BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee

26 March 2014

Present
David Latchman (Chair), Philip Dewe, Jonah Duffin (for Tricia King), Costas Douzinas, Hilary Fraser, Stephen Frosh, Keith Harrison, Nick Head, Matthew Innes, Sue Jackson, Nick Keep, David McGhie, Naina Patel, Philip Powell, Megan Reeves, Patricia Tuitt, Matthew Weait, Bob Westaway, Miriam Zukas

In attendance
Katharine Bock, Roisin Lynch

Apologies
Li Wei

58 MINUTES
Approved
58.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 19 February 2014

59 REPORT
Noted
59.1 The report made to Finance and General Purposes Committee in March 2014 (SP 2013 34)

60 ACTION SHEET
Received
60.1 An update on progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2013 35)

Noted
Research Excellence Framework

60.2 The PVM Research had circulated additional research grant data to the Executive Deans after the last Strategic Planning Committee, and HR would circulate department REF inclusion data.

Postgraduate marketing
60.3 The new postgraduate marketing campaign, which would have a focus on employability, would launch in May.

Student attainment
60.4 Work to further develop data to monitor student attainment was underway.

Portfolio review
60.5 The summary of the School of Law portfolio review outcomes had been circulated and was being confirmed.
National Student Survey

60.6 The return rate for the NSS was lower than at this point last year, and if this did not improve there was a possibility that the College would not reach the necessary 50% return rate. Ipsos Mori, who were conducting the survey, would send out an email to those students who had not yet submitted a response. Although institutions were not permitted to know which students had not responded to the survey, the College was informed of reply rates by programme and was thus taking action on a programme level to encourage responses.

60.7 Members noted the importance of responding to the issues that students raised in the NSS and other surveys. Students had frequently noted that they would prefer if the exam timetable could be published further in advance. This was particularly relevant for students who were working and would need to book time off work to attend examinations in the day. However, it would be important to ensure that accuracy was maintained if the timetable was published earlier. This would require the deadlines for module choice to be more strictly enforced.

Action

60.8 (BW) Work with colleagues from the Schools to identify and remove bottlenecks in the process of publishing the examinations timetable.

61 MASTER’S REPORT

Noted

61.1 Birkbeck had been successful in its appeal against the automatic allocation of student numbers that HEFCE had issued for 2014-15, which had included a reduction based on over-recruitment in the previous year. The SNC for 2014-15 was now 1100, which represented a significant success compared to the original provisional allocation of 700.

61.2 The letter outlining the College’s funding allocation had been received by HEFCE. The allocation for 2013-14 was higher than had been expected.

61.3 Members asked how the higher allocation would impact the IDM and heard that it would improve the position of the Schools. As it was not a recurrent payment this money should be used for investment rather than recurrent costs. Some of the money would be allocated through general mechanisms to all Schools, and some would be allocated specifically for high cost subjects.

62 AWAYDAYS 2014

Received

62.1 Information and outcomes from the Governors’ Strategic Horizons morning March 2014 (SP 2013 36)

Noted

62.2 The Governors held an extended Strategic Horizons meeting on 10 March, during which they heard and discussed presentations on key strategic areas from the Vice Master Designate; the Pro Vice Masters for Strategic Engagement and Recruitment, Learning and Teaching, Enterprise and Innovation, and Research; and members of the Strategic Futures Group.
62.3 Members noted the importance of maintaining the impetus of the Strategic Futures Group (SFG), which had been set up to give colleagues who had not had opportunities to be involved with College level committees a chance to contribute to the strategic direction of the College. Members of the SFG would be invited to meet with the Master, the Vice Master Designate and the College Secretary to give further consideration to ways in which some of their ideas could be taken forward; and a new group would be set up with membership drawn from the SFG and SPC to start thinking strategically about Birkbeck in 2023.

62.4 The Executive Dean of SSHP had already met with the Strategic Futures Group in relation to the Be Birkbeck/Guardian partnership, and the consultants that were working on this were meeting with SFG members to take their ideas forwards. The PVM Learning and Teaching had also met with the group to discuss Technology Enhanced Learning as well as broader learning and teaching issues.

62.5 Colleagues were encouraged to think of ways in which members of the SFG could be involved in some of the strategic work that was already ongoing, but also to ask the Executive Deans to suggest some other colleagues that may wish to be involved as appropriate.

62.6 SPC noted the importance of ensuring that information about the strategic projects that were taking place was communicated widely across the College. Possible methods for this included increasing the involvement of the Assistant Deans in communicating about ongoing work, and holding ‘market square’ type events for the Pro Vice Masters to discuss their strategic areas.

62.7 The Governors expressed their interest in continuing to be involved in strategic discussion with the introduction of an annual strategic horizons meeting, scheduled for December to allow it to feed into the College’s planning cycle.

Minute 63 covers reserved business: commercially sensitive information restricted to members of Strategic Planning Committee.

63 2014-15 STUDENT NUMBER CONTROL

Received

63.1 A note on the Student Number Control for 2014-15 (SP 2013 37)

Noted

63.2 After an appeal against sanctions for over-recruiting against SNC in 2013-14, Birkbeck had been awarded a SNC of 1100 for 2014-15. The fine for over-recruitment would remain in place for each year that the students were at the College, so there would be a grant adjustment for the 2013-14 over-recruitment in 2014-15 and 215-16. It was noted that 1100 represented the expanded tolerance allowed by HEFCE, so there would be penalties for recruitment over this number.

63.3 Three year degree recruitment for 2014-15 was being monitored by the UCAS Planning and Strategy Group, chaired by the Vice Master. Offer conversion rates were being segmented by offer type, age, cycle phase and School. To date enough offers had been made to realise a predicted 368 enrolments. Applications for fundable students that counted towards the SNC were up by 74% compared to this
time last year, and offers were up 103%, demonstrating the hard work from staff in
the Schools.

63.4 Members noted that 2014-15 was a unique year because the Student Number
Control target would be removed from 2015-16 onward. There would be a delicate
balance to strike between reaching the target and putting the College in a position to
maximise recruitment in 2015-16, and ensuring that the College did not recruit far
above 1100 which would result in a fine.

63.5 It was noted that issues around student number control, recruitment levels and the
affordability of the current and proposed systems were current topics of interest
politically. Every effort should be made to maximise recruitment once the SNC was
removed to ensure that the College was in the best possible position for a future in
which there was uncertainty over what would happen with student numbers and
regulations.

63.6 There were several potential strategies for managing recruitment for 2014-15. These
included:

- Going into Clearing – it would be necessary to do this in order to reach
  1100 students.

- Keeping recruitment open until the end of September – there was a large
  volume of applications from ‘traditional’ mature Birkbeck students in
  September in 2013-14.

- Promoting the four year programmes to three year applicants, as there
  were no restrictions on the number of students that Birkbeck could
  recruit to the four year programmes. This could be done through offering
  the four year option in Clearing if there were no three year places left, or
  offering unconditional offer holders a place on the four year programme as
  an alternative.

- Encouraging students to defer until 2015-16, with incentives such as cash
  bursaries. The number of bursaries that could be offered would be decided
  based on the volume of offers and acceptances as the cycle progressed. It
  was also noted that students who deferred would have to be guaranteed
  the same fees as 2014-15 students.

- Not permitting transfers from part time to full time in 2013-14, as these
  students would count against the SNC. It was noted that, conversely,
  transfers from full time to part time did not allow the College to recruit
  another full time student. Transfers could be approved in 2014-15 if these
  were processed in 2015-16 after the SNC was removed; a waiting list of
  students who wished to transfer could be kept in case there was capacity
to transfer earlier.
63.7 It was noted that the communication and presentation of these strategies would need to be considered very carefully. The College was in dialogue with UCAS about these strategies.

63.8 Members asked about how the resource and estates implications of these decisions would be considered. Schools would be able to bid for additional staffing resource through their strategic plans, and for Estates resource through the annual cycle of estates projects. The data suggested that numbers were not expanding overall: rather, four year students were being replaced by three year students. However, full time students did put additional pressures on resources.

64 2015-16 STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT
Received

64.1 A note on options for the 2015-16 student financial support package (SP 2013 38)
Noted

64.2 The Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee had held a meeting, open to SPC and other colleagues with expertise, to review the student financial support offer to undergraduates at Birkbeck from 2015-16 onwards.

64.3 The review had been driven by several factors, including the increased understanding of the profile of Birkbeck undergraduate student recruitment in the new fee and funding regime, and changes in the national policy landscape.

64.4 The following scheme of financial support for undergraduates was proposed:

- A general financial scheme for all low income students, offered at an equal rate across all years of study, and paid as a cash bursary. Awards would be proportionate to level of study. Cost modelling had been carried out based on potential levels of award and income thresholds.

- A scheme offering a fixed resource for cash bursaries for part-time degree students, aimed at appealing to mature and middle income student groups where recruitment had fallen off most since 2012.

- The merger of the Hardship Fund, the College Awards and the Access to Learning Fund to provide a streamlined scheme designed to support diverse groups of students in need of financial support, including provision to cover undergraduate course fees in exceptional circumstances, and part time students’ costs associated with childcare, dependants and caring responsibilities in cases where full time students could access public funding. This would simplify the existing offer and allow students experiencing unforeseen hardship to access help quickly.

64.5 It was noted that it was important for reasons of fairness that all students from all Schools had the same access to financial help; it was therefore not appropriate for individual Schools to operate their own hardship schemes in addition to the central ones.
FBSC also discussed the pricing strategy for Certificates of HE. It was suggested that more explicit marketing of CertHE programmes as low-risk routes into degree level study would be a strong strategic response to the decline in part time degree recruitment. Further academic development needed to be undertaken to facilitate the repositioning of ‘feeder’ CertHE provision as a Birkbeck Gateway to Degree Level Study. Ideally there should be a single set of expectations about CertHE to degree progression that could be presented as a simple transparent offer. Once progression routes had been harmonised it would be possible to consider applying a discount for the first year of degree level study for students progressing from CertHEs.

Endorsed

The proposals on the 2015-16 student financial support package in principle, subject to further more detailed discussion.

FBSC REPORT

Received

The Report of the Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee (SP 2013 40)

Charging by cohort

Approved

FBSC’s proposal that from 2014-15 all undergraduate students would be charged by current rather than original cohort, to ensure that all students studying in the same year were paying the same fee. The same policy would apply to postgraduates, although postgraduate students coming back from breaks in study or repeating a year would be exempt in 2014-15 if a tier change would make a significant difference to their fee. The policy would apply to all from 2015-16 except those who had been exempted the previous year. Schools would have discretion in cases where there had been mitigating circumstances.

Noted

It was important that this change was communicated widely and that student-facing staff gave the right guidance to students. Information would be updated on my Birkbeck and an all staff email would be sent out. Students would be reminded of the policy and its implications as part of the Break in Studies process.

SPC noted the need for a clear and consistent set of fee regulations to be published on the website. Work on producing these was ongoing as part of a project FBSC had set up to create a central set of fee regulations, address the process of communication of fee decisions to staff and students, and agree responsibilities for managing queries.

Modular fees

FBSC and SPC had previously agreed that all modular students should be charged new regime fees from 2014-15 onwards to save resource by simplifying the process of setting and approving fees, and of managing the student record. However, this change would result in a 30 credit module rising in price by approximately £500. It would also lead to a small number of students losing PTG1 funding.
65.6 FBSC felt that, given that the infrastructure was in place to handle charging students both new and old regime fees, the resource savings and financial gain of making all students new regime would be small.

Approved

65.7 FBSC’s decision that old and new regime charging for modular students should be continued until the end of 2017-18 or until no old regime students remained, whichever was sooner.

Accredited Prior Learning

65.8 FBSC agreed in principle that a pro-rata reduction in tuition fees should be offered to students with Accredited Prior Learning, subject to ensuring that this did not conflict with the PVM Enterprise and Innovation’s ongoing work on APL.

65.9 This would address the inconsistency of the current situation where students with APL credit were sometimes permitted direct entry to the start of the second or third year of a programme, and thus only charged for the credit they took with Birkbeck. However, students who were given credit for part of the year of study were charged the full programme fee for that year regardless of the credits they were studying, unless a manual fee adjustment was requested by the School. Most HE institutions offered a pro-rata reduction in tuition fees for APL.

66 FLEXIBLE STUDY

Received

66.1 A note on progress and fee charging options in the flexible study project (SP 2013 39)

Noted

66.2 The flexible study working group presented a business case for offering a flexible modularised approach to fees. It proposed to deliver programme fees that could be charged pro-rata to study load, and online student module selection.

66.3 Modular charging was arguably fairer as it reflected what the students had actually studied. Currently some students paid pro-rata fees and some did not, based on whether the department requested a manual fee adjustment.

66.4 The change would allow programmes that were offered flexibly, e.g. that allowed students to start in any term, to be dealt with as part of mainstream fees policies and rules rather than as exceptions.

66.5 Online module selection would streamline a currently resource intensive process and enable module selection to be completed earlier which could have an impact on other processes.

66.6 The new infrastructure would work for all programmes of study, including full time, but this did not mean that all programmes would need to be offered flexibly: this would remain at the discretion of the programme leaders.

66.7 There had been mixed reactions within the College to the notion of offering flexible programmes. The majority of Masters programme leaders wanted students to sign
up to the default pace and load of study, while other areas wanted to explore more flexible study patterns such as students starting in terms 1, 2 or 3.

66.8 There were issues over offering modular or pro rata fees for part time Masters programmes in which the programmes did not have the same module load in each academic year. This introduced the risk of potential loss of income on programmes which were far cheaper in year 1 as students would be disincentivised to enrol onto year 2.

66.9 One way to smooth fees over two years where credit loads were uneven was to introduce the concept of ‘fees credit’ as distinct from academic credit, and have a compulsory 30 ‘fees credit’ module with zero academic credit in year 1, called something like ‘Dissertation registration’. This would allow programmes to have a modular approach to fees while also making the fee the same in each year of study, or to charge strictly pro rata to academic credit by not incorporating an additional module. However, this could potentially be confusing to staff and students.

66.10 The alternative to this would be to continue to charge programme fees. Programme fees would allow for students to pay their fees by instalment, if it was decided that this option should be offered.

66.11 It was noted that having variable approaches to charging, with some programmes charging on a modular basis and some charging a programme fee, would be complicated to administer and communicate.

66.12 Members noted that the issue of fee charging should be separated from academic questions about allowing students to study flexibly.

Agreed

66.13 That the trial should proceed as planned to allow any problems with the processes to be identified and rectified. Departments would not have to adopt pro rata fee charging if it was not appropriate.

67 CATALYST PROJECT

Noted

67.1 The College was awaiting feedback from HEFCE on the metrics by which the success of the projects funded by the Catalyst award would be measured.

67.2 The project manager had been working with individual project groups and the Programme Board would meet shortly to discuss the progress of the programme as a whole.

68 ACADEMIC ENGLISH

Noted

68.1 There were currently three main routes for the delivery of academic English teaching and support: pre-sessional teaching, in-sessional teaching and through learning support.

68.2 It was suggested that the College move away from a modular approach to English for academic purposes. Numbers had dropped on these programmes as they were
offered to students outside Birkbeck as Certificate programmes and priced accordingly.

68.3 It was proposed that the pre-sessional delivery be continued, and the learning support model be extended to offer additional support with academic English to students who require it in the same way as support was currently offered to those who need study skills support. It was confirmed that this support would be for students who spoke English as a first language as well as those who did not.

68.4 A transitional year long programme for students who were changing discipline was also being developed as part of the College’s widening participation work and to contribute to retention. This would provide students with a mixture of subject knowledge and academic language teaching.

Endorsed

68.5 Further work on academic English provision as outlined above.

68.6 SPC asked for more data on the success of students who were recruited from the Cambridge Education Group and from Further Education colleges.

69 SANTANDER STUDENT ENTREPRENEUR COMPETITON

Noted

69.1 Birkbeck had entered several entrants in this competition for the first time this year. A winner had been selected and had gone forward to the main competition.

69.2 Members noted their appreciation for the hard work done by the International Office to build links with Santander.

70 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Noted

70.1 The following dates for future meetings:

- Tuesday 13 May 2014 at 2pm
- Wednesday 11 June 2014 at 2pm