STUDENT EXPERIENCE & WIDENING PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE

Meeting 31 January 2012

Minutes

Present:
Tricia King (Chair), Nigel Buckle, Professor Raymond Caldwell, Angela Dierks, Garmon ap Garth [vice Caroline McDonald], Professor Sue Jackson, Dr Tim Markham, Rob Park, Mark Pimm

Apologies:
Patricia Crampton, Keith Harrison, Dr Jane Nicklin, Annette Mc Cone, Dean Pateman, Philip Payne, Professor Matthew Weait

In attendance:
Trevor Pearce [Secretary]

13 MINUTES
Received:
13.1 The unconfirmed minutes of the meeting of 12 October 2011 (SEWPC 14 - 2011/12).

Agreed
13.2 To confirm the minutes of the meeting of 12 October 2011, with the following amendment, in

“4.2 (i) By the Chair, that the Chair had discussed, with the Master and Pro-Vice Master (Teaching and Learning), during the Summer 2011, the impact of national developments on the student experience at Birkbeck…”

14 MATTERS ARISING
Received:
14.1 The Committee’s report to Academic Board of its meeting of 12 October 2011 (SEWPC 15 – 2011-12)

Noted:
14.2 That Academic Board had received the Committee paper identifying the agenda of the Student Experience & Widening Participation Committee and felt that it identified an appropriate agenda for the Committee to be pursuing.

15 CHAIR’S REPORT AND LOBBYING AND INFLUENCING GOVERNMENT AND HE STAKEHOLDERS
Received:
15.1 An update report on the College’s efforts in relation to lobbying and influencing government operations (SEWPC 16 – 2011/12)

Reported by the Chair:
15.2 (i) That the Government had indicated that it had suspended consideration of its proposed Higher Education Bill; it was now unlikely that the Bill would be put forward during this parliament;
(ii) that it was still likely that many of the stipulations of the Bill would be put forward, as they did not require legislation, including the aspects of the Bill relating to support for part-time students;

(iii) that UCAS had now published statistics on applications for undergraduate programmes. There had been a national drop in applications, but Birkbeck’s applications for full time undergraduate programmes had increased by 157%;

(iv) that performance by other 1994 Group institutions was variable; Goldsmiths’ College and Surrey University had seen significant falls in applications, but others had seen slight increases. The position was similar across Russell Group universities. There were few clear trends, although there had been a downturn in applications to arts and humanities programmes.

(v) that the College continued to work with external organisations such as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Student Loans Company to emphasise the benefits of part-time study to potential students.

Noted:
15.3 (i) That nationally applications had been reduced by 9%; some of this reduction related to the demographic downturn. It was too early to say whether this drop would impact upon overall numbers, and the scale of change in the system meant that it was not possible to forecast with confidence likely enrolment numbers for 2012/13 at this stage;

(ii) that part time undergraduate applications had also declined slightly. However the College financial support web pages relating to part-time study had seen a substantial increase in activity, which could mean that the decline in numbers reflected uncertainty about applying rather than any definite fall in enrolments for 2012/13;

(iii) that there was a significant decline in the number of mature students applying for full time programmes through UCAS;

(iv) that the average age of applicants applying through UCAS to the College was falling; the profile obtained by being part of UCAS had led to substantial increase in applicants of between 18-21 applying for part time undergraduate programmes.

16 RETENTION STRATEGY
Received:
16.1 A report from the Retention Strategy Steering Group (SEWPC 17 – 2011/12)

Reported by Head of MyBirkbeck Services:
16.2 (i) That the four projects of the Strategy had now been completed. A Retention Strategy Steering Group website had been established relating to the outcomes and data of the projects;

(ii) that the Retention Strategy Steering Group had now been established and was currently discussing the next steps for the Strategy. The Group would focus on learning support and student support in the short term;

(iii) that the Retention Strategy Operations Group continued to meet and identify and share best practice. Its current focus was on pre-entry support;

(iv) that a pilot “Stay Motivated” programme had been run focussing on issues identified as significant for students considering withdrawal. The first session run as part of the pilot had
been very popular with all places taken within a day. Analysis of take up would be undertaken to break down numbers by school;

(v) that a retention “Events Calendar” had been produced to enable further co-ordination of events between schools and professional services.

Noted:
16.3 (i) It was not yet planned to incorporate use of the College’s virtual learning environment for pre-entry students;

(ii) that the Operations Group had reviewed some of the retention data, and was hoping to get more complete and robust data for its meeting in February 2012. An initial review suggested that retention rates were broadly similar for 2010/11 as for the previous year, which, given the significant increase in student numbers in 2010/11 would be a successful outcome. The School of Law had been particularly successful in retaining students; their student numbers had increased substantially in 2010/11, but withdrawal rates had fallen for the same year.

17 WIDENING PARTICIPATION
Received:
17.1 An update report on the College’s Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (SEWPC 18 – 2011/12)

Reported by the Joint Acting Head of Outreach and Widening Participation:
17.2 (i) that the Widening Participation Strategic Assessment document had been submitted in December 2011. The government now required a different format for the WPSA, as a result of the new Office for Fair Access requirements; the assessment focussed on a limited number of courses as outlined in the access agreement, with further data to follow in the Summer;

(ii) that the assessment highlighted a small number of the College’s main projects, with provision for more background and explanation than had previously been required; this section of the Assessment would be published on the OFFA website;

(iii) that the report demonstrated the relatively high expenditure made by the College on Widening Participation projects, and so reflected the commitment of the College to widening participation.

Noted:
17.3 That future Assessments would include reference to part-time education.

18 NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY
i. Preparations for the 2011/12 National Student Survey
Received:
18.1 A report on preparations made by the College for the 2011/12 National Student Survey (SEWPC 19 – 2011/12)

Reported by the Chair:
18.2 That the College was making strenuous efforts to ensure that at least 50% of its students completed the survey. The College’s response rate was ahead of where it had been at the same point in the previous year; the College would continue to promote the Survey in order that it would be able to publish the results, which were consistently good for the College.
Noted:

18.3 (i) That the College’s Teaching & Quality Enhancement Committee had discussed whether the College could utilise the NSS for non-finalists; it would be important to ensure strong feedback loops so that participants would consider that participation had had some beneficial effects for them. The College could adapt the survey for non-finalists to feed into its own project, but would need to ensure that students were not “over-surveyed”.

(ii) that it would be helpful to establish a calendar of College surveys, indicating which groups of students were surveyed, for what purpose and when;

(iii) that there had been no detailed analysis of the correlation between NSS performance and application statistics, but the College view was that a strong NSS performance was vital in increasing application numbers.

Agreed:

18.4 To establish a group, consisting of the User Support Manager, the Librarian, the Head of MyBirkbeck Services, the Assistant Academic Registrar (Operations & Projects), External Relations, a School Manager, a representative from the Students’ Union and an appropriate Assistant Dean from each School to review current practice in relation to student surveys, including arrangements to feed back results to students.

ii. Consideration of Issues raised During 2010/11

Received:

18.5 Responses from departments to issues raised during the 2010/11 NSS (SEWPC 20 – 2011/12)

Reported by the Deputy Academic Registrar (Academic Services):

18.6 That the report had been considered by the Teaching & Quality Enhancement Committee that month; it had been noted that the survey was a powerful tool in gauging student views of the College provision, and the College continued to assess how best to analyse the data provided.

19 STUDENT COMPLAINTS & DISCIPLINE

Received:

19.1 The annual reports on student complaints and assessment offences & student discipline (SEWPC 22 – 2011/12; SEWPC 23 – 2011/12)

Reported by the Deputy Academic Registrar (Academic Services):

19.2 That figures on complaints and disciplinary cases remained broadly in line with previous years.

20 BIRKBECK / UEL STUDENT EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE

Received:

20.1 A report from the Birkbeck / UEL Student Experience Committee (SEWPC 24 – 2011/12).

Reported by the Chair:

20.2 (i) That the Birkbeck / UEL Student Experience Committee met regularly, and reported to the joint Birkbeck / UEL management group, along with a “pre-entry group”, Student Centre group, IT Group and Library Group. UEL would now be leading on pre-entry arrangements, while Birkbeck would lead on the development of the Stratford Student Centre;

(ii) that the College had established a Stratford Group to oversee the move into the Stratford campus in 2013.
(iii) that works had commenced on the Stratford site.

21 WIDENING ACCESS & RETENTION
Received:
21.1 The regular report from the Widening Access and Retention Team (SEWPC 25 – 2011/12)

Reported by the Joint Acting Head of Outreach and Widening Participation:
21.2 (i) That the Widening Access and Retention team had continued to work with colleagues in the marketing unit and the Registry to communicate the changes to financial support arrangements of interest to Birkbeck students. The Team was working to emphasise the changes that were of particular note to mature students and to make potential students aware that the tuition fee changes did not impose an up-front cost;

(ii) that the Team continued to offer a monthly event on higher education finance & study;

(iii) that the College was now able to ring fence bursaries to offer to students from specific Further education Colleges;

(iv) that the Team would be running an Adult Learners Week in 2012. This would include the introduction of a “pop-up” university, which included a series of career workshops, and workshops on applying to university. It was hoped that the College would be able to stage an event in a large shopping centre as part of this initiative.

(v) that the College was now reviewing the contract with Careers London; Careers London had indicated that they were happy to offer the College a tailored service, including a drop in service on Wednesday afternoons for one-one and group sessions. Careers London would also be able to help with destination survey responses and would be able to advise departments on what they could do to improve employment rates of their graduates. The Higher Education Academy had noted the College’s strengths in this area and was hoping to engage the College in delivering sessions on pre-entry careers support.

22 DATE OF NEXT MEETING
Noted:
22.1 The next meeting of the Committee would be held on 10 May 2012.

Meeting concluded

Signed ___________________________________________________________________

(Tricia King, Chair, Student Experience & Widening Participation Committee)