BIRKBECK
University of London

Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee

3 June 2015

Present
David Latchman (Chair), Katharine Bock, Philip Dewe, Hilary Fraser, Stephen Frosh, Keith Harrison, Nick Head, Matthew Innes, Sue Jackson, Nick Keep, Frasier Keir, Tricia King, Megan Reeves, Julian Swann, Patricia Tuitt, Matthew Weait, Keith Willett, Richard Wilson (for HR), Miriam Zukas

In attendance
Roisin Lynch, Tim Markham (for item 81), James Smith

72 MINUTES
Approved
72.2 The Minutes of the meeting of 29 April 2015.

73 ACTIONS
Received
73.1 An update on the progress against actions agreed at previous meetings. (SP 2014 48)
73.2 The Academic Registrar has updated Birkbeck’s Sites and Partnerships Agreement with the UK Visas and Immigration office, and is now awaiting their feedback.
73.3 The Vice Master will report to a future SPC meeting on options for a different reporting structure for the Equalities Committee and for a formal process for senior appointments as part of a wider review of governance at Birkbeck.

74 MASTER’S REPORT
Noted
74.1 The Master updated SPC on plans to continue to advocate for part-time study, alongside the Open University which was moving towards a renewed focus on part time provision. The best approach was likely to be to emphasise to the Government the benefits of retraining and career change.
74.2 The College has exchanged contracts for the Cambridge House property, and the next step is to consider how this building might best be used. One option is to move
the Baby Lab and proposed new Toddler Lab to the new building, and free up teaching space in Malet Street through a short sequence of moves. The Master thanked College Governor Peter Zinkin and the College Officers who had been involved with the purchase for all the work they had done.

74.3 The new property acquisition will contribute to the College’s strategy to increase teaching space in the medium term. However, the College will continue to explore ways to reach the eventual goal of having all teaching space within core Birkbeck buildings; and ways to improve existing teaching space in the short term, which might also involve donor funding.

74.4 Members heard that the College currently has large cash reserves and its investment fund manager does not wish to invest any more of the College’s money; the acquisition of Cambridge House is therefore useful both as an investment and as a resource which is beneficial to Birkbeck’s core business. Cambridge House is also a freehold building, and given the short leases granted on its buildings by the University of London, and the increasingly commercial approach UoL is taking to its estates strategy, it is likely to be beneficial to the College to have a mixture of external and University of London buildings.

75 SCHOOL AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE PLANS 2015-16

Received

75.1 A first draft of the School and Professional Services business plan narratives (SP 2014 49), including a draft College Corporate plan which will be forwarded to Governors and then come back through the next Committee cycle.

Noted

75.2 The individual School plans give a clear sense of School aims and aspirations, and the Professional Services plan will incorporate feedback from these plans. The Corporate Plan will bring the plans together. More thinking may be needed on a method for central engagement with the School plans and vice versa. The draft Corporate Plan would be discussed by Governors and then brought back to the next meeting of the Strategic Planning Committee. It would be revisited during next year’s planning round, giving participants the opportunity to refine planning and modelling and learn from this year’s experience. The Corporate Plan would be a working document outlining College strategy against which new initiatives and investments could be considered.

Action

75.3 (SJ) Contact the Executive Deans to follow up on issues around learning and teaching as detailed in the School plans.
Members noted the importance of including Professional Services in the planning process at an early stage to ensure that they can put the necessary support in place to help the Schools to grow, and the desirability of more extended discussion with the Pro Vice Masters as part of the planning process. SPC noted the need to invest in growth academically as well as through the estate, while acknowledging the difference between one-off capital expenditures and ongoing expenditure, and also the need for all investment to be shown to be sustainable and good value for money.

**Action**

**75.5** *(MI and KB)* Consider the best way to incorporate a collaborative meeting into the planning process to identify the synergies and conflicts in the various plans. This meeting should also look at staffing strategies and ensure comparability and equity across the College.

### BUDGET PROPOSALS 2015-16

**Considered**

**76.1** The financial position for 2014-15 and a draft budget for 2015-16. *(SP 2014 50)*

**Noted**

**76.2** The College expects to achieve its target surplus of 5% of income for the year. As predicted at the March meeting of SPC, tuition fee income is lower than the mid year prediction, and the contingency will be utilised to off-set this. More work will be done on investigating the reasons for this fall in income, which is likely to be due to a number of factors, for example that improved record-keeping has resulted in more timely adjustments for in-year withdrawals/interruptions. The Committee commended all those involved in the efforts to reduce bad debt, which have allowed the bad debt contingency to be reduced over the past few years.

**76.3** A reasonably prudent budget has been set for 2015-16, which provides a surplus of 5% of turnover in line with the College’s agreed financial strategy. As in previous years it is significantly dependent upon recruitment, and a contingency of £3.175 million has been included as a buffer against increased recruitment uncertainty.

**Recommended**

**76.4** That the draft budget for the financial year ending 31st July 2016 be forwarded to Governors for approval.

### STUDENT RECRUITMENT UPDATE

**Noted**

**77.1** The current student recruitment monitoring report. *(SP 2014 51)*

**77.2** Although applications and offers remain at a three year high for Birkbeck, the College needs to be cautious and continue to give attention to issues around
recruitment, particularly as the SNC removal and the possible introduction of postgraduate loans may create a volatile and unpredictable recruitment market. The Government’s proposal for postgraduate loans may not be in place by the 2015-16 academic year, but if and when this is introduced it will represent a big change in student recruitment. The current Government is in its early stages and its priorities for Higher Education are not yet clear but Birkbeck will begin to lobby relevant ministers in an attempt to influence policy.

77.3 Members noted that, although the recruitment figures are currently high compared to this time last year, this may be due in part to colleagues becoming more efficient and processing applications earlier in the cycle. SPC noted the difficulty in reliably modelling income at this stage based on conversion rates for previous years.

77.4 The Committee will continue to monitor the recruitment situation as it develops and keep receiving this paper at future meetings. Members asked for future versions of this report to include Tableau graphs so that all members are considering the same figures.

78 FEES, BURSARIES AND SCHOLARSHIPS COMMITTEE
Noted

78.1 Report of the Fees, Bursaries and Scholarships Committee. (SP 2014 52)

78.2 Members commended the Academic Registrar and the Director of Finance for their work on the Fees Policy, and noted the importance of this work in ensuring that the College is compliant with consumer legislation. The Academic Registrar thanked the School Managers for their work on the policy, the current draft of which will be circulated to SPC after they have commented. There was a short time frame for comment due to the need to include the policy in the enrolment Terms and Conditions by next week. Members noted that as this will be the first year of the policy it is important to exercise discretion in applying it where students may not have been given the correct advice. Seminars are being held to clarify the policy to staff and SPC were asked to encourage their colleagues to attend.

79 CORPORATE INFORMATION SYSTEMS STRATEGY
Received

79.1 The Corporate Information Systems strategy (SP 2014 53). Members thanked the Director of Process Improvement and Corporate Information Systems for this useful document, which describes the College’s vision for how we want to build the CIS landscape. They key principle for approaching systems projects such as the replacement of the HR, Payroll and Finance systems should be to ensure that users have as seamless as experience as possible.

Noted
Members noted the strategy’s aim to ensure that user support can be appropriately devolved to business process owners. The growth in the range and complexity of facilities provided online means that it is increasingly unrealistic to expect them all to be supported by a single ‘expert group’. Systems and processes are inextricably linked, and there is a core need to improve understanding of our processes across the College, in order to get the most benefit out of our systems and ensure that users are provided with the most appropriate support as well as a seamless integrated experience.

**HR FINANCE AND PAYROLL SYSTEMS**

Received

80.1 An update on the HR Finance and Payroll Systems replacement project *(SP 2014 54)*

Noted

80.2 It is important to communicate the absolutely essential nature of this change to all staff, and engage with colleagues to gauge their requirements in a way that will elicit the most useful responses. At this stage the focus is on procuring underpinning technology to enable the College’s aspirations. Implementation will be an iterative process that focuses initially on essential priorities while leaving doors open for further developments.

**Action**

80.3 *(JS)* Continue to provide feedback on the requirement gathering process to senior Colleagues and report regularly to SPC.

80.4 *(JS)* Prepare a report on the project to the Audit Committee, as this is a major College project.

**STUDENT PROGRESSION, RETENTION AND SUCCESS AT LEVEL 4**

Received

81.1 A project initiation document on developing this strand of work after the Catalyst programme *(SP 2014 55)*

Noted

81.2 The Committee was asked to endorse this project initiation document on developing work to enhance and develop progression, retention and success of students studying at Level 4, following on from the work done by the Catalyst Student Achievement and Success working group.

81.3 Members heard that increasing data on student retention is available to inform this work, including the NSS and other surveys, module evaluations and other student feedback. There was of course a need to acknowledge that there are departmental
variations in practice and a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is unlikely to be the most appropriate. It was confirmed that the scope of the project would include all Level 4 provision, included embedded provision such as HEIS, and low risk-entry routes. Members noted that uncertainty was often the cause of insecurity and dissatisfaction, and that setting explicit expectations with Level 4 students about what to expect from university could improve retention and success.

81.4 The Committee agreed that it supports the direction of this work in broad terms. It asked for more work to be done to identify specific deliverables and actions, and analyse which areas are likely to have the biggest impact, to enable consideration and prioritisation for the upcoming phase of College projects.

82 RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK
Endorsed
82.1 A description of the Unit of Assessment co-ordinator role, with responsibilities for leading preparation of UoA submissions in the next REF evaluation. (SP 2014 56)

Noted
82.2 The paper formalises the expectation that all Unit of Assessment leads will stay in their roles and defer any study leave or sabbaticals until the next REF exercise. There had previously been a discussion about a financial allowance for the role; however it was felt that staff members at this level would prefer to be rewarded with additional time for study leave.

Action
82.3 (SF and JS) Write to Unit of Assessment Leads regarding the role description.

83 EXTRA SPC MEETING
83.1 Several items of business listed on the agenda, together with post-Governors discussion of the Corporate Plan and financial forecasts, were postponed to an additional meeting of the Strategic Planning Committee in early July.

84 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING
Noted
84.1 The dates of the meetings in the next session:
- 1 July 2015 at 10am
- 16 September 2015
- 19 October 2015 at 2pm
- 10 December 2015 at 2pm
- 11 February 2016 at 2pm
- 22 March 2016 at 2pm
- 12 May 2016 at 2pm
- 6 June 2016 at 2pm