BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee

19 October 2015

Present
David Latchman (Chair), Katharine Bock, Jonah Duffin, Hilary Fraser, Stephen Frosh, Keith Harrison, Nick Head, Matthew Innes, Nick Keep, John Kempton, Philip Powell, Megan Reeves, Julian Swann, Keith Willett, Miriam Zukas

In attendance
Rachael Boyle, Chris Murphy, Tim Markham (for Sue Jackson), Carol Watts

Apologies for absence
Sue Jackson, Fraser Keir, Patricia Tuitt

14 MINUTES
Approved
14.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 16 September 2015

14.2 The Terms of Reference of the Committee, amended as requested at the last meeting (SP 2015 06)

15 ACTIONS
Noted
15.1 The following progress on actions agreed at previous meetings:

Competition and Markets Authority Regulations
15.2 The Academic Registrar was in the process of organising a briefing for both academic and non-academic staff on the CMA regulations.

16 MASTER’S REPORT
Noted
16.1 The Master noted that Jonathan Woodhead had been appointed as interim policy advisor. The College would look for opportunities to lobby the government and other politicians on the issues affecting part time students, particularly in support of opportunities to link part time study with government-supported apprenticeships. Members noted that recruitment of Birkbeck’s ‘traditional’ part time students did not seem likely to recover, and the College should look for other ways to offer provision for these students, such as the apprenticeship scheme.
16.2 SPC members had been sent the report of a review of the Economics, Mathematics and Statistics Department in the School of Business, Economic and Informatics, commissioned by the Master and conducted by Dr Ruth Thompson, Deputy Chair of Governors and Professor Miriam Zukas, Executive Dean of the School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy. The review had been prompted by concerns about a disappointing REF outcome, student numbers, and management issues. The report made recommendations to improve leadership, management and communications, address research and student recruitment performance, and improve internal organisation and staff development. It had been circulated to all the staff in the Department, who had been asked to report back to the Master on progress, with an expectation that clear improvements would be in place within a year.

16.3 The Executive Dean of the School of BEI thanked Dr Thompson and Professor Zukas for their efforts in conducting the review and for the final report.

17 POSTGRADUATE REVIEW: FUTURE RESEARCHERS MATTER

17.1 The report of the recent review of postgraduate provision at the College (SP 2015 08)

Noted

17.2 The review had been commissioned by the Master and conducted by Professor Carol Watts, Assistant Dean for postgraduate students in the School of Arts in 2014-15. The Committee thanked Professor Watts for her work on the review.

17.3 The review had concluded that, while Birkbeck had outstanding PGR provision in many areas, there was a need to improve co-ordination and communication, between academic departments and also for support functions including studentship management, management information and skills development. Research students would benefit from being supported as junior researchers rather than as taught students. This was important not only for the College’s REF results and research funding partnerships, but also to ensure the College was reaching its full research potential.

17.4 Members noted the importance of a shared understanding of the value of PhD students to the College’s mission. As the future members of the academic staff community, they needed a suitable environment and resources to support their development. Members noted the need to promote this in parallel with provision for part time PhD students, who were more likely to be pursuing intellectual fulfilment than an academic career but who had an equally important contribution to make.
The Committee considered the best way to take prompt action on the findings of the report and noted the formation of a Research Strategy Group and a Research Support Group to implement the recommendations of the Research Strategy agreed last year.

**Action**

17.6 *(Research Strategy Group and Research Support Group)* Work together to create an implementation plan for the review’s recommendations, in parallel to the implementation of the Research Strategy, and report back to SPC on progress on a termly basis.

Professor Watts thanked all those who had participated in the review.

**18 STUDENT RECRUITMENT**

Received

18.1 A report on the current student recruitment position *(SP 2015 09)*

Noted

18.2 After a strong start in a volatile and competitive environment, application levels at the end of the cycle were reduced compared with previous years. The usual September spike in part time undergraduate and postgraduate applications had not materialised, and international applications had slowed down after an initial positive start.

18.3 Work was ongoing to understand the causes and identify action that could be taken to improve next year’s recruitment. Potential factors which will be analysed include competition from other HEIs, applicant and student demographics, process issues and accuracy of target setting. Members noted the possibility that improved process efficiency had led to applications being processed earlier, leading to the lack of a September spike. More investigation was needed to confirm whether this was the case.

18.4 Members noted concerns about whether the College’s international recruitment cycle opened early enough to meet the needs of international students. Although the College’s obligations as a Tier 4 visa sponsor brought inevitable complications, the processes for international students would be examined to ensure that they helped support international applicants to move from offers to enrolment.

18.5 The Schools, External Relations and the Registry would meet to consider last year’s approach to recruitment and develop plans for the next cycle.

**19 FINANCIAL OUTTURN 2014-15**

Received

19.1 A report on the provision out-turn for 2014-15 *(SP 2015 10)*
19.2 SPC noted the College’s financial performance for 2014-15. There was a draft surplus of £10M, pending completion of the audit, with all Schools returning a break even or surplus position after allocation of overheads. This compared to the summer 2015 revised budget target of £5.5M and indicated a strong financial position for the College compared to the rest of the sector. The positive variance was due to several factors, including higher Other Income than expected, unfilled staff vacancies, underspend against the Teaching and Scholarship staff budget, a lower number of students than expected qualifying for bursaries, and other expenses lower than budget, including a £1.8M School underspend against the non-staff budget.

19.3 The Committee heard that the financial position for 2015-16 was more uncertain. There was a potential significant under-recruitment of students against target in 2015-16, with a corresponding shortfall in income estimated at between £4.5M and £6M, in addition to uncertainties around the impact that the outcome of the comprehensive spending review will have on HE funding. SPC therefore noted the need to address the likely shortfall in tuition fee income in 2015-16, rebalance the budget for the current year, and manage the impact of the fall in recruitment on subsequent years. To contribute to the work on reviewing the budget, members asked to see the income distribution model for 2015-16 broken down to department level.

20 COUNTERTERRORISM AND SECURITY ACT 2015
Noted
20.1 An update on the College’s response to the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015.

20.2 The Act makes it compulsory for specified authorities, including universities, to comply with the Prevent duty, taking measures to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. The Committee noted the actions that the College will need to take, including risk assessment, liaison with the local Prevent co-ordinator, and ensuring that appropriate staff are trained.

20.3 The College Secretary had convened a working group to ensure the necessary actions were taken. The group would welcome comments from SPC members on how best to ensure the duty is understood and communicated widely, and implemented effectively, with appropriate engagement from the diverse College community and in line with Birkbeck’s ethos.

20.4 Members noted that the College had a duty to its students to recognise issues affecting student wellbeing, and enable students to access support. Compliance with the counter-terrorism guidance should be considered as part of a wider agenda
around enhancing the student experience and providing support and safeguarding where appropriate. SPC thanked the College Secretary for ensuring that the duty was being implemented in a way that complemented the College’s ethos.

21 **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AT BIRKBECK**

Received

21.1 A proposal on the development of public engagement activity at Birkbeck and a draft public engagement strategy (**SP 2015 11**)

Noted

21.2 The College has a grant from the Wellcome Trust International Strategic Support Fund, to support the strategic development of scientific research environments. Institutions receiving ISSF funding are expected to have public engagement strategies.

21.3 The Committee noted the potential wider benefit to the College of developing its public engagement activity. However, while SPC supported the principle of an extension of the Public Engagement Co-ordinator role, it agreed that it was not necessary to appoint a Pro Vice Master to establish strategic leadership.

**Agreed**

21.4 That the ISSF working group with the Director of ER should make a proposal for implementation to be sent to the Master for approval via Chair’s Action, with an identified academic as a point of contact, outlining how the Public Engagement Co-ordinator would operate with an expanded role and how this work would relate to the research impact agenda. This role should be time-limited based on the availability of the Wellcome Trust funding.

22 **HIGHER AND DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS AT BIRKBECK**

Received

22.1 A proposal on developing Higher and Degree Apprenticeships at Birkbeck (**SP 2015 12**)

Noted

22.2 The government had recently announced a Higher and Degree Apprenticeships scheme, which combines employment, learning and certifying skills ‘on the job’ with a higher education qualification at level 4 or above. One third of the delivery price for the qualification is paid by the employer and two thirds by the Government. Given the fall in recruitment to Birkbeck’s part-time programmes it was felt that this scheme represented an opportunity for the College to continue to recruit the part-time working Londoners who are a key element of the College’s mission.

22.3 It was felt there was scope for Birkbeck to work productively in this area. There are already several Apprenticeship Standards, which lay out the requirements for the
apprenticeships, in subject areas taught by the College, with more relevant standards under development. Members noted the need to manage any risks associated with the scheme, particularly reputational risks that could arise from the College’s involvement if the scheme was unsuccessful.

**Endorsed**

22.4 The creation of a formal cross-College working group to investigate the opportunities presented by the scheme in more detail and to report back to SPC.

23 **NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY**

Noted

23.1 A working group had met to consider the results of the recent National Student Survey (NSS), and would bring a detailed action plan for the College’s approach to NSS 2016 back to a future meeting of SPC.

24 **EQUALITIES REVIEW**

Noted

24.1 SPC received a progress report on the Equalities Review, the review of the selection procedures for appointment to senior roles, and the new PVM appointment for access and community partnerships. The Equalities Review, which was being led by the Vice Master, aimed to strengthen reporting and accountability lines, to promote equality and diversity and to enable consideration of these matters to be better integrated in the College’s management structure. The review was being overseen by the HR Policy and Strategy Committee. This Committee would consider the review at their next meeting on 21 October, and members of SPC were invited to attend this meeting.

24.2 The Committee noted the appointment process that would be trialled for the recruitment of a Pro Vice Master for Access and Community Engagement. It would involve an all-staff call for expressions of interest, using a generic PVM role description and specific details of the specific portfolio. After shortlisting there would then be a presentation and interview with an internal panel, who would give advice to the Master who would make a formal recommendation on appointment to the Governors. This process would then be reviewed for future appointments.

24.3 In some portfolio areas there might be scope for a Deputy PVM role. There would need to be further discussion on how these roles were filled and rewarded, but this should not delay work on the PVM appointment process. SPC discussed a generic PVM job description and noted that, while the appointments were usually for three year terms initially, the job description should not be prescriptive about this.

*Minute 25 is reserved to the Committee as it is commercially sensitive.*
25 HR, PAYROLL AND FINANCE SYSTEMS

Received

25.1 A note on progress in replacing the HR, Payroll and Finance Systems (SP 2015 13)

Noted

25.2 The procurement process for replacing these systems was underway. It was expected that the Project Board would be in a position to make recommendations on the purchase of new systems by the end of 2015. The Committee noted the risks incurred by the College currently in using systems which were or would shortly become unsupported by their suppliers, and the improvements in key processes and data quality that would be brought about by the right new system(s).

Endorsed

25.3 The approach to the procurement process being taken, which was in compliance with EU rules on public sector procurement, and the proposed process for the confirmation of Governors’ formal agreement to spend capital funds on the selected system(s) and the implementation project.

26 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT VISAS

Received

26.1 An update on the College’s response to Tier 4 student visa policy (SP 2015 14)

Noted

26.2 A deposit scheme for Tier 4 applicants, to ensure applicants are committed to studying at the College, was being implemented to begin in 2016-17. Attendance recording would be facilitated by the launch of the E-registers initiative, using student cards and classroom based scanners to record attendance.

26.3 The Committee noted that the College’s visa refusal rate for the 2015-16 intake has improved compared with the previous year and is well below UKVI’s 10% threshold. All refusals had been for insufficient financial documentation. Given the small number of Tier 4 students sponsored by the College, the refusal rate could rise sharply and compliance would therefore continue to be closely monitored.

26.4 Members heard that the UKVI continue to tighten its requirements and that compliance is essential to maintain the ability to recruit international students. New restrictions include a rule similar to the ELQ funding policy, that students who have already started or completed a degree in the UK should not be sponsored for another at the same level, and classification of failure to properly assess a student’s academic progression as a serious rather than standard breach of sponsorship duties.

26.5 More guidance was expected to be released shortly and the Registry would continue to report regularly to SPC on this area.
FBSC REPORT

Received

27.1 The Report of the Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee (SP 2015 15)

Noted

27.2 FBSC had approved tuition fee tiers for 2016-17 and 2017-18. Fee levels were currently stable, which had allowed the Committee to approve a new approach to fee setting that would allow fees to be advertised earlier, in line with competitor practice.

27.3 FBSC had discussed ways in which the College could provide support for refugees. This work would be taken forward in consultation with local authorities and with an emphasis on access.

DATES OF MEETINGS 2015-16

Noted

28.1 The dates of meetings for the rest of the session:

- 10 December 2015 at 2pm
- 11 February 2016 at 2pm
- 22 March 2016 at 2pm
- 12 May 2016 at 2pm
- 7 July 2016 at 2pm