

Council

23/64 A meeting of the Council was held on Thursday 28 September 2023 at 2.00 pm in Room 201, Carrington Building, Whiteknights.

Present:

The President (for Minutes 23/64-23/77)
 The Vice-Presidents (Mr K Corrigan and Mrs K. Owen)
 The Vice-Chancellor
 The Deputy Vice-Chancellor
 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Dr C. Baylon)
 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor E. McCrum) (for Minutes 23/64-23/66)
 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor D. Zaum)

Mr S. Alexander
 Mr S. Ali
 Professor E. Beleska Spasova
 Professor R. Frazier
 Professor J. Gibbins
 Mr E. Gregory
 Mr J. Jack
 Ms S. Jordan

Ms S. Maple
 Mr P. Milhofer
 Mrs S. Plank
 Mr N. Richards
 Dr C. Shaw
 Professor K. Strohfeltd
 Dr J. Young

In attendance:

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary
 The Director of Finance
 The Director of Quality Support and Development
 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor P. Miskell) (for Minutes 23/64-23/67)

Apologies for absence were received from: Mrs S. Butler, Mrs P. Egan, and Mr A. McCallum.

[The decisions taken by the Council were approved by those members who were absent at the meeting]

23/65 President's opening remarks

The President:

- Welcomed Dr Caroline Baylon, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International), to Council and wished her success in her new responsibilities;
- Advised that, due to the unavoidable absence of a number of lay members, the meeting was inquorate. The meeting would consider

- the scheduled business and the outcomes of its discussion would be reported to the absent members for their consideration; if the absent members gave their assent, the resolutions would become effective;
- Referred to the helpful tour of the Thames Valley Science Park and the site for the proposed Loddon Garden Village, which had preceded the meeting of Council. On behalf of Council, she thanked Nigel Frankland, Strategic Estates Manager, for the tour and for his expert explanation of the proposals for the site. Mr Frankland would be pleased to offer a tour to any member who had not been able to attend this morning;
 - Expressed appreciation of the recent Henley graduation ceremonies, which she had attended;
 - Commended to lay members the Vice-Chancellor's all-staff talks, which provided valuable insight into the University's work and staff engagement.

23/66 Update on National Student Survey and Teaching Excellence Framework

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) (Professor McCrum) reported on the University's results in the National Student Survey (NSS) 2023 and in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023.

Professor McCrum reported that the University had performed well in this year's NSS. While noting that changes in the NSS methodology and questions meant that precise comparisons with previous years were not possible, she advised that the University had improved its performance in most sections. The University's scores were above benchmark in all sections except one and above the sector average in all sections except two. It performed strongly in questions about 'Teaching on my course', Learning Resources, and Academic Support, and significant further work was needed in relation to Assessment and Feedback, Student Voice, and Communication of Mental Health Services. Performance in Schools varied significantly. Actions were being taken both at University- and School-level to address issues.

In the TEF, the University had achieved a Silver rating overall and for both Student Experience and Student Outcomes, the two sections within the TEF. The detailed TEF report on the University's performance identified a number of outstanding features, including:

- Research, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement, noting research-informed teaching, use of specialist research resources in teaching, and embedding professional practice and employer engagement across a range of provision contributed to an outstanding academic experience for students.
- Approaches to supporting student success, noting a holistic approach and uses of tailored approaches that were highly effective in ensuring students succeeded in and progress beyond their studies.

- Continuation, completion, and progression rates, noting evidence of very high continuation and completion rates for all groups of students, with outstanding rates for some groups of students and outstanding rates of progression in some subject areas and student groups.

Some 46 higher education providers had achieved Gold, 100 Silver, and 29 Bronze; 53 outcomes were pending (i.e. under appeal). No universities had been rated 'Needs improvement'.

The University considered that its Silver ratings fairly represented the University's performance against the criteria. The detailed feedback from the TEF panel confirmed the value of the University's work to date in improving the student experience and outcomes, and, along with analysis of TEF reports on practice in other institutions, would inform future work.

The Council thanked Professor McCrum and colleagues for their work in achieving this outcome.

23/67 Disclosure of interests (Item 2)

The Council received a list of members' interests, and members were asked to notify the Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary of any amendments.

Presentations

23/68 Student Access and Participation (Item 3)

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) (Professor P. Miskell) gave a presentation of the University's most recent Student Access and Participation Plan.

Professor Miskell explained that the University's Access and Participation Plan responded to a twin imperative: the University's ethical commitment to ensuring that people from all social groups were equally able to join and succeed in our programmes; and the fulfilment of the regulatory requirement, under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, to have such a Plan and to take all reasonable steps to comply with it. Across the sector and over many years, work on access (attracting under-represented groups to programmes) had matured, and the focus of the Office for Students (OfS) and universities had increasingly shifted towards improving the success of students from under-represented groups while they were at university.

Professor Miskell reported that the University had volunteered to be one of the first wave of 40 universities to follow the new OfS guidance on Access and Participation Plans 2024-29. Under the new guidance, Plans were required to take an explicitly risk-based approach, linked to the OfS Equal Opportunities Risk Register (EORR), and the OfS had developed a data dashboard to inform providers' decision-making and monitoring. The OfS was concerned that providers evaluate the success of their various initiatives and publish their evaluations to inform the development of effective practice across the sector.

Professor Miskell advised that the University's new Plan had been submitted in July 2023. The University's priorities, set out in the Plan, focused on:

- By working with partner schools, supporting removal of attainment gaps at the age of 16 (KS4) for black students and those in IMD4 or receiving free school meals;
- Ensuring our entry cohort reflected the demography of the age cohort in the south-east, London and south-west;
- Ensuring students from under-represented groups continued on and successfully completed their programmes;
- Eliminating gaps in degree outcomes and positive Graduate Outcomes which correlated with categories of disadvantage most relevant to each measure.

Progress would be achieved through four or five specific activities related to each objective.

In response to questions, Professor Miskell advised that:

- The broad themes had changed little between the previous and new Plans, but there had been some change in the groups of students identified in relation to each of the themes;
- The University was working to develop a consistent approach to evaluation across the range of initiatives;
- The targets identified in the Plan were University-wide, but in practice much of the work would focus on a more limited number of Schools where the relevant groups of students were mainly represented;
- The University was sharing ideas and practice with some other higher education providers participating in the first wave.

The President asked the Student Experience Committee to take broad oversight of this work.

23/69 Reading Students' Union priorities (Item 4)

The Council received a paper setting out the RSU Officers' priorities for 2023/24.

The RSU President and RSU Education Officer gave a presentation elaborating on their priorities, which reflected the principal concerns of the student body. Their overarching priority was to increase student engagement by working in the following four areas:

1. Inclusivity and belonging
Activities included: promoting a pledge against hate speech; creation of an Events Committee with an inclusive membership to share feedback on RSU events from a wider range of perspectives and to gather ideas for future events; and increasing opportunities to celebrate the range of cultures represented among students.
2. Cost of living

Activities included: a discounted Savers menu and free tea and coffee in RSU venues; an Academic Resource Fund to assist students in financial difficulty to purchase textbooks and other essential resources; and a fund to remove financial barriers which prevented students from participating in societies and clubs.

3. Safety

Activities included: reviewing the security arrangements in the RSU venue and raising awareness among students of the security measures in place; working with UPP and Street Pastors with a view to the extension of their support services to Union night and similarly working with the Safer Streets Partnership; and providing Bystander Training and Consent Training.

4. Housing

Activities included: partnering with Student Hand, a company which provided a guarantor service for international students seeking private rental accommodation; and improving information for students about their rights as renters.

In response to questions, the RSU President and RSU Education Officer indicated that the lower participation rates in clubs and societies could reasonably be attributed, in part, to cost of living pressures and, in part, to a legacy of the pandemic which meant that young people were generally less inclined to get involved in groups. However, the officers reported that RSU events during Welcome Week had been very successful and that the 2024 entry cohort appeared to be more engaged than recent cohorts. The RSU team was committed to promoting participation in clubs, societies and events, both for their intrinsic value and for their benefits for students' wellbeing and personal development. The Council welcomed RSU's work in this area. Lay members noted that employers were concerned that nationally recent graduates appeared to lack the social skills necessary for their roles.

The RSU Education Officer confirmed that prevention of sexual harassment and training in consent continued to be a priority and was well integrated into RSU's core business.

23/70 Loddon Garden Village (Item 5)

The Council received a paper on the progress of the proposal for Loddon Garden Village.

The Vice-Chancellor outlined the background to the proposal, referring to the importance of Loddon Garden Village to Wokingham Borough Council's Local Plan. The Local Plan was expected to include some 3,750 homes in the development, with the volume of social housing and the provision of local facilities subject to later consideration.

The Vice-Chancellor reminded Council that the development would mainly be on land held by the NIRD Trust, with a smaller portion on University land. He reported that the NIRD Trust Committee had considered, and had agreed

to support, the proposal, which would serve to increase the value of NIRD's assets and allow increased investment in research in fulfilment of its charitable purposes. The University's scoping study of agrifood research, led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, was expected to report before the sale of the land was completed.

The Vice-Chancellor explained alternative models by which the University might take the development forward, which would involve different balances of risk and financial returns. A decision on the model to be adopted would be required in due course. The strong recommendation in the paper was for a "Didcot style" model, i.e. the University would dispose of the land whilst minimizing its financial infrastructure and planning obligations.

In response to questions, the Vice-Chancellor:

- Affirmed the University's commitment to involve the local community in shaping local amenities, heritage sites, transport and the eco valley;
- Recognised the capacity constraints within the University Executive Board and the governance challenges presented by a project of this scale. He believed that, at this stage, it was important that the Vice-Chancellor was seen to be leading the work, given its political dimension, but that, in due course, there would be greater reliance on external consultants and the Commercial Advisory Group. The governance arrangements would be reviewed when the model for taking the development forward were confirmed;
- Agreed that a timeline would be prepared for Council which would set out the different phases of the project and the decisions which would be required at each stage;
- Indicated that eco valley would be an outstanding amenity for the local community and would be highlighted in communications about Loddon Garden Village;
- Explained that the extent to which dairying research facilities would be required at Farley Hall Farm would depend on the outcomes of the review of agri-food research;
- Advised, in response to a question from the RSU President, that, for reasons of commercial confidentiality, it had not been possible to communicate openly with students about the farm purchase. However, the student interest was being protected through the initiatives relating to the farm sale and purchase. The timescales meant that no current student would be affected by any of the proposed changes;
- [redacted, Section 43]

Resolved:

Acting both as Trustee of the NIRD Trust and as Council of the University, to approve [redacted, Section 43].

[redacted, Section 43]

[redacted, Section 43]

[redacted, Section 43]

[redacted, Section 43]

Council, acting as Trustee of NIRD, RESOLVED that:

[redacted, Section 43]

Council RESOLVED that:

[redacted, Section 43]

23/71 Report of the Appointments and Governance Committee (Item 6)

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) and Director of Finance recused themselves from discussion of this item and withdrew.

The Council received a Report of the meeting of the Appointments and Governance Committee held on 21 August 2023.

Mrs Owen, as Chair of the Committee, reported that the Committee, following a searching discussion, was content to recommend the arrangements now proposed. In relation to the proposed arrangements to cover the vacancy of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource), members of Council expressed concern about capacity and stretch in the executive team pending an appointment to the substantive post. Mrs Owen clarified that the process for appointing the University's Senior Financial Officer would be determined by the selection committee following appropriate consultation.

The Council noted that the President, acting on its behalf, had approved the appointment of Mr A. McCallum and Ms S. Maple to the Joint Standing Committee of Council and Senate on Honorary Degrees.

Resolved:

“That:

1. Professor Dominik Zaum be appointed interim Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) for a period of 6 months to ensure continuity for the planning process for the 2024/25 academic year, relinquishing his 0.8 FTE job-share as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) for this period;
2. The post of Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) be filled on a substantive basis following an internal-only appointment process;
3. Professor Parveen Yaqoob be appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor for a further two-year term, subject to her continuing as Pro-Vice-Chancellor;

4. The Report of the meeting of the Appointments and Governance Committee held on 21 August 2023, now submitted, be approved.”

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) and Director of Finance returned to the meeting.

23/72 Response to the most recent consultation on USS (Item 7)

The Council received a paper on the University’s response to an employer consultation on the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) 2023 Valuation.

The Director of Finance outlined the proposals on which the USS was consulting and their background. The proposals, based on the 2023 valuation of the scheme, included provisions for a substantial reduction in contributions by both employers (from 21.6% to 14.5%) and employees (from 9.8% to 6.1%) and an increase in future benefit accrual back to 2022 levels. The current proposals would improve the University’s financial position by some £32.1m over the next five years; if contributions were reduced without an uplift in benefits, the improvement would amount to £58.9m. The Director noted that the proposed changes were possible because, based on the 2023 valuation, the scheme was in surplus. The surplus resulted from the rise in long-term interest rates and expected asset returns; if, however, interest rates were 1.4% lower, the scheme would return to deficit.

The Director of Finance explained that the timing of the consultation over the summer was unfortunate and had provided limited opportunity for Council and the governing bodies of other member institutions to discuss fully the implications of the proposals and alternative approaches. He reported that Universities UK/UCU had endorsed the USS proposals in March 2023.

The Council discussed the USS proposals at length. Some members observed that the corporate sector had discontinued defined benefit pensions schemes many years previously, and they expressed concern about the cost of the USS for employers and employers’ unlimited liability. Some members questioned whether, given the financial position of much of the sector, a decision to increase employee benefits was sustainable and whether, in the sector generally, it might lead to redundancies. In response to questions, the Director of Finance advised that the USS had never consulted on the possibility of closing the scheme to new members and explained that the cost to the University of withdrawing from the scheme would be wholly unaffordable.

The Vice-Chancellor acknowledged the points raised, but noted that employees had a greater role in the governance of the USS than would commonly be the case in corporate pension schemes. It was incumbent on both employers and the employee representatives to work together to secure the long-term sustainability of the scheme; this project would be achieved by building trust and constructive relationships between both parties and would not be assisted by a dissenting view at this stage.

The Council regretted that the opportunity to consider and respond to the consultation had been so limited. It asked the Director of Finance to send a note to USS raising its concerns.

Resolved:

“That the University’s response to the consultation on the Universities Superannuation Scheme 2023 Valuation, with particular reference to Section C, now submitted, be approved.”

Items for report

23/73 Report of the Vice-Chancellor (Item 8)

The Council received the Report of the Vice-Chancellor.

The Vice-Chancellor:

- (a) confirmed that the University remained committed to delivering the 2023/24 budget as approved by Council in July, acknowledging the need to manage the positive and negative movements identified to date (principally, the anticipated reduction in USS contributions and the shortfall against the student recruitment target) and further future movements;
- (b) reported on the appointment of heads of the new Directorates. The University’s 19 Functions had been grouped into eight Directorates in order to simplify the structure of professional services, streamline processes, facilitate collaborative working, and empower the collective leadership of professional services to shape provision to serve the University’s priorities. Where a new Directorate corresponded, wholly or largely, with an existing function, the current Head of Function had been appointed as Director. Where the new Directorate did not largely correspond to an existing Function, appointments had been made through a competitive internal process. Directors were appointed as follows:

Chief Digital and Information Officer: Stuart Brown

Director of Estates: Andrew Casselden

Director of External Relations: Fiona Blair

Director of Finance: Andrew Grice

Director of HR: Claire Rolstone

Director of Planning, Governance and Legal: Julie Rowe

Director of Research and Innovation: Karen Henderson

Director of Student Experience and Education: Matt White.

The Vice-Chancellor reminded Council that, while comparisons were difficult, evidence suggested that professional services at the University cost more than at comparable universities. He reported that the new Directors were confident that significant savings could be delivered without a detrimental reduction in the level of service. The Directors

would be responsible for submissions to the forthcoming planning process for the period 2024/25-2028/29. The Council congratulated the new Directors on their appointment.

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary reported that the new School of Art building had opened, and had attracted a very positive reaction from students and staff, including a comment that it was 'transformational'. The Council asked that they have an opportunity to visit the building in due course.

Resolved:

"That the Report of the Vice-Chancellor, now submitted, be received."

23/74 Financial update, admissions update and implications (Item 9)

The Council received an update report on finance, admissions and their implications.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Resource and Planning) (Professor Zaum) explained that admissions for 2023/24 remained a work in progress and the numbers continued to change; in consequence, there were large error bars in the various projections. The position differed for undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and transnational education categories.

[redacted, Section 43]

[redacted, Section 43]

[redacted, Section 43]

Overall, the recruitment position implied a shortfall of £0-6m, with the most probable outcome being in the region of £2-3m. Its impact would be mitigated by the expected reduction in the University's USS contribution.

Professor Zaum noted the ambitious recruitment targets for the coming year and advised that, in order to drive growth in student numbers, the University would:

- [redacted, Section 43]
- [redacted, Section 43]
- [redacted, Section 43]

In order to maintain student numbers, the University would work to improve the continuation rates for current students, which had become less secure in the post-pandemic environment and with cost-of-living pressures.

In response to questions, Professor Zaum:

- Confirmed that the University's improved position in the QS World University Rankings 2024 had had a positive impact on the conversion of international students, and that it was important to maintain this position;

- Explained that the increase in the numbers of Foundation students was largely due to the introduction of a Foundation year in Henley Business School, that controls on numbers of Foundation students were necessary for some programmes due to laboratory capacity and other constraints, and that improving continuation rates of Foundation students throughout their programme was a priority;
- Explained that the sector-level decline in recruitment reflected a roll-back from inflated A level grades during the pandemic and represented a reversion to pre-pandemic participation rates;
- Confirmed that the demographic spike in 18 year olds continued until 2030 and then declined rapidly;
- Indicated that future reports on recruitment plans and outcomes to Council and others should be clearer about margins of error and other caveats, indicate trends, and present information more visually;
- Clarified that the improvement required of Henley Business School amounted in total to £3.4m in 2023/24, including £2m which had already been agreed during the five-year planning process.

The Scrutiny and Finance Committee would consider an update on admissions numbers and their financial implications at its next meeting.

Resolved:

“That an update report on finance, admissions and their implications, now submitted, be received.”

23/75 Conclusions from the appraisal meetings conducted by the President and Vice-Presidents with each member of Council (Item 10)

The Council received a report on annual appraisal discussions with members of Council. Members were encouraged to raise with the President and Vice-Presidents throughout the year suggestions on how Council could improve its effectiveness or how individuals might be able to contribute further to Council’s work.

Resolved:

“That a report on annual appraisal discussions with members of Council, now submitted, be received.”

23/76 Corporate Risk Register and associated actions (Item 11)

The Council received the Corporate Risk Register and a paper on associated actions.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor Zaum) explained that, in view of the rapidly changing external environment and the University’s consideration of its risk appetite, it was important that strategic risk management was embedded more explicitly in the work of Council committees. The risks identified in the Corporate Risk Register had been mapped to relevant

committees of Council (and to Senate), and chairs were asked to ensure that, over the course of the year, their committees explore in greater detail one or more of the assigned risks. Chairs were also asked to identify other issues within the scope of their committees which might constitute a strategic risk.

In response to a question, Professor Zaum confirmed that the shortfall against the student recruitment target had prompted reflection on the effectiveness of the mitigations identified in the Corporate Risk Register and consideration of possible further mitigations.

Resolved:

“That the Corporate Risk Register and a paper on associated actions, now submitted, be received.”

23/77 Freedom of speech (Item 12)

The Council received a briefing paper on the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and its potential implications for the University.

The Vice-Chancellor explained that Act placed a series of obligations on the University and on the Students' Union, including a duty not only to protect but to promote freedom of speech and academic freedom, and created a new mandatory Condition of Registration with the Office for Students (OfS) requiring compliance with the provisions of the Act. The University had convened a working group to considering the implications of the Act for the University's policies and practices. The Vice-Chancellor reported that he had had a constructive discussion about the Act and its implementation with the OfS Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom. Council would receive a full presentation on the Act and its implications at its November meeting.

The Council asked that the Student Experience Committee, at its next meeting, give some consideration to the Act and its implications for the University and the Students' Union.

Resolved:

“That a briefing paper on the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, now submitted, be received.”

The President had to leave at this point to fulfil another commitment on behalf of the University. Mr Corrigan, as Vice-President, took the chair.

23/78 Suggested items for future Council meetings (Item 13)

The Council received an update on topics for future Council meetings.

Members suggested that Council might usefully consider how the University was engaging with strategic partners, such as the British Museum, Natural

History Museum and Shinfield Studios, to develop synergies and maximise the value of such partnerships to the University. Members also looked forward to updates on the progress of key strategies, including the future development of Henley Business School.

Members asked that the papers to support the forthcoming discussion of University of Reading Malaysia (UoRM) should include: an outline of the original proposal, including objectives, targets, and the grounds of the original decision; a statement tracking UoRM's cumulative losses; and options for the future. A similar focus on performance against original targets might also be useful in discussing other matters.

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary invited members to contact him with suggestions of topics for future discussion.

Resolved:

“That a paper on suggested topics for discussion by Council, now submitted, be received.”

Items for note

23/79 Minutes (23/39-23/63) of the meeting held on 3 July 2023 (Item 14)

The Minutes (23/39-23/63) of the meeting held on 3 July 2023 were confirmed and signed.

23/80 Decisions taken by the President on behalf of the Council (Item 16)

The Council noted that the President had approved:

1. the appointment of Emeritus Professor Sarah Brewer to the vacancy for a lay member on the University Research Ethics Committee;
2. having been advised by the Chair of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, a project with a budget of £7.08m for pavilions and cricket pitches at Shinfield, as part of the University's obligations under the Section 106 agreement. The project was within the £15.8m budget for the Shinfield legacy programme approved by the Council in July 2018 and had no implications for the 2023-24 financial forecast;
3. having been advised by the Chair of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, a Network Refresh project with a total budget of £4.15m, of which £3.5m was capital, and which would take place over a four-year period starting in 2023-24.

23/81 Membership and Terms of Reference (Item 17.1)

The Council received a statement of its Membership and Terms of Reference.

23/82 Council Standing Orders (Item 17.2)

The Council noted the Council Standing Orders.

23/83 Documents sealed and to be sealed (Item 17.3)

The Council received a list of documents sealed and to be sealed.

Resolved:

"That the Council approve the action taken by the Officers and Members in affixing the University Seal to documents sealed since the last Ordinary Meeting of the Council and authorise the Seal of the University to be affixed to the documents to be sealed as now reported."

23/84 Further meetings in the Session 2023/24

Further meetings of the Council in the Session 2023/24 had been scheduled for:

Wednesday 22 November 2023, 10.00 am-2.00 pm (preceded by an informal meeting and dinner the previous evening)
Tuesday 23 January 2024, 12 noon-5.00 pm
Monday 11 March 2024, 12 noon-5.00 pm
Monday 1 July 2024, 12 noon-5.00 pm.

23/85 Reflections on the meeting (Item 20)

The Vice-President invited reflections on the meeting. It was suggested that it would be helpful to have earlier information about more complex matters for decision and an opportunity to explore them at greater length in the meeting. The Council noted the constraints of externally imposed deadlines which often did not sit well with the cycle of Council meetings, and recognised that forward planning for Council meetings sought to prepare the ground for major decisions by providing early, in-depth consideration of issues at meetings well in advance of a decision. The Council acknowledged the possibility of extending Council meetings to a full day, but was mindful of the significant time commitment already expected from members of the Council.