BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee

11 September 2014

Present
David Latchman, Philip Dewe, Hilary Fraser, Stephen Frosh, Keith Harrison, Nick Head, Sue Jackson, Tricia King, Matthew Innes, Naina Patel, Philip Powell, Megan Reeves, Katharine Bock, Patricia Tuitt, Matthew Weait, Li Wei, Bob Westaway, Keith Willett, Miriam Zukas

In attendance
Roisin Lynch

Apologies
Costas Douzinas, Nicholas Keep

1 TERMS OF REFERENCE
Approved
1.1 The Committee’s Terms of Reference and Scheme of Membership (SP 2014 01)

2 MINUTES
Approved
2.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 11 June 2014.

3 ACTIONS
Received
3.1 An update on the progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2014 02)

Research
3.2 The Vice-Master and the PVM Research would discuss the roles of the Research Committee, the PVM Research and the Executive and Assistant Deans in relation to responsibility for implementing research strategy with the Executive Deans at their upcoming meeting in October.

3.3 It was noted that this conversation was linked to ongoing discussions in the College about budget management, whether the current planning cycle needed to be adjusted, and how research goals would fit in with planning and budgeting activities.

Flexible study project
3.4 The Director of Planning and the PVM Postgraduate Study had been meeting with programme leaders/directors in the Schools to discuss current and potential models of flexibility and their implications for pro rata or modular charging.

Access for un-enrolled students
3.5 The PVM Postgraduate Study would consult with the Research Students Sub-Committee on whether the new policy on access for unenrolled students should apply to research students. This consultation would be by email to allow the new policy to be in place for the new session.

Disabled students
3.6 The PVM Student Engagement, the Academic Registrar and the Disability Service Manager had met to discuss the changes to the Disabled Student Allowance and the political and public discussions that the College could usefully have about the impact they were likely to have on Birkbeck students.

3.7 The team from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills who were involved in constructing the new policy had come to meet with a group from the College, who had communicated the ways in which Birkbeck students were likely to be unfairly impacted by the proposed changes. It was not clear what impact this would have upon the development of the policy. The College would continue to raise the issues that Birkbeck had with the policy with external bodies such as UUK. Birkbeck’s focus was now on trying to lobby to delay the policy for a year. Meanwhile the Catalyst programme project to introduce lecture recordings on Moodle for off-site viewing would improve provision for disabled students.

College Innovation Fund
3.8 The Master had met with the Strategic Futures Group and identified some recommendations of the group which could be taken forward for development and funding. It was important to harness the enthusiasm of this group.

4 MASTER’S REPORT
Noted
4.1 The results of the National Student Survey had been published and were very gratifying. Thanks were due to the Director of External Relations, the PVM Learning and Teaching, and all involved in ensuring that sufficient responses were made to the survey.

4.2 Birkbeck had been shortlisted for the Times Higher Education University of the Year Award. The editor had subsequently visited the College. The results would be announced on the 27 November.
4.3 There had been several changes in senior management of the College’s Professional Services:

- The new Director of Finance, Keith Willett, had already made an impact on the College’s financial management.
- The recruitment process for a new Academic Registrar was underway; the Committee thanked Bob Westaway for his excellent and valuable work as Interim Academic Registrar.
- There was still work to do on finalising the structure of the Estates Department; as part of this work Jeremy Tanner had been appointed as Director of Commercial Services. The Committee acknowledged the significant contribution of the income generated from room lettings under his leadership.
- Katharine Bock would take the role of Deputy Secretary in charge of Governance; Megan Reeves take the role of Deputy Secretary in charge of Operations.

4.4 It was noted that it was important to have the right senior management in place in order to optimise the time the College Secretary had available to spend on issues needing the highest level of strategic management.

5 DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY/200TH ANNIVERSARY

5.1 Birkbeck’s 200th Anniversary would be in 2023. This was an opportunity both to celebrate two centuries of fulfilling George Birkbeck’s mission, and to fundraise for the future.

5.2 The Strategic Futures Group had been asked to nominate one member from each School and one from professional services to join a group to work on a development strategy for the College and its 200th anniversary; these nominees will join a group from College management including the Master, the Vice-Master, the College Secretary, the Director of External Relations, a nominee from the Executive Deans and a nominee from the Pro-Vice-Masters. This sub-group would report to SPC.

Actions

5.2 (PVMs and Deans) Nominate a representative to join the group.

5.3 (KB) Arrange the first meeting of the group.

5.4 It was suggested that one way to celebrate 2023 could be through the development of 5 courses, one in each School, based around the history of Birkbeck in each academic area.
The January edition of BBK would be the first platform for a launch piece on the upcoming anniversary, and the piece would ask for readers’ own stories about Birkbeck. It was suggested that the campaign focus on a theme of “towards our third century” or similar, which would allow the campaign to begin immediately rather than waiting nine years.

**STUDENT RECRUITMENT**

Received

6.1 A report on the current student recruitment position and the work of the UCAS group *(SP 2014 03)*

Noted

6.2 There was an encouraging increase in applications, offers and enrolments so far at Masters level in Home, EU and International markets. This suggested a recovery in PG Taught at Birkbeck in a way that early indications suggested was not being experienced across the sector.

6.3 Members asked whether the College knew why Birkbeck was seeing positive results in this area where other institutions were not. It was thought that it was due to two main factors: the unique advantages of Birkbeck’s offering, particularly that teaching was offered in the evening and that students were able to pay on a monthly basis; and the increased advertising spend by the College this year on specific postgraduate marketing. However, there was growing competition on postgraduate evening teaching in London; for example, Loughborough had started to offer part time evening Masters courses in London. It was therefore vital that Birkbeck continued to innovate in this area and increase recruitment.

6.3 Recruitment to four year part-time undergraduate degrees continued to decline. This was reflected across the sector, and there were no indications that the decline would slow under current government policy. This made the three year UCAS recruitment increasingly significant for the College.

6.4 It was predicted that recruitment to three year undergraduate degrees would once again increase significantly on the previous year. There were early indications that there would be a repeat of the September surge in applications from mature students, a group who in the past had higher conversion rates, which had been experienced in three year recruitment last year. However, the Committee heard that the final recruitment picture was still unknown, and the next week would be critical.

6.5 There were still some issues with the conversion of offers in the early mainstream UCAS cycle into acceptances for three year programmes. It would be important to pay close attention to conversion in the next cycle as, while the later, mature phase
of the cycle seemed reasonably static, the mainstream UCAS recruitment cycle was an area where the College could increase its numbers. Record numbers of students had put Birkbeck as an insurance choice in 2014, indicating increased awareness of the distinctive Birkbeck proposition. Efforts should therefore be focused on taking advantage of this increased awareness to increase the numbers of applicants putting Birkbeck as a firm choice.

6.6 The Clearing cycle had been very successful so far but there was still work to be done before the recruitment cycle was over. The Committee thanked the Head of Student Administration in the Registry for the work that she had done to clarify whether students were accepting offers.

6.7 The Schools were closely involved in the work; it was important to ensure that every offer made by the Schools was recorded so that the numbers could be monitored carefully to avoid exceeding the Student Number Control target. The Executive Deans asked that they be informed immediately if there was any evidence that offers were being made but not reported to any significant degree in specific areas in the Schools.

6.8 Applications were being monitored on a day by day basis and the College was prepared to close applications at short notice in order to prevent the SNC being exceeded.

6.9 From the 20th September students would not be able to make applications through UCAS; from the 30th September the College would not be able to make any new offers. It was therefore extremely important that the correct application procedure was carried out for each potential student. The College would be unable, for example, to honour offers made by email after the 20th September to students who had not yet applied through UCAS, as they would not be able to complete the UCAS process. Communications on this had gone to all colleagues in Schools but the Executive Deans were asked to reinforce this.

6.10 Members suggested that, as our available data showed that Birkbeck experienced surges in applications from its more ‘traditional’ mature students in September, it would be useful to ask UCAS about the possibility of a later closing date. This was another area where there were potential consequences for Birkbeck that were not the same for other universities.

6.11 It was noted that if specific cases arose this year where students who wished to enrol were unable to as they had missed the UCAS deadline the College could contact UCAS to establish whether arrangements could be made for these particular students and suggest that the deadline be changed for next year; if no specific cases
arose the College should still contact UCAS to discuss how it was impacted by the
deadline.

**Action**

6.12 *(UCAS team)* Monitor any cases of students missing the UCAS closing deadlines.

6.13 SPC heard that there had been an increase in applications and enrolments from partner colleges across all Schools. In 2012-13 there were 123 applications from partner colleges and 42 enrolments; in 2013-14 there were 238 applications and 78 enrolments. This year there had so far been 567 applications which were expected to convert to approximately 190 enrolments. FE partnerships therefore represented a significant recruitment area for the College across all Schools, almost 20% of UCAS recruitment overall, and it was agreed that this should be highlighted in future recruitment communication, ideally with an example of a Birkbeck student who had come through this route.

6.12 Although applications and offers for full time international students were up, the number of conditional offers had almost doubled from last year, while a lower proportion of these had converted to unconditional. A major cause of this was results from international foundation courses not being available at the expected time due to changes made by one provider that impacted the results. Action had been taken to follow these up and the results were now becoming available. Members noted that it was concerning that the provider in question had not informed the college of these changes in advance.

6.13 Enrolment for international students on UCAS courses was also down; it was believed that this was partly due to the IELTS score that was being requested. Members noted that much of the College’s previous international focus had been on postgraduate students, and that some other institutions did make a distinction between the IELTS scores asked for from undergraduate and postgraduate students.

6.14 It was noted that there had been some indications that there were some issues arising around culture and expectations of international students on undergraduate programmes that needed to be discussed further.

**Action**

6.14 *(KB)* Make sure that conditional offers, IELTS score, and international undergraduate students are on the agenda for the next International Group.

6.15 *(SJ)* Brief the Master on the new work on academic English before the International Group.

**FINANCIAL OUTTURN 2013-14**
Received

7.1 An update on the indicative financial outturn for the year ended 31 July 2014 (SP 2014 04)

Noted

7.2 The College anticipated a surplus in the region of £7M. This was an improvement from the moderated mid-year prediction of £5.2M.

7.3 The main cause of the positive variance was the bad debt provision of approximately £2M, which after analysis of the current student and commercial debt position was considered to be overly prudent and unnecessary. A prudent approach to calculating a provision for bad debt had been taken for the updated outturn which covered half of the debt for the current year and all the prior year’s debt.

7.4 It was noted that Birkbeck was moving towards a more stable position on debt thanks to the work that was ongoing on collecting outstanding debt, although it was important that the College continued to work on this over the next year. Improving the data available on the student record system and making amendments to student status far earlier for those students who were not attending would enable the College to have a clearer picture of the true nature of student debt.

7.5 The Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee would be working on clarifying who was responsible when there were issues around student fees or debts, and ensuring that this was widely communicated so that staff and students were aware of who they should contact if problems arose.

7.6 It was noted that there was a need for further discussions between the Director of Finance, the Vice Master and the Schools outside of the Committee about how financial reports are used during the planning process.

7.7 The College was currently renting a lot of space for its teaching activities from external providers, and this represented a significant risk. In line with the rest of the Higher Education sector, Birkbeck was receiving less money from external sources like HEFCE for estate development and other projects. The proposed redevelopment of the current Malet Street extension building would be an expensive project, so the College needed to generate more cash going forward to fund our estates needs and thus increase recruitment. There was uncertainty in the future over the REF results and the impact they would have on funding, postgraduate taught recruitment, and the potential impact of the pensions deficits. Although the College had a significant surplus it was important to retain most of this as reserves for possible bad times and for major projects.
7.8 When chasing debt there would need to be communication links between the Schools and the Finance department on specific student cases to ensure that students were only chased for debt when this was the appropriate course of action.

7.9 In 2014-15 the outturn would be considered on a monthly basis to help with planning and investment activities.

8 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT VISAS

Received

8.1 An update on tier 4 student visa policy (SP 2014 05)

Noted

8.2 There had been a number of developments over the last few months regarding the arrangements for sponsorship of international students. An audit had been conducted in this area by the internal auditors Knox Cropper and the College had also invited representatives from Penningtons Manches LLP to undertake a ‘mock-audit’ of the arrangements in place. There were three areas highlighted which appeared to impact disproportionately on Birkbeck and place the College at risk.

8.3 Revised guidance by UKVI (UK Visas and Immigration, the successor to UKBA) indicated that institutions had a responsibility to ensure every international student had a right to be in the UK, not just those for whom the College was a Tier 4 visa sponsor. This was likely to particularly impact Birkbeck due to the significant amount of students on short courses. The Registry was therefore currently undertaking a check of all international students who were not believed to be in the UK under Tier 4 arrangements and checking that they were entitled to be in the UK. The monitoring of students’ visa status would have to be an ongoing process from now on, and was likely to involve the implementation of a more rigorous admissions procedure in respect of modular students than was currently in place. The resource implications of this were likely to be considerable.

8.4 The College was required to notify the Home Office of all locations at which Tier 4 students were being taught. The sites constituting Birkbeck’s main campus were registered, but the College undertakes teaching at a wide variety of off-campus locations. A great deal of work had been undertaken to establish that planning permission or the equivalent was in place to register these sites as “temporary locations”.

8.5 However, two off-campus sites currently used by Birkbeck are commercial rather than educational premises, which makes them ineligible for use for teaching Tier 4 students under UKVI rules. Software was therefore being written to allow early notification of modules with Tier 4 students on them falling into this category so that they could be reallocated to different rooms during the timetabling process.
Members noted the potential negative impacts this could have on the student experience.

8.6 Regarding online or work-based programmes, it was noted that work placements did not come under these regulations. Students on blended programmes would be present on the campus for some teaching activities.

8.7 From November 2014, the rules on acceptable visa refusal rates would be halved to 10%, meaning that if more than one in ten student visa applications were rejected by UKVI, institutions would risk losing their sponsor license. Birkbeck's refusal rate was currently approximately 5%, but as our overall number of international students was small a low number of extra refusals could have a significant impact. The Registry would continue to monitor refusal rates and address any areas of concern.

8.8 It was important to address the operational issues that these regulations brought up, but there was also a need to explore the potential for political lobbying on this area, particularly considering the disproportionate impact the regulations were likely to have on Birkbeck specifically. The Academic Registrar had been discussing the issues with the Registrars Council and UUK to get some advice from the rest of the sector, and was exploring how Birkbeck might lobby externally with the Director of External Relations.

8.9 The Academic Registrar would continue to report back to SPC on progress against the action plan on a termly basis.

9 **ANTI BRIBERY POLICY**

9.1 The Anti Bribery Policy and Gift Acceptance procedures *(SP 2014 06)*

Noted

9.2 The Committee heard that the proposed procedures were designed to make the College compliant with the 2010 Bribery Act without imposing an undue bureaucratic burden on colleagues. After the policies had been approved by Finance and General Purposes Committee and Governors there would be an all-staff communication explaining the Code of Practice on the Receipt of Gifts and linking to the form that should be used to make a report on acceptance of a gift or hospitality. There would also be additional communication with the Executive and Assistant Deans and the Heads of Professional Services to ensure that they are all aware of the requirements of the policy. The unions would also be informed of the new policies.

**Recommended for approval by Finance and General Purposes Committee:**
9.3 The new Anti Bribery and Corruption Policy

9.4 The New Code of Practice on the Receipt of Gifts

9.5 The Revised Philanthropic Gift Acceptance Policy

10 OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Received

10.1 A report from the Operational Excellence Programme Board on progress in the initiative (SP 2014 07)

Noted

10.2 A key development of the Operational Excellence project had been the Fastfix initiative. This addressed the issue of limited resources for large scale ITS interventions by giving a way for small scale low-technology process improvements to be implemented quickly.

10.3 Members thanked the Planning and Business Systems and Corporate Information Systems Teams for the extremely useful work that had been done as part of this programme, but noticed that there was a serious capacity issue due to the limited number of people who were able to carry out systems changes. This had meant that some important projects had been delayed. It was also noted that the College was under-resourced in the area of web development which was a mission critical area for Birkbeck. Increasing resource in these areas where possible would allow for some of the lower priority but still important projects to take place.

11 CARBON MANAGEMENT PLAN 2014-2021

Received

11.1 The draft Carbon Management Plan 2014-2021 (SP 2014 08)

Noted

11.2 This would be presented to the Estates Committee for approval at its October meeting.

11.3 Members noted that it would be useful to see the emissions figures displayed per FTE to allow the historical data to be contextualised.

Action

11.4 (All members) Feed back to the Sustainability Manager with any further comments on the Carbon Management Plan before the Estates Committee on 29 October.

12 GUARDIAN SPACE

Noted
12.1 The Guardian had now released information about its development of the Guardian Space site to the public. Birkbeck and the Guardian had not yet signed a final agreement.

12.2 SPC congratulated Miriam Zukas and Nick Head for the progress they had made on this project.

13 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS
Noted
13.1 The dates of meetings of the Strategic Planning Committee:

- Monday 27 October 2014, at 2pm
- Thursday 4 December 2014, at 2pm
- Wednesday 21 January 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 18 February 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 25 March 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 29 April 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 3 June 2015, at 2pm