Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee
27 October 2014

Present
David Latchman (Chair), Katharine Bock, Philip Dewe, Hilary Fraser, Stephen Frosh, Keith Harrison, Nick Keep, Tricia King, Matthew Innes, Philip Powell, Megan Reeves, Patricia Tuitt, Bob Westaway, Keith Willett, Miriam Zukas

By invitation
Richard Evemy, Gretchen O’Neill, James Smith, Julian Swann

Apologies
Costas Douzinas, Nick Head, Sue Jackson, Naina Patel, Matthew Weait, Li Wei

14 MINUTES
Approved
14.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 11 September 2014

15 ACTIONS
Received
15.1 An update on the progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2014 09)

Noted
Research
15.2 The Vice Master and the PVM Research had met with the Executive Dean to discuss the roles of the Research Committee, the PVM Research and the Executive and Assistant Deans in relation to responsibility for implementing research strategy.

Access for un-enrolled students
15.3 Following consultation with the Research Students Sub Committee and confirmation that PhD/MPhil students on breaks in study could have access to the Library, the new policy on access for un-enrolled students was being put into place.

200th Anniversary Group
15.4 The members of the 200th Anniversary Group had been nominated, and the first meeting of the group would be on 10th December 2014.

UCAS recruitment
15.5 All applicants potentially affected by UCAS deadlines had been able to enrol. As many traditional Birkbeck students enrolled late in the cycle the College consider discussing the potential impact of the early UCAS closing deadline with UCAS if there was likely to be an issue in the 2015-16 cycle.

16 STUDENT RECRUITMENT
Received
16.1 A report on the current student recruitment position (SP 2014 10A)
16.2 A report from the UCAS Planning and Strategy Group (SP 2014 10B)

Noted

Postgraduate recruitment

16.3 While other HE institutions have seen falling numbers in PGT recruitment, Birkbeck's enrolment numbers are steady. Members noted several factors in this success: the unique advantages of Birkbeck's offering, with teaching offered in the evening; the extended payment plan enabling students to pay monthly over the whole course of their programme; and a newly developed, digital postgraduate marketing campaign carried out this year.

16.4 While the outdoor marketing campaign on public transport and elsewhere remains important to the College's marketing strategy and raises the profile of Birkbeck, the targeted digital marketing campaign has had a marked impact and presented opportunities to launch highly targeted campaigns. External Relations was considering how these could be used at all levels of recruitment.

16.5 There was growing competition in postgraduate evening teaching in London; for example, Loughborough had started to offer part time evening Masters courses in East London. It was therefore vital that Birkbeck continued to innovate in this area and increase recruitment. Two sets of research had been commissioned: one to look into the changing external PGT environment and one to look in detail at the different demographic groups that made up Birkbeck's PGT student body. SPC noted that the College needs to pay close attention to its postgraduate recruitment strategy in light of the changing external environment.

16.6 In 2015 the first cohort of students graduating with higher levels of debt will be contemplating PGT study. Some policymakers believe that the home PGT market will decline sharply. In many universities most postgraduates are international students but at Birkbeck 80% of PGT entrants are from the UK and the EU. The College will need to be vigilant about changes in the home and EU PGT market, although the model of evening teaching will enable us to make an attractive proposition for students to earn and gain work experience whilst they learn.

16.7 London remains the key market for Birkbeck to ensure growth in PGT part-time numbers, although there are campaigns in other cities across the UK. International and EU markets are important and work will continue in international markets and expand into the EU during this cycle.

Undergraduate recruitment

16.8 The continuing decline in part time undergraduates makes further UCAs expansion increasingly important. This year there was another major upturn in applications from and offers to 'mainstream' UCAS students, indicating the success of marketing campaigns making Birkbeck more visible to younger students. However, many applicants either declined the offer or selected Birkbeck as their insurance choice. When UCAS releases data on the 2014 recruitment cycle in January we will be able to identify which institutions these students chose and adapt accordingly.

16.9 The number of more mature students applying later in the UCAS recruitment cycle, who exhibit much higher conversion rates, was similar to last year. After a concerted effort from all involved, including during Clearing and this late recruitment phase, the College was close to meeting the Student Number Control limit of 1,100.
16.10 The next challenge is to consider what target should be set for next year’s UCAS recruitment, when the Student Number Control target would no longer apply.

**Action**

16.11 (PD) Send UCAS recruitment statistics to the Master for use in discussions with external bodies.
- percentage increase from last year’s enrolment total to this year’s SNC target
- total number of Home/EU students recruited for 2014-15, including ABB students,

16.12 There had been an increase in applications and enrolments from partner FE colleges. The College will continue to build on this success and increase the amount of work it does with schools, sixth forms and FE colleges.

16.13 After declining numbers in the last few years, Certificates of Higher Education performed better this year. Certificates were a lower risk and lower priced entry route into Higher Education for some groups of students. This area could be developed further including creating Certificate routes into the second year of degree programmes where they did not currently exist.

**Action**

16.14 (MI) Set up a working group to develop and systemise Certificate to degree progression routes, and communicate and market them more widely.

**International recruitment**

16.15 Most of this year’s growth in international students was postgraduate, with fewer undergraduates than anticipated converting from application to enrolment.

**Action**

16.16 (Secretariat) Ask the International Group to consider undergraduate international recruitment.

16.17 Full-time international students now account for 21% of total full-time fee income.


**17 STUDENT SUCCESS DATA**

**Received**

17.1 A paper on the development of student success data (SP 2014 11)

**Noted**

17.2 The draft Performance Indicators to measure and monitor student achievement at Birkbeck were designed to sit alongside and compliment the finance and resource-based metrics looked at by SPC and the Governors on the IDM and financial statements. The indicators measure progression, retention, completion, average module marks and degree outcomes ( classifications).

17.3 The initial report focused on undergraduate degrees, and would be developed to track progress over future years. The full time cohort of 226 UCAS-recruited students that started in 2011-12 had their first chance of taking final exams in 2013-14. Future iterations of the report will track the progress of students in this group who have not yet graduated; as well as data from the larger
groups of UCAS recruits that entered the College in 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15. The reports will also include other course groups.

**Action**

17.4 *(NH)* Re-circulate the data with confirmed completions for 2013-14

Develop the report to include all course levels and breakdowns by full and part time mode and by department.

17.5 As more data became available it would be possible to identify points at which students were more likely to withdraw and put appropriate interventions in place. The data would also enable the College to identify routes taken by students who were less likely to do well and therefore give extra support in these areas.

17.6 To promote retention among non-traditional students, the Executive Deans had been considering the possibility of introducing the concept of a ‘student sabbatical’ rather than the current break in studies regulations, with points of contact and access to facilities to reduce the risk of these students drifting away from the College. Members noted the excellent practice going on in some areas to keep in contact with students on breaks in study and thereby minimise withdrawal, but also the need to ensure a common approach was taken across the whole institution.

**Action**

17.7 *(BW)* Review the current regulations around breaks in study and establish if they sufficiently encourage students on breaks to return rather than withdrawing.

*Section 18 of the minutes is reserved to the Committee as it is commercially sensitive.*

19 **STUDENT ATTENDANCE CENSUS**

Noted

19.1 There would be an exercise to identify non-attending students, enabling students who enrolled but were not studying to be withdrawn before the 1 December HESA census date. The process would be repeated in the spring and summer terms. This would address some of the issues around uncertain student data in relation to debt and allow for a clearer picture of expected fee income. It would also allow support interventions to be put into place for students who were not attending.

19.2 The Schools would need to be involved in the discussions about the best way to identify these students and initiate appropriate processes, and how to take individual student circumstances into account. Students would be notified before any withdrawal took place.

19.3 Members noted that it was important that this withdrawal process was not presented as a punishment to students, but was rather an attempt to ensure accurate records and appropriate academic and financial decisions.

19.4 In the short term these students would be identified by staff checking lists, supported by information such as Library, fee payment and Virtual Learning Environment use indicating that students are engaging. In the future, data from e-registers and other technological solutions should allow for earlier identification of students at risk of dropping out.

20 **FBSC REPORT**
20.1 The report of the Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee (SP 2014 13)

Noted

20.2 FBSC discussed proposals for dealing with fee queries and complaints from students. Improving procedures for students who had fee queries or difficulties – and the accuracy of student records - would improve the student experience and our ability to forecast and manage tuition fee income.

20.3 FBSC approved the formation of a working group headed by the Interim Academic Registrar to draft tuition fee policy and regulations, having reviewed sector best practice, for FBSC to consider.

20.4 FBSC also reported on the new Birkbeck Access to Learning Fund (BALF), designed to help students on low incomes who were struggling to afford the ongoing costs of studying, e.g. through providing assistance towards study materials or field trips. It confirmed that neither the BALF nor the existing Hardship Fund was designed to support students who could not pay their fees.

20.5 FBSC agreed that there should be a central point for decisions on fee issues in order to ensure student equity. In resolving fee queries, establishing the accuracy of the fee should be kept distinct from the student’s ability to pay it. A note setting out the processes to be followed and the respective responsibilities of the Finance and Registry Services departments for fee adjustments, student hardship, difficulty paying fees and debt has been circulated to FBSC representatives and will be the basis of a staff communication.

Approved

20.6 FBSC’s recommendations on tuition fee tiers for 2015-16. No changes were proposed for undergraduate. It was proposed that part time postgraduate taught fees should be frozen and pro rata full time fees implemented across the board. This would result in a c.10% rise in full time fees for two current fee tiers. SPC heard that competitor pricing data on provision elsewhere in London in these areas indicated that Birkbeck fees would not become uncompetitive as a result of the rise, and students in those areas also had the options of flexible monthly payment plans and specialised part time pathways. Going to pro-rata would remove the anomalies from the PGT fee structure and make the fees simpler to explain and easier to justify to students.

20.7 Fee tiers for 2015-16, subject to further discussions about postgraduate full time fees with the School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy, which had expressed concerns about student uptake trends and competitor pricing in its subject areas.

Secretary’s note: After the meeting the Chair of FBSC agreed to a stepped increase to pro rata full time fees over two years for SSHP Masters programmes, supported by more overt marketing of the flexible payment plan and the unique evening teaching proposition.

20.8 FBSC noted its ongoing discussions on the timing of publishing fees, balancing early notification for prospective students with the capacity to be agile and respond to recent recruitment changes, to plan ahead strategically and to allow time to check the fees and ensuring their accuracy.

21 CATALYST

Received

21.1 An update on progress in the Catalyst programme (SP 2014 14)
21.2 The Catalyst programme projects consisted of five key strands:
- Portfolio Innovation and Flexibility Project (PIF)
- Linking Work and Study Project (LWS)
- Student Recruitment and Engagement Project (SRE)
- Student Achievement and Success Project (SAS)
- Research, Interpretation and Dissemination Project (RID)

21.3 Good progress had been made on the e-registers and lecture capture projects, which were part of the SRE and PIF strands respectively.

21.4 All Birkbeck-owned classrooms had lecture capture facilities in place. Seminars and support were being offered to academic staff to promote take-up of the technology. Members noted that academic engagement was critical to the success of the lecture capture project.

Action

21.5 (RE, JG, PD) Consider how to evaluate and increase uptake of lecture capture by both staff and students.

21.6 More work would also be done to capture the other ways in which technology was already being used in teaching throughout the college. It was noted that the PVM Learning and Teaching had been involved throughout the project, and that more discussions on the use of this and other technology for learning and teaching would take place at School Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committees before being reported up to Academic Boards.

21.7 Members noted that the lecture capture project had given the College more information on how and when students were engaging with their studies, which presented more opportunities to identify chances for intervention.

21.8 Work on the e-registers pilot was split into a technology strand and a strand considering interventions to address non-attendance. Card readers had been installed in the classrooms used by the Law and Management degrees, and the technology was already in place at University Square Stratford. A web page had been developed to explain to students why and how attendance was being recorded.

21.9 There would be a need to consider the future implementation of the work initiated by Catalyst once the funding programme was finished.

22 CORPORATE INFORMATION SYSTEMS STRATEGY

Received

22.1 The draft Corporate Information Systems strategy (SP 2014 15)

Noted

22.2 Birkbeck’s corporate information systems (CIS) infrastructure comprises the student record system, the HR and finance systems, the teaching staff management and timetabling system, the research grant management system and various other systems.

22.3 Over recent years, the number, scale and impact of these systems have grown. At the same time, students and most staff do not and should not need to recognise the distinctions between the
underlying systems. There is a need to deliver a seamless user experience. The CIS strategy therefore set out proposals for a more integrated approach, including principles around which systems would be procured, implemented and developed.

23.4 Members noted that significant improvements had been made in College systems and processes over the last few years, notably on student enrolment, self-service student information accessibility and the Tableau management information system.

23.5 Given that the systems team had limited resources, there was a need for Schools as well as Professional Services to be involved in the prioritisation of work and systems improvements.

23.6 Further consultation on the strategy would take place over the autumn term 2014, with a view to seeking endorsement of the final version in spring 2015.

23.7 There was a need to consider replacing the HR, Finance and Payroll systems. The supplier of the HR and Payroll system was ending support in 2017. The options for the Finance system were to implement a major upgrade in order to continue to be supported by the provider, or replacement.

Action

23.8 (KW, NP) Develop and submit the business case for replacement/upgrade of the HR Payroll and Finance systems.

24 ERASMUS+

Received

24.1 Proposals on the College's future involvement with the Erasmus+ scheme (SP 2014 16)

Noted

24.2 Erasmus+ was the EU funding programme for education, training, youth and sport, which promoted mobility for staff and students between institutions and programmes in the EU countries. The College currently had an ad-hoc approach to Erasmus student mobility.

24.3 SPC was asked to assess the options for future Erasmus+ activity:

- Do nothing and continue the ad-hoc approach
- Cease participating in student mobility
- Introduce a planned framework for student mobility

24.4 The ad-hoc approach was not recommended, as it had led to problems in individual cases. Members noted that participation would make a positive contribution to the employability agenda, and that while there had been limited appetite uptake of the scheme so far due to a lack of promotion of its availability, this was likely to increase if a planned framework was developed.

24.5 It was confirmed that consideration of Erasmus+ at Birkbeck should not just be limited to undergraduates. There were elements of Erasmus+ which also applied to postgraduate research students, and it provided opportunities for staff exchange which allowed for the development of strong international academic links.

Actions
24.6 (BW) Investigate whether institutions can stipulate that they will only participate in Erasmus+ within bilateral agreements (rather than on demand from individual students).

24.7 (JS) After taking up post as Pro Vice Master (International) in January 2015, consider how to take Erasmus+ forward at Birkbeck.

25 GUARDIAN SPACE

Noted

25.1 The Guardian had released information about its development of the Guardian Space site to the public. The date for completion of the building was September 2016 and the final Agreement for the partnership between Birkbeck and the Guardian was expected to be ready for signing shortly.

25.2 Birkbeck would begin to develop a draft programme of events, but this would not be released publicly until closer to the opening of the building. The key motivation for Birkbeck’s involvement in the project was to increase brand awareness by promoting the College to a wider audience. Members discussed the programme and noted that, while the breadth of the institution in terms of subjects should be represented, some areas were likely to be more popular with the Guardian’s clientele. Curating the programme would require careful quality control. It was confirmed that participating in the Guardian programme would be considered to be part of academics’ normal workload. Members suggested that visiting fellows and lecturers should be asked to be prepared to give a Guardian lecture if required, as part of their agreement with the College.

Action

25.3 (Guardian group) Draft a clear plan setting out the College’s financial and other commitments in relation to the project, and how the initiative will be managed, to support approval of the agreement by the Governors.

26 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT VISAS

Received

26.1 An update on the College’s response to Tier 4 student visa policy (SP 2014 17)

Noted

26.2 As reported at the last meeting, revised guidance by UKVI (UK Visas and Immigration in the Home Office, the successor to UKBA) made institutions responsible for ensuring every international student attending the College had a right to be in the UK, not just those for whom the College was a Tier 4 visa sponsor.

26.3 In addition, the College was required to notify the Home Office of all locations at which Tier 4 students were being taught, and the Home Office required all these locations to have educational purpose planning status.

26.4 A further area to monitor was that from November 2014, the threshold for visa refusal rates would be halved to 10%, meaning that if more than one in ten student visa applications were rejected by UKVI, the institution would risk losing their sponsor license. Birkbeck’s refusal rate was currently approximately 5%, but as our overall number of international students is small a low number of extra refusals could have a significant impact.
26.5 The Registry was taking action to address these areas and further progress on these actions would be reported to SPC termly.

26.6 Members heard that rejections of visa applications were frequently due to the student not supplying the right financial evidence. The Registry was considering how to support students to ensure they supplied the required documentations, and would ask advice from other institutions on how they were addressing these issues.

27 INCOME DISTRIBUTION MODEL OUTTURN 2013-14
Noted
27.1 A report on the provisional out-turn for 2013-14, in the Income Distribution Model format (SP 2014 18)

27.2 A surplus of approximately £6.6M and an improved outcome for all the Schools was anticipated.

28 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS
Noted
28.1 The dates of meetings of the Strategic Planning Committee in 204-15:
- Thursday 4 December 2014, at 2pm
- Wednesday 21 January 2015 (Strategic Awayday)
- Wednesday 18 February 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 25 March 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 29 April 2015, at 2pm
- Wednesday 3 June 2015, at 2pm