MINUTES
Approved
30.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 27 October 2014.

31 REPORT
Noted
31.1 The Committee’s Report to the last meeting of Finance and General Purposes Committee (SP 2014 19)

31.2 As outlined in the report, the view of the Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee was that there should be a central point for decisions on fee issues, including fee adjustments, student hardship, difficulties paying fees and debt, in order to avoid operational problems and inequities and to allow debt to be monitored. A process needed to be in place for Schools to refer students centrally if they had
financial problems. It was confirmed that central decisions about specific students should be made in communication with Schools to ensure that any extenuating circumstances were taken into account as appropriate.

31.3 In order to ensure transparency, Schools wishing to offer scholarships to students should develop criteria that could be approved in advance by FBSC.

32 ACTIONS

Received

32.1 An update on the progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2014 20)

Noted

UCAS recruitment

32.2 This data had been circulated.

Certificate to degree progression

32.3 There was a large piece of work to be done on this area, starting with mapping the current offer. Certificate progression should be linked with broader discussions about our longer term aspirations for part time recruitment.

International recruitment

32.4 Undergraduate international recruitment had been referred to the International group for consideration and they would report to the March meeting of SPC.

Student success data

32.5 The data would be recirculated shortly.

Breaks in study

32.6 The Break in Study policy, which currently did not allow students to take more than two years break, would be included on the programme for this year’s review of academic policy.

League tables

32.7 Discussions with the Schools were underway.

32.8 It was noted that Birkbeck’s KIS data related to student contact time did not compare favourably with other institutions, which could be attributable to the methods used by the College to collect and submit the data. The full exercise to collect the data would be carried out again this year.

Actions

32.9 (NH & MZ) Discuss the best way to communicate with the Schools to get an accurate impression of contact time when gathering the KIS data.
Catalyst programme
32.10 The process of evaluating the take-up of lecture capture by students had begun. The data from the use of the software in the first term had been captured and the project group were considering how to evaluate both staff and student use and feedback.

32.11 The group was working with the Registrar and the Deputy Secretary (Governance) on identifying what amendments were needed to established policies to incorporate rights and responsibilities around attendance monitoring.

Erasmus+
32.12 It was confirmed that institutions could decide the criteria by which they selected students, and could therefore if they wished could stipulate that they would only participate in the scheme within bilateral agreements.

Action
32.13 (BW) Meet with the new PVM (International) to hand over the work on the Erasmus+ scheme.

Guardian space project
32.14 Progress was being made in the discussions and it was expected that the interim agreement and heads of term agreement would be ready to be signed in early January. Before it was signed the Director of Planning would prepare a briefing for the Master and the Chair of Governors on the implications of signing.

33 POSTGRADUATE LOANS
Noted
33.1 In his Autumn Statement the Chancellor had announced plans to introduce a student loan system for postgraduate master’s degrees from 2016-17. While the College was still learning the details of the policy, it was expected that the loans would be worth up to £10,000 and available only to students under the age of 30. It was not yet clear whether loans would be available to part time students who were already in the system by 2016.

33.2 There would be a consultation on the proposals before they were introduced. Birkbeck would lobby emphatically against the elements of the proposals were contrary to Birkbeck’s mission and values, for example the age criteria.

33.3 Unlike the impact that the changes to fees in 2012 had on undergraduates, these changes should not detrimentally affect our postgraduate taught students: they would be paying the same fees and be subject to the same conditions as previously,
with the addition that some of them would be eligible for loans. However, there was a possibility that a lack of clarity in communications from the Government might have a negative impact on recruitment from 2016; there was also a risk that students might delay applying for 2015 and wait until they were eligible for loans.

33.4 The first work to be done was to consider the College’s approach to finance for PGT in 2015-16. As an announcement about postgraduate loans had been expected, College management had already raised the issue with the Governors and begun exploring the possibility of repackaging our current monthly payment plan for PGT students as an interest free loan from 2015. This would allow Birkbeck to get ahead of the sector which would be waiting for loans to be introduced in 2016, although it was noted that there were risks with this rebranding approach. The current monthly payment plan worked on a ‘pay as you go’ basis, and if the College began to refer to this as a loan it would be important to ensure that students did not conflate these with government student loans with more lenient regulations around repayments.

33.5 As part of the offer for 2015-16 there would also be a one year match funded Postgraduate Student Support (PSS) bursary scheme from HEFCE aimed at encouraging students who graduated from the post-2012 system with large amounts of student debt to continue to postgraduate taught study.

33.6 It was agreed that the scholarships available for 2015-16 should not be published until detailed information about the distribution of the HEFCE PSS bursary funding was available in January 2015.

33.7 After decisions had been made about 2015-16 the College would then consider the whole postgraduate offer for 2016-17 onwards. It was noted that the availability of state-backed postgraduate loans to some students would reduce some of the College’s financial risk. Alongside these and the College instalment plan other potential PGT offerings, including working with third parties, should be considered. There was a need for a nuanced discussion on how to increase both postgraduate taught and undergraduate recruitment; it was important not to be complacent about student numbers at this stage, and to ensure that potential misinformation about the proposals did not impact recruitment.

33.8 As it was important to move quickly to make arrangements for 2015 it was proposed that a small light-touch working group, potentially a subset of FBSC and including the Directors of Finance and External Relations, the Academic Registrar and School representation should be set up.

33.9 Audit Committee, Finance and General Purposes and the Governors were aware of the College’s work in exploring the possibilities around the College’s existing payment plans and postgraduate loans.
**Actions**

33.10 (MI) Establish a Postgraduate Student Support (PSS) working group.

33.11 (PSS working group) Communicate appropriately with staff on the PSS proposals once they have been agreed.

33.12 (Secretariat) Ensure Governors and Committees are kept informed about the development of the new schemes and the financial implications.

33.13 (TK) Pursue lobbying on the age restriction on the Government postgraduate loan offer.

34 **FINANCIAL OUTTURN 2013-14**

Received

34.1 The final outturn Income Distribution Model and the Financial Statements for 2013-14 *(SP 2014 21)*

Noted

34.2 The year-end position for the College represented a strong overall performance with a final surplus of £6.6M, an improvement from the £5.3M unmoderated forecast reported in June and the £2.2M un-moderated forecast reported in March following the mid-year review.

34.3 There had been increases in income across all the Schools, increases in grant income from HEFCE, partly due to recruitment of more fundable students than originally forecast, and a reduction in School pay costs.

34.4 The Governors had been pleased with the strong financial outcome for the College. The Financial Statements had been approved by the Governors and submitted to HEFCE.

35 **FINANCIAL POSITION 2014-15**

Received

35.1 A note on the current financial position, as reported to the last meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee *(SP 2014 22).*

Noted

35.2 The Director of Finance had met with the Executive Deans and the Directors of Professional Services to discuss the system of budget management and how to plan for a future which the College can shape to meet its business needs. Previously, the annual budget was set during the summer term and reviewed at the mid-year point, after which there was traditionally a change in the College budget, including the
forecast outturn. There were some issues with this method of budget management, including:

- The original budget surplus had been overly prudent, resulting in a number of changes during the year.
- Budget managers needed to wait until after the mid-year review to get a full understanding of their budget.
- The IDM only focused on one indicator of performance, the surplus or deficit of Schools after apportionment of overheads.

35.3 A new suite of reports was therefore being developed to address these issues and allow financial performance to be considered and managed on a monthly basis.

35.4 SPC noted that there were financial challenges approaching for the Higher Education sector. Proposed changes to pension schemes and the National Insurance scheme were likely to result in increased staff costs for Birkbeck. The College needed to continue to grow in order to be able to accomplish its goals, and these challenges would make planning for the future more difficult. It was therefore all the more important that the process for planning and managing budgets worked as well as possible.

35.5 The overall budget would be set based on assumptions and plans, using a similar methodology to the current IDM process. Once the budget had been set, the proposed reports were aimed at enabling better operational management of budgets on a monthly basis to ensure that the College reached the forecasted surplus that had been identified as appropriate. This would remove the need to re-forecast the surplus throughout the year, and would thus reduce uncertainties and allow for more reliable planning.

35.6 If issues were identified during the course of this budget monitoring, the first approach would be to explore the possibility of making small adjustments; if necessary, strategic discussions would be held about the need to make more significant changes.

35.7 School members asked for the next version of the paper to distinguish between decisions that would be made by the budget holders and decisions that would be made by the Finance Department, and to identify the point at which strategic discussion would be needed.

35.8 Members noted the College’s low level of borrowing, and heard that this was not standard for the HE sector. Most debt in the sector was due to student residences which Birkbeck did not have. More recently, Higher Education institutions had been taking out loans in order to expand their estate; this had not been possible for
Birkbeck as the College’s land was leased from the University of London and so could not be borrowed against.

36** PLANNING AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT**

Received

36.1 A paper on planning, five year strategy development, strategic aims and Key Performance Indicators *(SP 2014 23)*

Noted

36.2 Due to the major changes to university funding in 2012 and the dramatic impact on the College’s student numbers, the approach to planning in the last few years has of necessity focused on year to year planning, with a mid-year review to reduce uncertainty and risk. Now that numbers were beginning to stabilise, a new financial reporting structure had been put in place and the five year financial forecasts had been revised in line with current College ambitions. Governors were taking a closer interest in the College’s longer-term projections and prospects and meeting annually to consider the strategic horizon. This was an appropriate time to resume a five-year planning cycle.

36.3 The proposed approach had been developed following discussion in various fora, involving the Executive Deans, Pro Vice Masters and Directors. A hybrid approach to planning would be taken in 2014-15 as the College’s new financial reporting structure was implemented, including a lighter touch mid-year review.

36.4 Schools and Professional Services would plan on a ‘2 plus 3’ principle, in which there was programme by programme and individual staff member level planning in the first two years and a broader brush look forward to the following three years. The Planning Tool would be adapted to suit this. Instead of the annual School narrative plan there would be a five year business plan, updated annually, with projections of budgets and an accompanying narrative to explain the numbers. Professional Service departments would adopt a similar approach to produce an integrated Professional Services plan.

36.5 In March/April, in preparation for the May/June committee round, the School and Professional Services plans would be drawn together in a centrally convened process to assess overall impact and ensure that the strategies collectively constitute an academically and financially viable College. This process would take into account the impact of possible policy changes. The College level strategic plan would be drafted for the May/June committee round, and would also look five years ahead.

36.6 The grid of high level College strategic objectives aligned with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) would be further developed to inform School and Professional Services planning. SPC discussed the development of KPIs containing a balance of
financial and other measures, which would be supported by other measurable objectives and targets. Members noted that the aims which were supported by the KPIs should not be generic but should reflect Birkbeck’s distinct character.

36.7 SPC discussed the agenda for the upcoming awayday, and suggested that the meeting include a discussion of the College’s mission statement.

**Action**

36.8 (SPC members) Email any further suggestions for the awayday agenda to KB.

36.9 (KB, NH) review the planning and strategy development paper:
(a) To be consistent with the financial position paper and
(b) To clarify the presentation of the roles of the Schools, the SPC and the specialist academic Committees in the appendix

37 RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT AND ACCESS

**Received**

37.1 A report on the new Funding Council requirements for open access to data (SP 2014 25)

**Noted**

37.2 The EPSRC had developed a set of expectations related to Data Management and Sharing (DMS) with the requirement that, by May 2015, these expectations be met by institutions seeking EPSRC funding. The other UK Research Councils have followed this lead, and all now require that researchers seeking funding should explicitly consider research data management within their proposals. A College working party on DMS was therefore set up with the aim of developing a suitable college policy.

37.3 It was proposed that a formal project be set up to explore open access issues, the most immediate priority of which should be research data management. To meet the requirements of the Research Councils the College would need to develop a Research Metadata repository; the working group recommended that Birkbeck approach the University of London Computer Consortium as a supplier for the required infrastructure, as ULCC had been developing systems that would allow for the extension of BIRON (Birkbeck Online) to encompass research data and also had experience in working with other institutions to develop Research Metadata repositories. The working group also recommended the appointment of a Research Data Management Officer to manage the operation of the repository and the implementation of the policy.

37.4 The project team would assess this recommended approach, including doing due diligence on the sustainability of working with ULCC, and take appropriate action
with all due speed in order to meet the May deadline. After the immediate concentration on research data management, the project team would move on to scoping a broader project about supporting BIROn and open access at Birkbeck.

37.5 Members noted that the Research Data Management Policy should cross refer to the Research Data Integrity Practice Policy.

Action 37.6 (KH) Set up a research data management project with appropriate project management support to take forward this work.

Minute 38 is reserved to the committee as it is commercially sensitive.

38 FINANCE, HR AND PAYROLL SYSTEM

Received

38.1 A report on defining requirements for Finance, HR and Payroll IT systems (SP 2014 26)

Noted

38.2 There were significant risks with the College’s current position regarding its Finance, HR and Payroll systems, and there was a need for urgent action in this area. The current HR/Payroll system, AltaHR, would not be supported beyond April 2017. It was also a system with limited functionality compared to modern HR/Payroll systems. The current Finance system, Symmetry BluQube, had not been upgraded for several years and the current version was not supported by the supplier. This represented a significant risk, and although the College could upgrade to a current version of BluQube it was noted that other HE users were moving away from this supplier and there was little evidence from the sector that the developer was interested in developing BluQube to retain HE customers. An upgrade would cost a similar amount to a move to a new system, and a full tender would therefore be undertaken.

38.3 It was felt that retaining two unsupported and critical corporate systems was not an acceptable risk. It was therefore suggested that the opportunity be taken to identify the system features that would be best for the College now and in the long term, to improve functionality and efficiency and help meet the Colleges ambitions for improved organisational performance and annual process and cost efficiency savings. Members agreed that work should go ahead with a view to replacing both systems

38.4 Birkbeck had recently found out that pFact, the software used to support research costing and pricing, would no longer be supported from September 2015. Any replacement for this should be considered alongside the replacement of the other systems to ensure maximum compatibility.
38.5 A project board would be convened to take this work forward. PP agreed to represent the Executive Deans on the group and it was agreed that the Science School Manager should also be asked to join. The project would initially focus on drawing up a specification for the systems that could go out to tender.

**Endorsed**

38.6 The further development of work on potential replacement of the Finance, HR and Payroll systems.

**Action**

38.7 *(College Secretary)* Convene the project board.

39  **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS 2013-14**

Noted

39.1 A report on Freedom of Information requests received and responded to in 2013-14 *(SP 2014 27)*

39.2 SPC members should contact the Deputy Secretary (Governance) with any questions on the report.

40  **KNOWLEDGE QUARTER**

Noted

40.1 Members noted that there was a new partnership driven by the British Library, and including UCL, SOAS and the Guardian among others, that aimed to highlight the area around Bloomsbury as a “Knowledge Quarter” to raise awareness about the academic work in the area. Birkbeck was not currently involved in this although it has been involved with Camden Council-led discussion on developments in the local area. Given the Guardian involvement, Birkbeck should seek to be involved.

**Action**

40.2 *(MI)* Look into how Birkbeck can become involved with the Knowledge Quarter.

41  **INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIC SUPPORT FUND**

Noted

41.1 SPC members noted the good news that Birkbeck had been awarded an Institutional Strategic Support Fund (ISSF) grant from the Wellcome Trust. Professor Nick Keep was the institutional lead on this work.

42  **CHASE CONSORTIUM RESEARCH COLLABORATION**

Noted

42.1 Birkbeck had joined the Consortium of the Humanities and the Arts South-East England (CHASE), a prestigious group fostering collaboration in the Arts and
Humanities between nine of the premier universities in South-East England. The consortium promotes excellence in research, postgraduate research training and knowledge exchange, and Birkbeck students will benefit from CHASE doctoral training activities and events. SPC congratulated Hilary Fraser and Carol Watts for their work on this.

43 **UNIVERSITIES UK PRESIDENT**
Noted

43.1 Members noted congratulations to Dame Julia Goodfellow, Vice Chancellor of the University of Kent, who had been elected President of Universities UK, the first woman to lead the organisation. Dame Julia was Head of the Department of Crystallography and Vice master at Birkbeck before leaving to head the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council in 2002.

44 **DATES OF MEETINGS**
Noted

44.1 The dates of future meetings of the Strategic Planning Committee in 2014-15:
- Wednesday 21 January 2015 (Awayday)
- Wednesday 18 February 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 25 March 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 29 April 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 3 June 2015, at 2pm