BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee

22 March 2016

Present
David Latchman (Chair), Katharine Bock, Hilary Fraser, Stephen Frosh, Keith Harrison, Nick Head, Matthew Innes, Nick Keep, Fraser Keir, John Kempton, Tim Markham (for Sue Jackson), Chris Murphy, Philip Powell, Julian Swann, Patricia Tuit, Jonathan Woodhead, Miriam Zukas

In attendance
Richard Evemy (for item 63), Jas Gill (for item 62), Roisin Lynch, Eleanor Mongey (for item 58)

Apologies
Roz Dixon, Jonah Duffin, Sue Jackson, Megan Reeves, Keith Willett

53 MINUTES
Confirmed
53.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 11 February 2016.

54 REPORT
Noted
54.1 Strategic Planning Committee’s Report to Finance and General Purposes Committee (SP 2015 34)

55 ACTIONS
Noted
55.1 Progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2015 35)

Portfolio Review
55.2 The PVM International has set up a meeting with the Director of the University of London International Programme to discuss the potential for further work with the programme, and will report back to SPC on progress.

Digital steering group
55.3 The PVM International has invited the Head of Communications to attend the next meeting of the International Group to discuss how the ongoing work on Birkbeck’s digital presence can facilitate the work of the group.
Predictors of student success at Birkbeck

55.4 Chris Dewberry and Miriam Zukas made a well-received presentation of the initial research to the Governors at their meeting on 15 March 2016.

Economics, Mathematics and Statistics Review

55.5 The Vice-Master is overseeing the development of targets to monitor the progress of the review recommendations and further reports will be made to future meetings of SPC.

Senior roles

55.6 The recruitment processes for a PVM with a learning and teaching portfolio and for an Executive Dean for the School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy will begin shortly.

International student visas

55.7 The guidance given to Schools about Tier 4 visa issues is currently under review and a consultation process is underway. The College’s internal auditors are also conducting a review of this area, specifically processes for ID checking of modular students. A more detailed report will be brought to SPC next term.

Student progression, retention and success at Level 4

55.8 A report will be made to SPC next term.

56 MATTERS ARISING

Noted

Guardian Space

56.1 After conducting a review of their business interests, the Guardian have decided not to go ahead with the Guardian Space initiative. The Executive Dean of SSHP, who has led on this project, will write to the College community to inform them that the venture will not go ahead. Members noted that public intellectual outreach is a vital part of Birkbeck’s work, and it is important to confirm to the College that work will continue in this area, including potentially building on relationships that have been started through the Guardian collaboration. The Director of Alumni and Development will be involved in this conversation as consideration is given to what the College can offer to alumni and to the wider community.

57 MASTER’S REPORT

Noted

57.1 In his Budget on 16 March 2016 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that loans would be introduced for postgraduate students from 2018-19, and that loans for master’s students would be extended to include three year part-time courses that had no full time equivalent. Members noted the need to clearly state on the College’s website which courses would be eligible for loans.
57.2 The Chancellor also noted the Government’s intention to “review gaps in support for lifetime learning, including for flexible and part-time study”. Members noted the importance of the College continuing its lobbying efforts to take advantage of this.

57.3 More information is expected to become available shortly on which Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics courses will become exempt from restrictions on accessing tuition fee loans for a second degree from 2017-18, in particular the status of Psychology.

57.4 Birkbeck would have some form of QA audit as scheduled in 2016-17, under the transitional arrangements while the proposed Office for Students is being developed to replace the QAA. Little information is currently available about the exact form these transitional arrangements will take, but it is expected to be light touch and provide an opportunity to feed into the development of the future processes.

57.5 Members noted that the Queen’s Speech at the State Opening of Parliament in May 2016 is expected to have an education focus and it is likely that a Higher Education Bill will be announced.

58 STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Received

58.1 The Student Services Strategy 2015-2018 (SP 2015 36)

Noted

58.2 Birkbeck Student Services was established in 2013, consolidating services from across the College. This strategy aims to outline how effective management, improved integration within Student Services and working in partnership across the College seeks to mitigate the risk identified in the College Risk Register that Birkbeck will be unable “to provide effective student services in line with expectations linked to increased fees”.

58.3 Members praised the document, which has brought together a variety of services coherently, and thanked the Head of Student Services for all the hard work that has gone into the restructuring of Student Services.

58.4 Feedback in the National Student Survey (NSS) will be one indicator that can be used to judge the success of the strategy, but not all students are eligible to respond to the NSS and it is important to support the whole student body, including international students.
58.5 SPC asked the Head of Student Services to consider if there is scope for offering professional placements to students, particularly those on the MSc Psychotherapy and MSc Psychodynamic Counselling, and students from the Law School.

58.6 Members discussed the College’s response to the National Student Survey. The current survey will close on 30 April, and Birkbeck currently has a 35% response rate. Institutions need to achieve over 50% at both subject and institution level to be included in the results. NSS results contribute to position in various league tables, but these also take other factors into account. Birkbeck would not be in league tables this year at an institutional level, but will at subject level where the College has sufficient numbers of students.

Action
58.7 (FK) Email Schools to clarify the requirements for being returned in the NSS.

58.8 (FK/NH) Confirm which subject areas are likely to feature in this year’s league tables and discuss further with relevant Schools.

58.9 A paper on league tables would come to a future meeting of SPC.

59 RECRUITMENT
Received
59.1 A report from the recruitment strategy and planning group (SP 2015 37)

Noted
59.2 Applications to undergraduate full time degrees are 21% down compared to this point in the cycle last year. In phase 1 of the cycle (October to January) proportionally more offers were made than last year, and a number of processes have been put into place to drive up conversion rates. In phase 2 (February to June) only a small decline in applications has been seen so far. Applicants in this phase have converted at a higher rate in the past so it is important to maximise applications and offers throughout this phase.

59.3 Applications to part time undergraduate degrees are down by 10%, with 30 more offers made than at this time last year. It is very early in the cycle for these degrees and work is underway to maximise applications during the crucial stages of the cycle from June onwards.

59.4 Full time home PGT applications are up by 20%, with international and EU applications down but with indications that they are recovering. Part time PGT applications are up by 34% and home applications by 55%. More analysis of the demographics of the applicants will be carried out to understand the causes of this increase, particularly as the new loans have not yet been widely publicised by the
Government, and what impact it should have on the College’s future recruitment strategy.

59.5 Members noted that applications to the Stratford campus are up in some subject areas. The PVM Access and Community Partnerships will analyse this as part of her review of University Square Stratford.

59.6 Members noted that some other institutions were contacting EU students who had been made offers for 2016-17 to inform them that if they accepted their offer before Friday 25 March 2016 they would come under the three year residency requirement rules rather than the new five year requirement.

Action
59.7 (FK and JD) Communicate with EU students on this as soon as possible.

59.8 Consideration should also be given to a potential communication to prospective EU students encouraging them to enrol before the EU referendum, as regardless of the outcome of the referendum it was felt that the Government was unlikely to change the status of enrolled students.

60 POLICIES
Received
60.1 A draft safeguarding policy (SP 2015 38) and an updated Code of Practice on Free Speech (SP 2015 39).

Noted
60.2 Under the Prevent duty, institutions are required to have processes for individuals vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism to be referred for support as appropriate, and for procedures to be in place for considering proposed events with external speakers. There is a need for the College to have robust and operable policies for safeguarding and freedom of speech that are compliant with the Prevent duty, while at the same time taking as light touch an approach as possible, and one which is consistent with the College’s mission.

60.3 It was noted that linking the Prevent duty with wider safeguarding issues was the approach being taken by most Higher Education institutions. SPC noted the view of some members that this was not the correct approach to take, and that issues relating to Prevent should be separated from other College policies. Members noted concerns that the implementation of policies influenced by the requirements of the Prevent duty could result in the targeting of particular communities.

60.4 Members asked for more information to be included in the introduction to the policies explaining their necessity and their connections to other policies. They also
noted related issues including safeguarding for defined vulnerable groups and the College’s broad duty in relation to health and safety.

60.5 The Code of Practice on Free Speech had also been discussed at the College Ethics Committee, and SPC agreed with CEC that there should be academic leadership in the implementation of the policy and that panels making decisions on external events and speakers should be chaired by the Vice Master.

60.6 SPC endorsed the policies, noting that discussion on their implementation would continue in the summer term. Members were asked to send any immediate further comments on the policies to the Academic Registrar.

Received

60.7 A draft policy on supporting students who have disclosed criminal convictions (SP 2015 40)

Noted

60.8 The College will take a case by case approach to applicants and students with a criminal conviction. In most cases a criminal record may not be an obstacle to studying at the College or participating in extra-curricular activities, but there may be circumstances where the nature of the programme and the circumstances of the offense, as well as the demands of various professional bodies and requirements under law to protect special categories of people might mean that it is not appropriate for an individual to follow a particular programme of study, or to take a particular option within a specific programme of study.

60.9 It is important that the College makes it clear to applicants and students from the beginning that it may not be possible in some circumstances for all students to participate in all aspects of their programme of study, and to be clear about the rights and responsibilities of students regarding disclosure of criminal convictions.

60.10 There is a need to clarify how decisions about these cases are made in the Schools. Members also noted the need to balance supporting students with criminal convictions with the College’s duty to safeguard all students.

60.11 The Academic Registrar would edit the policy to address these points.

61 INTERNATIONALISATION

Received

61.1 The draft Internationalisation Strategy 2016-2021 (SP 2015 41)

Noted
61.2 Birkbeck’s international aims are to expand the size and diversity of its international student community, recruit eminent scholars from across the world, create an international community committed to partnerships with other world-class institutions, and produce research and teaching of global significance and value. The strategy aims to articulate the way the College will set about achieving these goals.

61.3 Members noted that these aims are interdependent: international research reputation is a major driver of international student recruitment.

61.4 SPC members were asked to give feedback on the strategy by email to the PVM International. The strategy would then be taken to ABExCo and Academic Board for approval in the summer term.

62 COMPETITION AND MARKETS AUTHORITY AUDIT

Received

62.1 A report from the Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee on the currently ongoing review by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) (SP 2015 42)

Noted

62.2 The CMA have contacted Birkbeck to request evidence to confirm that the College is complying with its regulations, in particular relating to how non-tuition fee debt is handled, the College’s processes for changing fees while students are on a programme, the College’s approach to CertHE module fees and student complaint procedures. Colleagues are currently collecting this evidence and a Fees Policy Working Group has been set up, with School and Professional Services staff. Some outdated policies have remained on the College website and potentially in student handbooks, which highlights a need for clarity on where responsibility lies for updating information and guidance after policy changes, centrally and in the Schools.

Approved

62.3 The proposal that the Fees Policy working group should have operational responsibility for overseeing immediate CMA compliance issues, reporting to FBSC. In the longer term, a senior College committee with a broad remit such as SPC or TQEC should have oversight of ongoing CMA compliance. The Audit Committee has asked the College’s internal auditors to produce a report on compliance with consumer legislation.

63 COUNTER TERRORISM AND SECURITY ACT 2015

Received

63.1 A paper on the use of web filtering (SP 2015 43)

An update on the Prevent compliance return being prepared to submit to HEFCE (SP 2015 44)
Noted 63.2 It is a requirement of the Prevent duty for institutions to consider the use of content filtering. SPC considered a paper from the Director of IT Services which advised that that the introduction of content filtering is not an appropriate response for Birkbeck to undertake in consideration of the Prevent duty guidance. There are several reasons for this, including the potential for a negative impact on academic freedom and the culture of trust between staff and students, the significant administrative overhead, cost, and lack of guarantee of accuracy when applying any filtering solution, and the possibility for lower cost and more effective approaches to awareness raising through promotion of acceptable use policies and safe use of the internet.

Endorsed 63.3 The recommendation that content filtering is not introduced at Birkbeck. This will be reported to Academic Board as a management decision.

Noted 63.4 SPC asked the Director of IT Services to consider the use of the word “extremist” in the current College Computing Regulations.

63.5 SPC noted that HEFCE is the compliance body for the Prevent duty in respect of the institutions that it funds, and has published a Prevent duty monitoring framework through which providers must submit documentation. Institutions are expected to return the documentation by 1 April. HEFCE will then return a judgement on whether institutions have satisfied the requirements. The College Secretary and Vice Master have convened a working group to ensure the necessary actions are implemented effectively and in line with Birkbeck’s ethos.

64 CATALYST
Received 64.1 A report on progress in the programme of Catalyst projects (SP 2015 45)

Noted 64.2 A detailed interim review of the Catalyst projects was submitted in September 2015, and HEFCE have confirmed that they are encouraged by the extensive level of work that the programme has evidenced. A final return will be made in October 2016 to conclude the Catalyst initiative at Birkbeck. As initially planned, the formal Project Management aspect of the Catalyst Programme is now on a reduced scale, and where applicable the work has been continued under new headings as appropriate for the College mission.

65 STUDENT DEBT
65.1 An update on student debt and income *(SP 2015 46)*. Members were asked to send any comments to the Director of Finance.

**BUDGET**

66.1 The updated budget for 2015-16 *(SP 2015 47)*

66.2 It was agreed that the paper should be reworded to confirm that the initial driver for spending School contingencies would be the financial position of the School, and then the financial position of the College.

66.3 SPC heard that Finance and General Purposes Committee might ask for further controls to be imposed on future budgets, depending on the financial performance of the College.

66.4 Members were asked to contact the Director of Finance with any comments.

**INSTITUTIONAL FINANCIAL COMPARISON**

67.1 A paper showing Birkbeck’s financial position compared with other HE institutions *(SP 2015 48)*

**STUDENTS’ UNION**

68.1 Following a diagnostic visit by the NUS a set of recommendations has been created for transformation of the SU. This is required because they don’t currently have effective management, and therefore are not achieving their strategy. College management will continue to work with the Trustees of the SU to try to reach an agreement. The SU’s financial issues will be reported to F&GPC, Audit Committee and the Governors.

**DATES OF MEETINGS 2015-16**

69.1 The dates of meetings for the rest of the session:
  - 12 May 2016 at 2pm
  - 7 July 2016 at 2pm