student recruitment targets for 2012-13 had been set on the basis of a 35% reduction in new undergraduate numbers, in response to increased fees. The College was monitoring recruitment and updating income projections. The initial budget for 2012-13 projected a small surplus.

2.15 Birkbeck had worked closely with the Government and external agencies to try to ensure the best possible deal for part time students. This included successful lobbying for an amendment that allowed part time students to repay their loans after the end of their four-year course rather than during the final year.

2.16 The new system had been implemented with little time for preparation and the College had faced several problems. There had been inaccurate information from the Student Loans Company (SLC) on the availability of part time student loans. The part time loan
application was paper-based and did not open until August, whereas full time students were able to apply online several months earlier. Birkbeck had worked closely with the SLC to address these issues, which had diminished.

2.17 The lack of national level information on the availability of loans for part time students had a significant impact on recruitment. The Government was concerned about the downturn in mature student applications, making it more likely that there would be better information to support 2013-14 recruitment. The College was discussing with the Department of Business Innovation and Skills a campaign aimed at full and part time mature students. Governors asked how permanent the downturn in mature students was likely to be. They heard that it was too early to tell, but appeared to be a sector-wide problem.

2.18 The introduction of the Key Information Set (KIS) was another potential risk to recruitment. The KIS data structure assumed all courses were full time. Birkbeck information presented in this way did not give students an accurate picture of the programme structure or fees. The new three year courses were not permitted to display student satisfaction scores for their four year equivalents, even though both had the same course material and teaching staff. The College had been discussing these concerns – and the possibility of improvements for 2013-14, with HEFCE.

2.19 Governors asked how the College managed to simultaneously have low fees and high contact hours, and heard that this was thanks to the strong culture of teaching within Birkbeck, with many of the most research active academics making teaching a priority.

2.20 To maximise recruitment for 2012-13 and to bridge the gap caused by late opening of applications for part time student loans, the College had launched the ‘Our Promise to You’ campaign to indicate to students that if they were eligible for and applied for a student loan, the College would not pursue them for fees while the loan was being processed.

2.21 Despite a strong recruitment campaign, undergraduate applications for 2012-13 had remained at about 35% down on last year’s applications throughout the admissions cycle. It was likely that recruitment in 2011-12 had been boosted by entrants wanting to be in the old fee system, who might otherwise have deliberated longer over applying for a course.

2.22 Although applications were down, indications were that the fees were not deterring the students with the lowest incomes, as approximately 40% of applicants qualified for student financial support. The financial thresholds for support were the same in the old and new regimes, although the new regime support package was stronger. While it put pressure on the student support budget, the increase in lower income students was good news as it indicated that the Birkbeck mission was being fulfilled. Continued fundraising for student support would be critical.

2.23 Governors asked if the drop in undergraduate recruitment would affect teaching numbers. It was too early to make any judgement on this although the annual portfolio review carried out by the Schools would as usual assess the viability of courses and student and
teaching numbers. In anticipation of the 2012-13 challenge, Schools had held back from appointing to a number of positions until the final recruitment numbers were available. It would not be sensible to make hasty decisions based on the first year of the new system but it would be important to assess the position over the next two years and for departments to be able to respond strategically to changes. The College needed to respond to student demand but also maintain its interdisciplinary nature and excellence in research and teaching.

2.24 The Estates strategy would need to accommodate uncertainty and fluctuation in student numbers. Even though numbers were down for 2012-13, the College would continue to pursue its strategy of expansion and there were larger cohorts from previous years still attending. The requirements for research space and a large lecture theatre were clear. Fluctuating numbers would be managed in the short term through hire of high quality external teaching space to supplement College space.

2.25 Governors asked how well the College was meeting its student retention objectives. It was reported that retention had increased following work on targeting and supporting students in their first year, when research showed they were most likely to leave.

2.26 The Governors heard about the developing student support services for the University Square Stratford building. There would be Stratford-based posts to provide information advice and guidance, replicating the successful service on the Bloomsbury campus. The group was currently considering a business plan for operations at Stratford.

2.27 The 2012-13 Stratford cohort was likely to be very similar to last year’s in size. The work being done to publicise Birkbeck in Stratford had also resulted in increased numbers of students from the surrounding boroughs applying to the Bloomsbury campus.

Flexible teaching

2.28 There were several initiatives to make courses more flexible to meet the needs of students. Some 20 three-year evening degrees were offered through UCAS in 2012-13, with good take-up and plans to offer more three year courses in 2013-14.

2.29 There had been some complications with HEFCE over how to classify these degrees. It was first suggested that they should be returned as part time with an FTE of 1, then as ‘full time other’, a category exempt from the full time Student Number Control (SNC). When this category was abolished, HEFCE raised the College’s SNC limit to 428, matching the 2012-13 recruitment target for three year degrees. This was an indication of support for the College at a time of strict number control. For the first time, the College had to operate offer limits during the Clearing process, to avoid under-recruiting or significantly over-recruiting. Student numbers were expected to be slightly over the SNC, demonstrating strong demand for these courses. Further discussions with HEFCE on raising Birkbeck’s SNC were planned. This would cover the increase in three-year programme recruitment coupled with the decrease in four-year programme recruitment. Although part time students could now get loans, there was not currently a Government control on part time
student numbers. It was expected that a part time control would be introduced, once HEFCE had worked through the complex policy issues around it.

2.30 Governors asked about academic performance in the three year degrees, which covered the same material as four year degrees but in a shorter time. It was reported that the admission requirements were higher for the three year versions and that there was an option to drop back to a four year course if necessary. Further analysis on performance on three and four programmes would be done. More information was also needed on the nature of UCAS-entry students and how to market courses to them. The Vice Master was chairing a working party to investigate these issues.

2.31 Governors also asked if there would be a point at which departments would need to stop developing UCAS courses, due to SNC restrictions. The current strategy was for colleagues to continue to recruit actively to UCAS courses. The Master would cover this in his annual address to staff.

2.32 Other flexible forms of learning were being planned. 11 programmes had been chosen by Schools to trial the new six year six-year decelerated degree structure. The ultimate aim for flexible learning at the College was that students would be able to choose between three, four and six year routes, and move easily between them if necessary.

2.33 The College was also having discussions with employers about part time employer-sponsored degrees, including for school leavers. A new programme in partnership with the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales had been launched, allowing students to gain an Applied Accounting and Business degree while studying for a Chartered Accountancy qualification and working during the day in an accounting firm. The School of Law was developing programmes that allowed working students to study in ways that suited them, for example intensive courses that concentrated contact time into short periods. Birkbeck’s strategy would respond to the growing demand for continuing professional education.

2.34 The Birkbeck Association was being developed to allow people to maintain an association with the College and its academic work by attending lectures and events without sitting exams. The Association would be launched in 2013 with a series of high profile guest lectures. This scheme was one way of attracting students lost after the ELQ crisis and the increase in fees, although the structure and programme were different from the provision of the former Faculty of Lifelong Learning. There would be a presentation on the scheme at the November Governors’ meeting.

2.35 The College was also reviewing its postgraduate provision to consider how Birkbeck could make the most of its distinctive offer and status as a research intensive university to effectively position itself in the postgraduate market in the future. Studying in the evening and having contact with working Londoners were major selling points for the postgraduate portfolio.
Birkbeck International

2.36 Enrolments from international students had increased by 90% in the three years since the College set up its International Office. The College was pursuing a strategy to maintain and enhance growth in international student numbers. At the same time it was seeking to raise its international profile by negotiating agreements with appropriate universities overseas.

2.37 There was also a more ambitious potential international project, involving working more closely with one university in a target country and providing expertise for the development of a range of Birkbeck-style part time evening programmes. The Minister for Higher Education had expressed enthusiasm about this idea.

2.38 Governors asked about the potential, discussed in previous strategic meetings, of establishing a presence in another UK city. It was reported that, following evaluation of options, the decision had been taken to first focus efforts on building links with FE colleges in London.

2.39 In light of the recent removal of London Metropolitan’s Highly Trusted Sponsor status for international student visas, it was important that all staff were aware of the UK Border Authority’s requirements for international students. The problems at London Met were a risk to international recruitment for all UK universities, especially London based institutions. So far there had been no indication at Birkbeck of a decrease in applications linked to the London Met issue. Some enquiries had been made from London Met students wanting to transfer and these would be considered on an individual basis.

2.40 Members asked if the College was able to secure accommodation for increasing numbers of international students. It was reported that current arrangements were sufficient and working well and that the College would be involved in the University of London’s plans to expand its student accommodation.

The Future

2.41 The introduction of higher fees and new part time student loan system presented a different and challenging situation for Birkbeck. In the short term this had led to falls in recruitment, but work had started to address these issues for the long term, by working closely with the Government and external bodies to make entering Higher Education as easy, accessible and widely communicated for part time students as for full time students and by integrating part time study more fully into the mainstream of higher education.

2.42 This would be underpinned by commitment to continual improvement of systems and processes, to provide excellent and efficient services to students and front line staff, improving the student and staff experience and supporting Birkbeck in staying ahead of the competition.

2.43 Governors asked about competition from other institutions. It was noted that Birkbeck’s closest part time competitors did not have Birkbeck’s research profile, while its peers in
terms of research were unlikely to move into part time study on a large scale. Competition from private providers of professional qualifications was a risk, making it important for Birkbeck’s marketing to emphasise its reputation for academic and research excellence.

2.44 While the current Higher Education environment was extraordinary, the anticipatory steps taken over the last few years had put the College in a reasonably robust financial condition, and had created flexibility and responsiveness in the governance and management structure to allow issues to be identified and addressed as they arose.

2.45 Governors commended College management and staff for continuing, during challenging times, to develop Birkbeck’s provision in order to successfully fulfil its mission to provide education to working Londoners.

Endorsed

2.46 The strategic direction of the College as outlined in the Master’s paper.