BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee

13 May 2014

Present
David Latchman (Chair), Philip Dewe, Costas Douzinas, Hilary Fraser, Stephen Frosh, Keith Harrison, Nick Head, Matthew Innes, Sue Jackson, Nick Keep, Tricia King, Philip Powell, Megan Reeves, Patricia Tuitt, Li Wei, Bob Westaway, Miriam Zukas

In attendance
Katharine Bock, Roisin Lynch

Apologies
Matthew Weait

71 MINUTES
Approved
71.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 26 March 2014

72 ACTION SHEET
Received
72.1 An update on progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2013 41)

Postgraduate marketing
72.2 The new marketing strategy for postgraduate taught provision had been launched.

Student attainment
72.3 The work to further develop data monitoring student attainment was underway; some new reports were now available and further analysis of the data was taking place.

National Student Survey
72.4 Work was underway to identify and remove bottlenecks in the process of publishing the examinations timetable. It was hoped that the issues raised by students who wished for earlier publication of the exams timetable could be addressed by the next academic session.

Academic English
72.5 At the last meeting it was agreed that further work should be undertaken to offer additional support with academic English through a learning support model to those
students who required it. It was noted that work was in progress on this, but that there were problems around access to rooms to allow these sessions to take place. Students wanted these support sessions from 5 to 6pm, before their evening classes, but rooms were not generally bookable through the room bookings system at this time due to the need to prepare the rooms for the evening session.

**Action**

72.6 (SJ) Find out how many rooms were likely to be required and discuss with KH how to take this forward.

73 **MASTER'S REPORT**

Noted

73.1 There was a feeling that part-time education was unlikely to be a current priority for HEFCE or Universities UK, and that there would therefore be little external support for the issues facing part-time students.

73.2 The College was planning to release a communications briefing which would note how Birkbeck had met the challenges of the changing fee and funding regime since 2012 and had strengthened its position by building its three year provision. It would also note that the lack of support for part time students represented a real loss in the sector, and that the needs of those students who did not wish to study as ‘traditional’ three year students still needed to be addressed.

73.3 Members noted that it was important for Birkbeck to take a public political stance on the current lack of support for part time and mature students. The College would continue to do so by lobbying the Labour party and other bodies on these issues. The Master was a member of the Universities UK group that was looking into student finance, and he would ensure that part time student finance was considered as part of this.

73.4 It was noted that there were internal concerns about the implications for the College of the increase in three year courses, and the students who were enrolling on them, who were on average younger than the ‘typical’ Birkbeck student. There were also concerns that the students who had previously been attracted to Birkbeck were less likely to stay on three year programmes, as the pace was too demanding for students with busy work and family lives. It was suggested that a further internal commentary go out in addition to the public briefing, addressing some of the issue around colleagues’ concerns.

73.5 The students on Birkbeck’s three year UCAS courses were not typical UCAS students: many of them were working and therefore might end up taking longer than three years to complete the course. More evidence needed to be collected about our students, including demographic data and their eventual patterns of study.
74 2014-15 BUDGET AND INCOME DISTRIBUTION MODEL

Received

74.1 A report on planning for 2014-15 and the proposed Income Distribution Model budget (SP 2013 42)

Noted

74.2 The aims of the 2014-15 planning round had been to build on the improved financial position achieved in 2013-14 to generate a sustainable surplus to fund academic and infrastructure development, while responding to the demands of our changing student body.

74.3 There had been budget iteration meetings with each of the Schools and with Professional Services led by the Vice Master Designate, during which income and spending estimates were reviewed, unnecessary spending was moderated and appropriate contingencies were identified against student recruitment and other risks. The forecast surplus was £2.5M, including £2.4M of contingency provision and £0.5M towards the College Development Fund.

74.4 It was noted that the work of the Schools over the last few years had delivered results, and that all of the Schools deserved congratulations for moving the College to a more balanced position. Only one School had a small deficit.

74.5 HEFCE T funding had been distributed according to planned student FTE, completion rates and price group. This distribution was provisional at this stage, and there were more checks and verifications to carry out before the IDM was finalised. Similarly, international student number forecasts would be reviewed before the final version of the IDM was submitted. The current forecast numbers were lower than last year although applications were higher; it was noted, however, that international student numbers were still so small that it could be difficult to make accurate estimations.

74.6 There was a continuing need to work on the College’s ability to forecast accurately and reduce the chance of large fluctuations later, even positive ones, in order to satisfy the Governors on the accuracy of our planning. Members noted that a significant source of fluctuation was spending on Teaching and Scholarship staff. It was necessary to plan for these costs based on maximum recruitment but this was an area where there could be significant variability. Members asked for further consideration on how to represent the potential variability of these costs in the initial forecasts.

74.7 Members also asked for more detail on the spending on student support that was charged to the Schools as an indirect cost, in order to ensure that these resources were being targeted in the most effective ways.
75 COLLEGE DEVELOPMENT FUND

Received

75.1 A proposed policy for the operation of the College Development Fund (SP 2013 43)

Noted

75.2 It was proposed that from 2014-15 a proportion of the College surplus, set each year as part of the planning process based on the moderated surplus estimate, should be distributed centrally as a College Development Fund aimed at supporting new projects tied to the expansion of the college’s academic activities. CDF funding would only be granted where it was not possible to fund initiatives through regular Schools or Professional Services budgets; it could not be used to fund incremental expansion or realignment of existing programmes or as a substitute for external research funding, and was not intended to be a source of recurrent support, but could be used to cover start up and project costs for new activities.

75.3 Rather than an annual opportunity to bid for funding, the application process for the CDF was intended to be iterative and open, although announcements would be made at certain points to ensure that colleagues were aware of the fund. Staff who had identified strategic opportunities should discuss the potential project with the College Secretary or Vice Master, and relevant college officers such as the Executive Dean(s) in whose School(s) academic activity would take place, and the PVMs with relevant strategic portfolios, before developing a bid. Final decisions on the amount and terms of funding would be made by a panel of the Master, the College Secretary, and the Vice Master.

75.4 It was noted that work undertaken on projects funded by the CDF should be considered as part of colleagues’ normal duties, although management in the Schools could consider whether buying out teaching hours for individual members of academic staff was appropriate on a case by case basis.

75.5 Termly reports on CDF projects would be made to SPC, and reported to F&GPC and Governors.

75.6 It was suggested that a condition be added to the allocation to ensure that the money was spent in a timely fashion. Although the fund should, where appropriate, be used to undertake projects with a higher risk than everyday activities, there would need to be a point at which unspent money for ideas that had not come to fruition would be collected back into the fund.

Action
75.7 **(Vice Master Designate)** Meet with Executive Deans to discuss how this condition could be operationalised and discuss any desired changes to the criteria for applications.

75.8 Members asked how any large financial returns from a project funded by the CDF would be allocated. It was expected that a percentage of the money would be returned to the fund, but further work would be done on how to address this as the CDF was implemented.

75.9 It was agreed that members of SPC would meet with the Strategic Futures Group to discuss whether aspects of the proposals they had made last term to SPC and the Governors could be taken forward via an application to the College Development Fund.

75.10 Members noted that the name College Development Fund had been previously used for a similar initiative, and agreed that College Innovation Fund was a better reflection of the intention that the money should be used for innovative projects to further the strategic priorities of the College.

76 **STUDENT RECRUITMENT**

Received

76.1 An overview of current student recruitment *(SP 2014 44)*

76.2 A report on current conditional and unconditional offer rates *(SP 2013 44A)*

Noted

76.3 There were no signs of recovery in applications to the four year undergraduate degree for 2014-15, but applications to the three year UG degree had increased by 69% from previous years and offers had increased by 78%. Using conversion rates from previous years would suggest an estimated 409 enrolments if recruitment was to close at this point. There was still a way to go reach the student number control limit of 1100 students, and the College was relying on receiving a substantial number of applications from mature students between now and the start of Clearing; previous years have suggested that the mature applicants applying later in the cycle had a higher applications to enrolment conversion rate than younger students who applied earlier.

76.4 There was an increase in conditional offers which was a reflection of Birkbeck increasingly becoming part of the mainstream UCAS recruitment cycle: it was common for offers to UCAS students to be conditional upon their A level results.

76.5 Applications to postgraduate taught programmes for 2014-15 have improved since Easter, with overall applications up by 1% on this time last year, an improvement
which has not been reflected across the rest of the HE sector. There had also been positive indications in the numbers of potential postgraduate students attending the recent Open Evening, and the increase in requests for the postgraduate prospectus.

76.6 The 2015 recruitment cycle was already underway. A full time undergraduate prospectus had been produced and work was underway to engage and work with schools, colleges and Sixth Forms. Advertising within the UCAS arena was bringing traffic to Birkbeck’s website and the UCAS course listings. Applications for 2015 would open in October 2014. The removal of the cap on student numbers would offer the potential for the College to increase its undergraduate recruitment, but it also meant that the external environment was unpredictable and competitors might behave in unprecedented ways that would have an impact on Birkbeck’s recruitment.

76.7 As a result of conversations over the summer and at the SPC and Governors Awaydays, further consideration had been given to the College’s marketing messaging for 2014-15. Work on a new narrative project was underway, aimed at appealing to the kind of student the College was now looking to attract, and members of staff would be contacted to contribute to a new set of messaging. Although younger undergraduate students were increasingly coming in through UCAS, they were still Birkbeck students, looking for a different educational experience than that found at other undergraduate institutions. It was important that Birkbeck’s messaging appealed to prospective students who were interested in the opportunity to fit high quality education around work and other responsibilities.

76.8 It was noted that although school leavers were introduced to Birkbeck through the UCAS cycle, the outdoor campaign was the primary way through which other applicants became aware of the College, even if they went on to apply through the UCAS system.

76.9 The entire marketing strategy, including the outdoor campaign and the advertising done through UCAS, was being considered as a whole to ensure that efforts and resources were directed towards the most effective activities.

Received

76.10 A report of a recent pilot international recruitment visit to South Korea (SP 2013-45)

Noted

76.11 A five day visit to Seoul was organised in March 2014. The aim of the trip was to pilot a new, high impact, integrated and cost-effective way to engage the full Birkbeck community in international markets. Working closely with the School of Business, Economics and Informatics, the pilot explored the potential of matching a large and emerging market with a Birbeck subject area, in this case Sports Management.
76.12 The trip included recruitment events, formal alumni events to which prospective students were also invited, meetings with prestigious Korean universities, meetings with potential employers (the Korean Football Association and the Korean Football League) brokered by Sports Management alumni, and a final high profile academic lecture at the British Council to which prospective students, alumni, partner HEIs and employers were invited.

76.13 The aim of the visit was to boost the profile of Birkbeck and particularly the Sport Management programmes and by doing so increase recruitment; engage the College’s alumni network to assist with Birkbeck’s international objectives; leverage the College’s academic reputation by engaging academics in international work; explore the potential for initiating partnerships with prestigious universities in key markets; and work with global employers to broker internships, work experience and jobs.

76.14 It was felt that there was potential for this model to be rolled out across the institution. External Relations had identified a list of potential cities that could be visited for each subject area, and the next step was for the Director of External Relations to visit the Schools for further discussions. It was noted that the role of the academic had been absolutely critical to the success of the pilot visit, and that individuals in departments would have to be identified who were willing to play a key part in any future visits.

Action
76.15 (TK) Initiate discussions with the Schools on potential links between subject areas and cities and identify academics who may be able to take the lead in these areas.

77 ONLINE PROVISION
Received
77.1 A report on progress in online provision development (SP 2013 46)

Noted
Lecture capture
77.2 A 15 month site licence had been agreed with Panopto, and the plan for installing the necessary AV infrastructure was now being developed. Each room was being surveyed to ensure the best placement of the equipment, and the objective would be to complete as much of the primary work as possible over the summer months. Installation of infrastructure for lecture capture and attendance monitoring would be taken into account in any refurbishment work carried out by Estates. Lecture capture solutions for external venues were being considered.

Flexible blended learning
The College was taking forward a project on flexible blended learning. The group was looking at how to develop a structure that builds on the existing flexible postgraduate module, Step Up to Postgraduate Study in Arts, to create a model that could be available to all departments across the College.

International Academy

Birkbeck currently ran two programmes in association with the University of London International Academy, was a partner in the Law consortium, and was working to develop other programme opportunities and initiatives in partnership with the International Academy. The Academy continued to develop its expertise in online learning, and the College would explore opportunities to take advantage of this by working with the Academy in this area. Consideration should be given in the development of any fully online programme as to whether it might be possible to use the International Academy’s platform.

BE BIRKBECK/GUARDIAN

Noted

The recent Be Birkbeck/Guardian launch event had been well attended, and the Committee congratulated all the colleagues involved with this event.

The team was expecting to receive the interim contact to run a test programme from September 2014. The test programme was being put together, and enthusiasm from those in the College who were going to be involved was high.

SPC heard that the Guardian had experienced some delays in signing the lease for its planned new building. It was also felt that the Guardian was unlikely to have implemented a reliable ticketing system or fully developed the marketing campaign for their initiative by September, areas for which they had responsibility. The project team would keep Strategic Planning Committee up to date with progress on the initiative.

Other institutions were also acting in partnership with the Guardian. UCL, for example, would be holding their lunchtime lectures in the Guardian building in summer 2014. Broad subject areas had been identified with the Guardian where Birkbeck would have priority, and other institutions wishing to hold partnership events in these areas would need to consult with us.

STUDENT DEBTOR POLICY

Received

Proposed amendments to the student debtor policy restricting academic sanctions to those with tuition fee debts (SP 2013 47)
Noted

79.2 The Office of Fair Trading had recently indicated that the withholding of results, certificates and similar from students who were in debt other than tuition fee debt was likely to be unlawful. This practice had been common in the HE sector for debts such as unpaid accommodation fees and library fines. While Birkbeck does not have accommodation, it has been the practice to withhold results etc. from students with outstanding library fines. It was therefore necessary to cease this practice with immediate effect to avoid the risk of legal challenge. SPC heard that other institutions would also be modifying their policies.

Approved

79.3 The revision of the College’s ‘Policy on Student Debtors’ to clarify that academic sanctions are only taken against students owing tuition fees, implemented with immediate effect.

79.4 Amendment of Paragraph 35 of the ‘Terms and Conditions of Enrolment 2014-15’ to read “The College reserves the right to cancel the enrolment and/or terminate the registration of any student who has outstanding tuition fees, in accordance with its Policy on Student Debtors.”

Action

79.5 (KB and BW) Take forward further work to clarify the processes that staff on the front line should be following when students were in debt to the College. The importance of having cross-College input to this work was noted, as these were often complicated cases where no single department had a complete picture.

80 ACCESS AGREEMENT 2015-16

Noted

80.1 That the 2015-16 Access Agreement was submitted to the Office for Fair Access on 1 May 2014 (SP 2013 48)

81 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Noted

81.1 The date of the next meeting:
  • Wednesday 11 June 2014 at 2pm