BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee

25 March 2015

Present
David Latchman (Chair), Matthew Innes, Fraser Keir, Philip Powell, Stephen Frosh, Sue Jackson, Matthew Weait, Patricia Tuit, Miriam Zukas, Philip Dewe, Tricia King, Keith Willet, Nick Keep, Nick Head, Katharine Bock, Keith Harrison, Hilary Fraser, Jonah Duffin,

In attendance
Richard Evemy, Garmon ap Garth (for item 51), Roisin Lynch, James Smith

Apologies
Megan Reeves, Julian Swann

45 MINUTES
Approved
45.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 4 December 2014.

46 REPORT
Noted
46.1 The Committee’s Report to the last meeting of Finance and General Purposes Committee (SP 2014 28)

47 ACTIONS
Received
47.1 An update on the progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2014 29)

Noted
KIS data
Action
47.2 (NH) Review KIS data collection to ensure an accurate reflection of contact time.

Postgraduate loans
47.3 The College was continuing to lobby on the age restriction on the Government’s postgraduate loan offer. A consultation process had been launched on the proposals which would report on the 20 May, although this was after the General Election and a new Government was expected to be in place.

Research data management
The first meeting had been held to set up a research data management project to ensure compliance with the Research Councils’ data management requirements. The Director of IT Services would be involved in the discussions. Members noted the importance of involving academic colleagues with research data management.

Finance HR and Payroll systems

Discussions with the Schools on their requirements for the systems had begun, and the scoping process for the HR system was moving forward. It had not yet been possible to appoint an appropriate systems accountant to undertake the scoping process for the finance system and more consideration needed to be given to how to resource this. The next step was to set up the project board.

Knowledge Quarter

The College’s application to join the Knowledge Quarter had been accepted. This was an initiative to bring together organisations in Bloomsbury to share intellectual capital.

MASTER’S REPORT

Noted

The Master was in the process of visiting the all the Schools, the Professional Services and the Students’ Union to discuss College strategy and ideas for the College’s 200th anniversary. It was important to engage the whole College in the process of planning for this. The Pro Vice Masters would also each hold an open meeting to discuss potential areas of development for 2023 in their portfolio area.

A member of the team behind King’s College London’s successful fundraising campaign would be attending the next meeting of the 2023 working group.

MID YEAR INCOME DISTRIBUTION MODEL 2014-15

Received

A report on the College’s current financial position and the mid year income distribution model 2014-15 (SP 2014 30)

Noted

The Director of Finance thanked colleagues for their positive contributions to discussions about forecasts and budget adjustments over the last few weeks, as a result of which the budget had been rebalanced to achieve a surplus of 5% of turnover in line with the College’s financial strategy.

A different way of producing management accounts was being developed which would allow forecasts to be revised on a monthly basis in conjunction with Schools and Services. The forecasts would be regularly compared with the budget and action
taken at an early stage. In future years the budget would be set in line with the financial strategy with the aim of achieving a surplus of 5% of turnover.

49.4 The forecast income from tuition fees currently included a net reduction of £0.6M over the coming months due to withdrawals and interruptions. However, a Tableau report which uses prior year withdrawal data by School to predict change in tuition income over time had been developed which may indicate a higher level of income reduction. In this worst case scenario the remaining contingency of £1.8M could be used to address this reduction in income. Work would continue on improving the accuracy of forecasting tools and on improving processes for identifying students who have withdrawn to increase the accuracy of our records.

49.5 The College was currently considering making an offer to purchase a specific property which would provide significant and much needed extra space.

Received

49.6 A note on Birkbeck’s financial position compared with other HE institutions (SP 2014 31)

Noted

49.7 SPC noted the need to communicate to staff that the institution was relatively healthy but that there was no room for complacency as the whole sector was facing threats: these figures were a useful illustration of this. Members also noted that a significant proportion of the College’s income came from areas of provision which had been developed more recently, such as management and law, and that the College could not have weathered the recent crises without them. Continuing to consider the potential for the development of innovative provision was important for the future health of the College, balanced with a consideration of the sector-wide risks. This should be part of the discussions around College strategy.

49.8 SPC asked to receive this report on an annual basis.

50  PLANNING AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Received

50.1 A report on the Governor’s annual Strategic Horizons meeting (SP 2014 32)

Noted

50.2 SPC noted the aims and aspirations that had been identified at the Governors’ strategic meeting:

- Through development of teaching space and collaborative space sharing partnerships, every Birkbeck class to be in a Birkbeck room, rather than in rented space.
Through collaboration and partnership with other HE and funding organisations, development of a new facility for teaching and research.

No student who can benefit from studying at any level in Birkbeck should be prevented from doing so by financial reasons.

The College’s ethos of promoting diversity, which has been central since its foundation, will continue to be prominent in its future strategy.

Consistently achieving a surplus of 5% of income.

We need to increase new student recruitment in order to maintain overall student numbers and income. The potential for expanding Masters degrees will be fully explored, and it is likely that the most significant income growth will need to come from three year degree recruitment.

We should focus on specific improvements to advice, services and facilities to increase student satisfaction and our NSS ratings.

Improving baseline student success statistics by targeting support resources more effectively.

Emphasising the development of a research culture, linked to career development for research academics and the clear definition of research leadership roles.

Improving the infrastructure and administration for research and for PhD students.

Developing and expanding teaching space, best use for the Georgian houses, appropriate space for research across the College’s extensive subject range and social and group work space.

50.3 The Governors were keen to remain involved with strategy development. The strategic horizons meeting in the spring term was therefore now part of the annual planning cycle.

50.4 Members discussed potential ways in which Birkbeck could work more closely with Further Education (FE) colleges. Members noted the opportunity presented by Birkbeck’s strong links with FE colleges for the College to influence the curricula of FE colleges to ensure students had the potential to progress to Birkbeck.

50.6 One route to potentially explore might be using Birkbeck’s degree awarding powers to validate FE colleges’ Foundation Degrees which could then lead onto the third year of a Birkbeck part time degree. Members noted the risks involved with this around quality, standards and the student experience, noting also that students on similar programmes elsewhere did not always progress to the partner universities. There would need to be a clear outline of the benefits that any such agreement would have for students and for Birkbeck. More broadly, there was a need to discuss what the standardised academic levels within the College mean, and how to bring students in at different levels.
Action
50.7 (MW) Meet with SJ and FK to discuss potential routes into entry into the third year, including validation of FE Foundation Degrees.

50.8 SPC heard that the Vice-Master would be meeting with the Executive Deans to discuss what future planning rounds should look like. There was a need for more long-term planning without the creation of strategy documents that were so long they were unwieldy. Members noted the particular importance of consideration of retention of students in planning for the future.

Action
50.9 (MI) Meet with SJ and FK to discuss ‘quick wins’ on retention and how they should be fed through the Schools.

Noted
50.10 The 204-15 School Portfolio Review reports were circulated by email to SPC members on 18 February and comments were invited. The reports and comments were considered by a group convened by the Vice Master and sign-off was confirmed where required to enable prompt implementation of actions. The PR outcomes will feed into the planning round.

51 FEES, BURSARIES AND SCHOLARSHIPS COMMITTEE

Received
51.1 The report of the Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee (SP 2014 33)

Noted
51.2 FBSC's confirmation of undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research fee tiers for 2015-16

Received
51.2 The Postgraduate Support Scheme offer for 2015-16 (SP 2014 34)

Noted
51.3 Birkbeck had 108 grant awards from HEFCE to provide £10,000 to 108 students towards Masters degree study for 2015-16 recruitment. The College would receive £540K funding from the government and the remaining £540K would be match funded from Birkbeck central funds. Birkbeck was required to decide the criteria for distribution, which had to be to 'under-represented groups' and only to students who had paid the higher undergraduate fees introduced in 2012.

51.4 A working group had been set up to discuss criteria, process and promotion for the scheme, and this was discussed at FBSC. It was important to have wide criteria to encourage applications, and to avoid as far as possible awarding money under the
scheme to students who would have come to Birkbeck anyway, as this would result in the College losing money. However, few current Birkbeck students progressed straight from undergraduate to postgraduate study so students who were eligible for the scheme were unlikely to have come anyway. The scheme should be simple and inexpensive to administer and the impact on applications and numbers should be measurable. The following proposals were developed:

51.5 Eligibility criteria
- Entrants to 2-year part-time Masters degrees in 2015/16.
- Other criteria as per the national criteria: i.e. Home-EU, non-ELQ, post-2012 ‘new regime’ funding.
- Given the wide eligibility criteria, and if the scheme is promoted on the website, we are likely to get more than 108 eligible applicants. In which case, we will apply additional criteria to prioritise PSS applications. It is proposed that we prioritise using the following criteria, in order of precedence (i.e. the most important first):
  o Students with a disability (DSA recipient)
  o Birkbeck students
  o Students in receipt of a maintenance grant at undergraduate level (there are various levels of grant depending on household income; the higher the grant received, the higher prioritisation the PSS application receives).
  o Students with a 1st or 2.1 (and students with a 1st will be prioritised over students with a 2:1).

51.6 Promotion
- To eligible Birkbeck undergraduate students: there are 290 eligible students, who we can target directly.
- On the Birkbeck website.
- To Birkbeck’s corporate partners (identifies another pool of applicants; also enables Birkbeck to build on our relationships with them).
- Recruitment fairs and open days.
- Other target audiences as identified.

51.7 Application Process
- Pending approval by SPC the application process will go live in the week of 8th April (just after the Easter weekend). The PSS application form will be online, accessible on the website or via a URL that has been e-mailed out.
- Students must submit an application for their intended course.
- Students must then submit an application for the Postgraduate Support Scheme by 3rd July 2015.
- Applications will be assessed and prioritised according to eligibility criteria. Scholarships awarded on the basis of the academic achievement criteria will be conditional awards.
- All awards are conditional on the student being admitted to the programme of study.
- Students will be notified by mid-July via e-mail if they have been successful. If successful students will be requested to confirm if they accept or decline their award.
Where a student declines their scholarship, or fails to confirm acceptance by the notified deadline, or is not offered a place on their intended course, scholarships will be re-distributed to reserve candidates.

51.8 SPC discussed this proposal, and noted the risk that the College would not manage to recruit 108 students who met the eligibility criteria. It was therefore suggested that prioritisation criteria should only be used in the case of over-recruitment. To encourage students to enrol it was suggested that there be a rolling set of monthly deadlines for awards to be confirmed, rather than one final confirmation in July. SPC noted the need to start advertising the scheme widely as soon as possible.

Approved

51.10 The proposed criteria and process for the postgraduate student support scheme, subject to the changes outlined in minute 51.8.

Received

51.11 A report on financial modelling of undergraduate student support for the 2016-17 Access Agreement (SP 2014 35)

Noted

51.12 Under the College’s most recent Access Agreement (2015-16) it was expected that Birkbeck would spend 33% of additional fee income on OFFA countable expenditure in ‘steady state’ (2018/19). This was significantly higher than both spending elsewhere in the sector and OFFA’s recommendation of approximately 15% for institutions with a high proportion of students from under-represented groups. It was proposed that for the future the College aim to reduce this to 20% of fee income and that the money saved be used instead for postgraduate taught student financial support and for access, success and progression activities.

51.13 OFFA had increasingly been encouraging HEIs to direct a higher percentage of OFFA countable expenditure (spending on students from under-represented groups) towards both widening access and student success, and a smaller percentage towards financial support. Birkbeck currently spent over 80% of its Access Agreement spend on financial support, and it was therefore suggested that the College consider changing this balance. FBSC had supported the start of a discussion on the Access Agreement balance, but noted that this was a significant decision involving a wide range of stakeholders. FBSC’s discussion focused on the future of undergraduate student financial support and not on the other areas of Access Agreement spending.

51.14 The Access Agreement for 2016-17 was due for submission in April and the criteria and size of award for undergraduate financial support would need to be agreed by then. To enable decisions to be made on how financial support should be allocated FBSC asked for modelling on possible options for spending 20% of additional fee
income of financial support, including options focusing on part time students, to be presented to SPC.

51.15 SPC considered the modelling and noted that, although Birkbeck currently spent more than the rest of the sector, there were risks involved with simultaneously making significant changes both to the amount of money being spent and to the students who were eligible to receive direct financial support. Members asked for this year’s Access Agreement to involve a reduction in the percentage of additional fee income being spent on OFFA countable expenditure, but for no more than minor changes to be made to the eligibility criteria. Eligibility would then be discussed further for next year’s Access Agreement. It was suggested that Birkbeck signal that it might need to make significant changes to its scheme in future in order to ensure that part time students were supported as they had not been a priority for successive governments. If it was decided in the future to aim financial support at part time students the income thresholds should be mapped onto those of the Government’s scheme for full time students.

51.16 Members asked for future discussions on the College priorities that the undergraduate offer should be designed to support, and on supporting widening access.

51.17 The final Access Agreement would be approved by Chair’s Action as it was due to be submitted on 23 April.

52 CATALYST PROGRAMME
Received

52.1 A report on progress in the Catalyst Programme projects (SP 2014 36) Noted

52.2 Conversations were ongoing with HEFCE about the possibility of re-profiling the Catalyst funding so that it could continue to be spent until March or September next year, to allow the projects to be completed and to allow for a smoother transition to future arrangements for supporting the new initiatives that had been developed.

52.3 SPC considered the long-term sustainability of the Catalyst projects. The projects had created new services and capacity with recurrent costs, and it was therefore necessary to consider how these costs would be met in future after the Catalyst funding was finished. There was a need for further discussions in SPC on the evaluation process for the Catalyst projects, and the key strategic directions and priorities used to decide which activities should be embedded into the long term work of the College. As part of this it would be useful to identify which College committees could take forward each sub-project.
53.4 The report on lecture capture showed that usage by staff and students was growing, and it was anticipated that it would continue to grow. The next step would be to evaluate the project to gather the views of staff, including teaching and scholarship staff, on the benefits and difficulties associated with lecture capture, and then to consider how to evaluate students’ experiences with the technology. Part of the evaluation process would involve considering the data to see if there was any link between the way students used the technology and attainment and exam success. It was noted that the College’s strategy around e-learning should be developed to ensure that the most effective use was made both of technology and of face-to-face contact hours.

53.5 Members asked where conversations were taking place about the broader impact of projects such as the e-registers work. The project so far was focused on ensuring the availability of working technology. Development of strategy around the use of the data would be a separate exercise involving academic staff.

54 INTERNATIONAL VISA REQUIREMENTS

54.1 An update on the College’s compliance with international student visa requirements (SP 2014 37)

Noted

54.2 Members received an update on progress against the action plan that had been developed in Registry as a result of the two audits that had been undertaken in respect of the College’s UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) compliance activities, by the College’s internal auditor Knox Cropper and by the legal firm Penningtons.

54.3 SPC noted the need for focused attention on the two highest risk areas, checks on non Tier 4 visas and the addition of all premises where Tier 4 students are taught to the College’s sponsor licence. Work was ongoing on these two areas. The student administration team was contacting students to confirm their nationality/immigration status where this was unknown. The room bookings team was amending systems to ensure international students were allocated to appropriate rooms, although there were still issues with locally allocated rooms. It was reported that it was challenging to make changes in the middle of the academic cycle. However, noting the high risk status of this area, SPC asked the teams to not wait for a new academic year to implement change, but to define and report back on the improvements being made and the earliest possible timescale for them to be delivered.

Actions

54.4 (FK) Remind School Managers that locally allocated rooms currently needed to be checked manually to ensure students were not being taught in inappropriate premises.
54.5 (FK) Discuss the effectiveness of the current Tier 4 attendance policy with School Managers.

Approved

54.6 The introduction of mandatory Visa guidance sessions for all in-country Tier 4 visa applications, to reduce the risk of refusals.

54.7 The introduction of online advice sessions for out-of-country visa support.

Noted

54.8 SPC discussed the recommendation that a deposit scheme be introduced for Tier 4 students: these students would have to pay a percentage of their tuition fee before a CAS would be issued to reduce the number of students who were not committed to applying, who were more likely to have their visas refused, and to improve statistical accuracy when predicting enrolments. This practice was common in the sector. SPC noted that this might have implications for international student recruitment, and asked for this to be discussed further at the International Group.

55 INTERNATIONAL GROUP

Received

55.1 The report of the International Group (SP 2014 38)

Noted

55.2 Given the generally unfavourable political climate for international students in the UK currently, Birkbeck had had a successful year, with applications to undergraduate full time courses up 64%. The International Office was continuing to work to raise the profile of Birkbeck and its unique offering internationally.

56 ATHENA SWAN

Received

56.1 A report on the College’s submission for renewal of its Equality Challenge Unit Athena SWAN charter bronze award (SP 2014 39). A draft of the submission had also been circulated by email.

Noted

56.2 The Athena SWAN charter was run by the Equality Challenge Unit to promote women in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine). Birkbeck’s Bronze Institutional Award was due for renewal and the submission date was 30 April 2015. From November 2015 the Athena SWAN charter was being merged with a broader equality charter mark for Higher Education, meaning that any department could apply for this.
56.3 Birkbeck needed to consider what its approach to the broader charter would be. The data needed for the new applications would include professional and support staff, Teaching and Scholarship staff and Honorary staff. It was noted that applications for the current scheme took a significant amount of resource to prepare, and applications to an expanded scheme from all the departments would require far more. Other institutions had members of staff dedicated to writing Athena SWAN applications and it was suggested that this might be necessary if the College was to apply to the broader scheme in the future.

56.4 It was suggested that consideration of the future of Birkbeck’s membership of the Athena SWAN scheme be brought together with the current institutional discussion about equalities. Members heard that the Governors had discussed equalities at Birkbeck at their recent meeting, and their view was that the Equalities Committee should be more embedded in the governance and management structures of the College. This could be achieved by a reporting line from Equalities Committee to a College management committee such as HRSPC or SPC.

56.5 Members thanked Professor Nick Keep for his work on the College’s Athena SWAN submission.

57 PROCUREMENT

Received

57.1 A note on the outcome of a recent Procurement Maturity Assessment (SP 2014 40)

Noted

57.2 This report had been considered and supported by the Audit Committee. The result of the Procurement Maturity Assessment (PMA) had been a low score, which was not unexpected as there was no dedicated procurement resource at the College. This did not mean that there was no value for money being achieved or that there was bad practice across the College, but that there was no central evidence to establish the extent to which the College may be obtaining value.

57.3 A detailed list of actions had been provided and a follow up PMA would be undertaken in approximately 18 months. The actions could be loosely summarised into four categories:

- Appoint an interim procurement manager who can undertake some background analysis of our spend and other routine tasks by 31 July 2015.
- Draft a procurement policy and develop a business case which supports the development of procurement by 31 December 2015.
- If the business plan is approved, a number of objectives can then be taken forward with a target delivery date of 31 July 2016.
• Systems developments can be considered as part of the project to introduce a new finance system by the end of 2016.

57.4 Members noted that the School of Science undertook a significant amount of procurement and would be keen for procurement systems to be upgraded.

58 CONSUMER LAW
Noted
58.1 Members received a note on information from the Competition and Markets Authority on consumer law for Higher Education Providers. The key issues were information provision, terms and conditions, and complaint handling. Schools and Professional Services needed to take action to review the information provided to students and the regulations, policies and procedures to ensure that they were compliant with consumer law. Compliance in this area would be reported back to SPC and to Audit Committee.

58.2 Members noted that the provision of clear and accurate information to students should not be driven by fear of the law but by the desire to provide a good experience to students.

Action
58.3 (FK) Work with the School Managers and TQEC to review programme handbooks and consider central templates for the provision of information to students.

59 SENIOR APPOINTMENT PROCESSES

59.1 Linked to the equalities work described in minute 56, there was a need for the development of a formal process for nomination and selection of the Vice Master and Pro Vice Masters. This should be part of a broader review of the College’s governance and management structures now that the new School structure had been in place for six years.

Action
59.2 (MI) Bring back a project initiation document for a review of the College’s strategic roles and governance and management structures, including the appointment of the Vice Master and Pro Vice Master and greater embedding of equality and diversity, to a future meeting of SPC.

60 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS
Noted
60.1 The dates of meetings of the Strategic Planning Committee in 2014-15:
• Wednesday 29 April 2015, at 2pm
• Wednesday 3 June 2015, at 2pm