BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the meeting of the GOVERNORS

13 October 2010

Present:
Mr Harvey McGrath (Chair),
Mr John Biggs, Mr Richard Clarke,
Professor Philip Dewe, Mr Tom Hoffman, Professor David Latchman,
Mrs. Joy Manners, Mr Eamonn Moyles, Professor Michael Oaksford, Mr John Poggioli, Mr Garth Pollard, Mr Sean Rillo Raczka, Mr Paul Shelton, Professor Julian Swann, Dr Ruth Thompson.

By invitation:
Mr Robert Allison, Mr Bruce Seton,

In attendance:
Mrs. Katharine Bock (Head of Governance), Mr Keith Harrison (Secretary and Clerk to the Governors), Mr David McGhie (Director of Planning), Mr Peter Westley (Director of Finance), Ms Julia Lerch (Corporate Support Intern).

Apologies for absence:
Mr Drummond Leslie, Dr Rebecca Gumbrell McCormick

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. No conflicts of interest 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 2010 01)

Noted

2.2 Governors were invited to consider and discuss the strategic direction of the College.

2.3 2009-10 had been a critical year in which the College moved from successfully setting up a new structure to implementing strategy for cost-effective growth. The progress made had put the College in a position to meet the specific challenges caused by the withdrawal of funding for students studying for equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQ), as well as the general challenges faced by the entire sector due to cuts in public funding.

2.4 The Master noted key successes:
- Shortlisting for “University of the Year” by Times Higher Education (THE)
- Listing in the THE top 200 universities in the world as 152nd in the world and 23rd in the UK
Building on success in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in which the College was ranked in the upper quartile of UK universities with several Departments ranked in the top five UK submissions in their discipline.

Awards for research excellence received by College staff in the current year, including election of Professor Diana Coole and Professor Li Wei to the Academy of Social Sciences and the award of the ESRC Neville Butler Prize (Dr Maya Elsabbagh, Psychological Sciences), Prix Ars Electronica (Professor Simon Shaw-Miller, History of Art and Screen Media), Royal Historical Society Whitfield Prize (Professor Frank Trentmann, History), Royal Society of Chemistry prize and Biochemical Society Astra Zeneca prize (Professor Bonnie Wallace, Biological Sciences).

2.5 Preparations were taking place for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. The subject areas in which the College would submit its research had been agreed. The College was assessing how to present evidence on the impact of research since this would form a part of the evaluation for the first time. There would be a ‘dry run’ assessment exercise across the College in 2010-11.

2.6 A new three year Research Strategy for the College was being finalised, intended to maximise high quality research outputs and enhance both research grant and contract applications and their success rate.

2.7 A major review of the College Research School had led to its relaunch as the Birkbeck Graduate Research School providing enhanced support for research students at Birkbeck.

2.8 The College was subject to and successful in a full institutional audit by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA confirmed confidence the College’s management of the academic standards of awards and the soundness of management of the quality of the learning opportunities provided to our students. This would enable resumption of assessment for degree awarding powers. As indicated previously however, the intention was to continue to award University of London degrees but to obtain degree awarding powers as an insurance against any future breakup of the University. It was confirmed that there would be no difference in cost in awarding College rather than University degrees since the supporting processes were already carried out in the College.

2.9 The QAA highlighted several examples of good practice in the College which related to the restructuring of the College including the ‘integrated advice, support and guidance’ provided by the Student Centre and the mainstreaming of the Faculty of Lifelong Learning into our five new Schools.

2.10 Governors asked about the National Student Survey outcome. It was reported that following a change in HEFCE’s sampling methods to include short course students, Birkbeck’s response rate had fallen below the publication threshold although the responses made had been characteristically positive.

2.11 2009-10 was the first year in which the new School structure, developed following the strategic review, operated. Each School had extensive discussions with the central College on its strategic plan and budget which were discussed and agreed by the newly established Strategic Planning Committee. This was the first round of the annual planning cycle, ensuring that the College’s overall strategy was underpinned and informed by complementary strategies and plans created by Schools.

2.12 The new structure had created an environment where academic success was balanced with financial sustainability. Each School conducted a portfolio review which resulted in 70+ new
courses opening in 2010-11. All existing courses were subjected to analysis of demand, income and cost of provision. Duplications between certificate and degree courses were addressed with voluntary redundancy and agreed changes in hours worked. Voluntary redundancy was resourced by the HEFCE Strategic Development Fund grant.

2.13 College officers had met with HEFCE and received positive feedback on the College’s progress towards meeting the targets agreed during the Strategic Review and SDF bid including increased tuition fee income, reduced reliance on HEFCE grant for income and lower staff costs as a proportion of income.

2.14 **Student recruitment** was a critical objective as the College worked to secure the increased student numbers allocated by HEFCE following the ELQ funding withdrawal. The College achieved record levels of applications and enrolments in 2009-10, from home and international students. Governors asked what the English Language criteria for international students were and heard that the College, in common with most UK HE institutions, required students to pass a standard test.

2.15 The 2010-11 recruitment cycle led to new record levels of applications, facilitated by the new School structure with Assistant Deans and Assistant School Managers playing a key role together with increased support from the central professional teams involved, coming together in a student recruitment monitoring group.

2.16 Initiatives to further increase recruitment were reported including an agreement with Union Learn to promote Birkbeck to trade union members; and the offer of undergraduate degrees in Law, Philosophy and Psychological Sciences via UCAS in a new three-year accelerated part-time format.

2.17 Governors discussed the potential different experiences and expectations of UCAS and accelerated course students at Birkbeck and asked how younger students would interact with the College’s older existing student body. It was reported that many UCAS students were in the age range of Birkbeck’s existing students and that the College was building on existing experience of offering accelerated degree programmes. It would be necessary to evaluate feedback from students on UCAS programmes since they were the first cohort. The UCAS initiative was part of a larger area of consideration of the direction of development of the College’s programme portfolio, which would be taken forward over the year.

2.18 Governors discussed the load of increased student numbers on the College’s infrastructure. There had been limited investment in the estate in the past because of underfunding and funding cuts, but there was a balance to be struck between cost effectiveness and investing income from expanded student numbers into facilities for students in the future. In particular, there was consensus in the College that a large lecture theatre was desirable. The constraints were funding and space, with limited options to extend or create buildings in central London. The College would continue to look for options for creating larger teaching spaces and for using existing facilities in other institutions.

2.19 There had been significant increases in application and enrolments at **Stratford** and a new partnership with the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London in Tottenham in which Birkbeck would offer Introduction to Higher Education courses on their premises with progression routes for students to continue at Birkbeck. This innovative work was contributing both to the work of the College and its profile with Government and HEFCE.
Governors commended the Vice-Master for the good progress at Stratford. As well as the second SDF award secured in 2009 the project had attracted significant donor support and was due to open for the 2013-14 academic session.

Extending Birkbeck’s innovative approach, the College was investigating the potential of working in partnership with other providers in a major English city outside London in order to deliver Birkbeck-type part-time courses in that city. Governors noted that this development could be complemented by harnessing technology to extend the College’s reach outside London and offset the space limitations at Bloomsbury. Full distance learning had been ruled out as this would duplicate the Open University’s offer, but blended and technology enhanced learning was being explored.

There had been considerable estates-related activity including completion of the move of the College administration to Egmont House with the Student Centre and other directly student-facing administrative activities being located in the high profile, front of house space in the main building, and refurbishment and relocation to provide a geographic focus for each School.

Following negotiations involving the Wiener Library and the University of London, a £1.2M 99-year lease of 29 Russell Square was agreed with the Wiener Library. This enabled the Pears Foundation to release £1.5 million funding to establish the Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism which would also be located at Russell Square.

During the year the issue of space in Senate House North Block was also resolved. The University offered a one-off payment of £600,000 to vacate the building and indicated that it would not pursue any claims for cost of renovation work. The College agreed and had moved out of the space.

Governors were pleased to note resolution of both of these long standing issues.

As part of the rationalisation of accommodation, the College was investigating selling its share in 23-29 Emerald Street to the Institute of Education who co-owned the property. This would generate additional capital for other projects (such as the Stratford building). Further reports would be made to Governors via Estates Committee and F&GPC.

Governors noted the need to prioritise estates work and make optimum use of what were likely to be limited resources.

A major change in HE funding was about to take place and the situation had changed even since the Master’s strategy paper was drafted. The Browne Review of student fees and funding had reported the day before the Governors meeting, recommending an increase in annual undergraduate tuition fees to £6K with the assumption that institutions would get mainstream teaching income from fees rather than state funding, except for a small number of subjects likely to be science and technology.

There would be an extended student loan system. The good news for Birkbeck was that the loan system would be open to part time students above a threshold of study intensity. This had been endorsed in Parliament where the Secretary of State had acknowledged the need to repair the damage to Birkbeck and the Open University caused by ELQ. The Browne recommendation was 33% of full time study intensity, although the College would ask if this could be lowered to 25%. This was a successful conclusion to the College’s campaign for fairer funding for part time provision and students.
2.30 The Browne recommendations implied major cuts to HEFCE funding. The changes introduced after ELQ had put Birkbeck ahead in terms of operating more efficiently and being able to deal with these new sector wide cuts. The College was beginning intensive preparations to ensure that it would be optimally placed to deal with these difficulties. 2011-12 was likely to be particularly challenging because the funding cuts could be applied before post-Browne fee income streams were in place.

2.31 Financial scenario models reported last term indicated that the College could withstand significant funding cuts provided that student numbers continued to develop further. This was a reasonable assumption given that the economic difficulties which lead to funding cuts also result in increased demand for Birkbeck’s teaching as individuals seek to enhance their employment opportunities.

2.32 Administrative service departments had been asked to assess how they would manage the level of cuts anticipated. As well as efficiency savings, there were opportunities to develop shared services between the Bloomsbury Colleges and other groups. It was confirmed that these exercises did not involve compulsory redundancy plans but were focused on how to deliver services with reduced resources.

2.33 Schools would also continue the portfolio review with the aim of opening up more opportunities to recruit students and to review provision that was not cost effective. It was confirmed that any course changes would take the need for continuity for existing students into account.

2.34 The initial challenges for the College were to reforecast its finances in the new landscape, which was dependent on the announcement of the government Comprehensive Spending Review and the subsequent application of funding changes by HEFCE to institutions; and to respond to the Browne review and influence its implementation to ensure part time and mature student issues were properly taken into account.

2.35 Careful consideration would need to be given to tuition fee strategy, not only in relation to other HE institutions’ fees and the possible emergence of a quality-price continuum but also in relation to the different characteristics of part time and older students in their appetite for loans and higher fees. Fee strategy should be considered in tandem with marketing strategy. The College should monitor risks of competition from other institutions entering the part time market.

2.36 There were major opportunities for providing more flexible education options for people in work, but also a need to consider those students not in work or not earning high incomes. The College had supported extension of cost of living grants and loans to part time students but the Browne review had decided against this. The system of College financial support for students would be reviewed at the same time as the fee strategy.

Agreed

2.37 Governors endorsed the College’s emerging response to these new developments and noted that discussions would commence via Strategic Planning Committee and be reported to Governors and Governors’ Committees.

2.38 Governors reaffirmed the importance of preserving George Birkbeck’s vision of the College’s unique mission: to spread the benefits of learning and knowledge to all. The College should maintain its core values and ethos and preserve its unique mission while responding to the major changes taking place.