



COUNCIL (STRATEGY MEETING)

Open Minutes

Of the meeting held on Tuesday, 01 June 2021 via Microsoft Teams.

Present: Dr Michael Hipkins (Independent [Chair]); Irene Kirkman (Independent [Deputy Chair]; Emma Binnie (PSE representative); Professor Nick Braisby (Vice-Chancellor); Andy Cole (Independent); Anna Crabtree (Independent); Annet Gamell (Independent); Tamsin Grainger (Students' Union President); John Hathaway (Senate nominee); Tim Marshall (Co-opted); Ken McCrea (Co-opted); Anthony Murphy (Independent); Dr Susan Rosser (Independent); Karen Satterford (Co-opted); John Smith (Independent); Supriya Sobti (Independent)

In attendance: Professor Rachel Cragg (Pro Vice-Chancellor: Education and Digital); Honor Fletcher (Students' Union President-elect); Trevor Gabriele (Director of Finance); Julie Griggs (Interim Director of Human Resources); Ian Harper (Director of Commercial and Business Development); Matt Hiely-Rayner (Director of Strategic Planning and Change); Ellie Smith (University Secretary and Clerk to the Council); Dr Marcus Wood (Minute Secretary)

Apologies: Professor Gavin Brooks (Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor); Professor Florin Ioras (Senate nominee); Jordan Penning (Student); Dr Cheryl Pitt (Academic representative); Bob Shennan (Independent);

Welcome

21.59 The Chair welcomed members. He also welcomed Honor Fletcher, the Students' Union President-elect, who would be observing the meeting before formally joining Council for its next meeting. Council congratulated Miss Fletcher on her recent election.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

21.60 No conflicts of interest were declared.

Appointment of Pro-Chancellor

21.61 Council approved the nomination, on the recommendation of the Honorary Awards Committee, of the incoming Chair of Council, Ms Maggie Galliers CBE, as Pro-Chancellor of the University, to serve in this role for their term of office as Chair of Council.

- 21.62 It was confirmed that the role of Pro-Chancellor was an honorary position. While it was envisaged that the Chair of Council would typically be appointed to this role, this did not preclude others also being appointed to the role in due course.

Comprehensive Spending Review 2021

- 21.63 The Vice-Chancellor gave an overview of some of the challenges that may feature in the forthcoming Government Comprehensive Spending Review planned for the Autumn. These followed the Augar review recommendations and recent sector consultations around quality and standards, recurrent and capital funding for FE/HE. Key drivers included the need to manage the country's debt levels following the pandemic.
- 21.64 Council discussed the following scenarios:
- a. Scenario One: Imposition of **minimum grade points for admission** to University entry which may see a number of current students fall below the minimum threshold proposed.
 - b. Scenario Two: **Reform to the teaching grant** and potentially **differential tuition fees** for subjects based on their cost and perceived value to students and taxpayers which would impact many creative arts programmes.
 - c. Scenario Three: **Removal of Foundation Year funding** impacting offerings at both the University and its partners where foundation year numbers play an important part.
 - d. Scenario Four: **A reduction in the headline tuition fee to £7,500**, especially where this is not offset by a rise in the teaching grant, impacting income levels.
- 21.65 Council considered that some of the IFS data was questionable, especially around the perceived value of courses, while it was noted that many of the scenarios would have the greatest impact on disadvantaged students. However, there were opportunities to strengthen strategic links with local Further Education providers to cultivate pipelines into various subject areas, especially if Foundation Year funding was redirected to FE – widely considered to be underfunded.
- 21.66 It was noted that some degree of austerity is inevitable given the financial pressures on the country. Therefore practical steps should be taken to improve efficiency and reduce the University's unit of resource: ensuring programmes were run as efficiently as possible by improving staff-student ratios and increasing the number of students on a smaller number of programmes; and sharing 'back office' functions (HR, finance, accommodation management etc.) with other providers.

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill 2021

- 21.67 Council discussed the Bill which had its first reading in Parliament in May 2021 and sought to bring forward a range of measures aimed at strengthening and extending existing legislation on freedom of speech and academic freedom in higher education.
- 21.68 Development of the Bill was linked to Government concern that higher education providers had more to do to comply with their duty set out in Section 43 of the

Education (No. 2) Act 1986 “to take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the establishment and for visiting speakers”. Concerns followed a small number of high profile incidents at universities where it was considered that free speech had become constrained.

21.69 Measures outlined in draft proposals included:

- the appointment of a Free Speech and Academic Freedom Champion to the OfS Board with the power to investigate breaches and recommend redress
- introduction of a new, ongoing condition of registration on free speech and academic freedom
- a duty on higher education providers actively to promote free speech and academic freedom on campus, a strengthening of previous legislation, and for the duty to be extended to students’ unions
- ability for individuals to seek legal redress for losses they have suffered as a result of a breach
- extension of academic freedom contractual protections for academic staff to cover other staff such as visiting fellows and recruitment and promotion opportunities
- minimum standards for codes of practice setting out the procedures to be followed by students and staff in connection with the organisation of meetings and activities taking place on a higher education provider or students’ union premises

21.70 The Students’ Union President noted that the SU had also considered the proposals but considered that its existing policies for societies’ activities met the requirements being proposed.

21.71 Council broadly welcomed the support for free speech and academic freedom as important principles for academic debate, but considered that many of the proposals were already enshrined in the existing Education Act and extensions were therefore unnecessary.

21.72 Meanwhile, Council considered that there was some confusion within the proposals around the lawful / non lawful nature of some contributions, including:

- contributions on some topics that were considered offensive to various groups and deeply unpopular to society as a whole, but not illegal – such as holocaust denial. Official comments on this subject had been contradictory and were not helpful.
- contributions on topics that would conflict with the University’s PREVENT duty to minimise the risk of individuals being drawn into terrorism and to ensure vulnerable individuals receive timely and appropriate support. This was particularly important given the town’s previous association with terrorist activity and extremist demonstrations.

A requirement to allow such debates to take place could harm community relations and damage institutional reputation impacting on recruitment.

- 21.73 In due course, the University would draft for approval a policy on Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in compliance with final requirements in the bill.

Action: University Secretary

Student Union President's report

- 21.74 Council considered the SU President's report on SU activities across the previous year. While activities had been significantly impacted by COVID-19, in particular sporting events, some activities had gone ahead and the University had 'won' the Varsity challenge for a third year running, albeit that the victory could not be formally recorded due to the impact of the pandemic.
- 21.75 Council commended the SU President for successfully steering the Union through an extremely challenging and unprecedented set of events.

Missenden Abbey Update

- 21.76 Council received an update from the Director of Finance where it was noted that the Missenden Abbey Board had approved a strategic direction to develop the Abbey as a Hotel and International Hotel School offering authentic education for the hospitality industry. An external adviser had been appointed and indicative financial requirements drawn up. The Business Case would be finalised and presented to the next meeting of Council.

Any Other Business

- 21.77 Council noted that it was Ms Tamsin Grainger's final Council meeting in her term of office as Students' Union President. Council warmly thanked Ms Grainger for her contributions to the Students' Union, Council and University over the previous year and wished her well in her future career.

Date of next meeting

- 21.78 The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 20 July 2021, where business items would be considered. It was hoped that, subject to confirmation of easing of coronavirus restrictions on 21 June, the meeting would take place in person at Missenden Abbey and would be followed by the annual Council member's dinner. Arrangements would be confirmed as soon as possible. It was hoped that the meeting could be joined by the incoming Chair of Council.