Council: Minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2015

Present: The Chair of Council
The Vice-Chancellor
Pro-Chancellor (Mr D Tecwyn)
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor D Smith)

Mr R Armitage
Mr M Galloway
Mr R Hide
Mrs D Jagger
Mrs M Loffill
Mr J Lister
Mr S Maguire (SU)
Mrs J McAleese
Professor P Sells
Professor L Stewart
Professor R Taylor
Ms J Unwin

In attendance: The Registrar and Secretary, Dr D Duncan
The Director of Finance, Mr J Lindley
Governance Officer, Dr P Evans
The HR Director, Mrs P Lofthouse (for M14-15/66)

Apologies for absence were received from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the Pro-Chancellor (Mrs L Wild), the Treasurer and Ms J Horvatic (GSA).

14-15/57 Politics Department Presentation

Council received a presentation from Professor Neil Carter, Dr Ignacio Jurado and Dr Nicole Lindstrom (Department of Politics) on the outcome of the 2015 UK general election.

14-15/58 Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

Members were invited to declare any potential conflicts of interest relating to the business of the meeting.

As Director of the Centre, Professor Stewart declared an interest in the item of business relating to staffing in the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (M14-15/61 below refers).
14-15/59 Minutes

The unreserved minutes of the meeting held on 27 February 2015 were approved (C.14-15/53). Council also noted the action schedule based on the minutes (C.14-15/54).

14-15/60 Piazza Building

Further to M14-15/34, it was noted that a report on financing the Piazza Building on Heslington East would be brought to the next meeting.

14-15/61 Staffing in Centre for Reviews and Dissemination

Further to M14-15/35, Council received for information an update on staffing in the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (C.14-15/55). Council congratulated the Centre’s Director and the HR Department for successfully minimising the redundancies arising from loss of a major contract.

14-15/62 HE Code of Governance


During discussion the following points were noted:

(a) The reference in the model to establishing a human resources strategy was not included in the proposed Statement as this was not consistent with Council practice. Likewise the reference to Council being the “employing authority for all staff” had been removed as this did not apply to pre-92 institutions.

(b) As regards the reference in the model to procedures for handling internal grievances, it was agreed that this was covered by the preceding reference to “systems of control and accountability” and could therefore be omitted.

(c) The provisions of the new Statement were consistent with the terms of the relevant University Statute relating to Council.

(d) It was agreed that it would be useful to provide an ‘assurance map’ that linked the fourteen provisions of the Statement to the means by which Council currently fulfilled each responsibility.
(e) The suggested scope of the next quinquennial Council effectiveness review would be presented for approval early in 2015/16.

Following the above discussion, Council approved the new Statement, noting that it would be made publicly available on its website and included in the corporate governance statement in the 2015 University Annual Report.

14-15/63 Executive Report from the Vice-Chancellor

Council received an Executive Report from the Vice-Chancellor (C.14-15/57) covering the following areas:

- general and local election results and implications for the University;
- Guardian league table position;
- developments in the Biovale initiative;
- University visits to China and the United States;
- opening of Quantum Communications Hub;
- appointment of Research Champions;
- award of prestigious Leverhulme Fellowships.

During discussion the following points were noted:

(a) The main risk areas for the University in the post-election political climate related to student number controls, the science budget, immigration and the UK’s future relationship with the EU. Also, as well as the in-year savings required to be made in the BIS budget (£450m), the Chancellor was expected to announce further funding cuts in an emergency budget on 8 July 2015.

(b) Strong collaboration would be required with local MPs and local government officers to promote and support the University’s role in the government’s ‘Northern Powerhouse’ project. It was agreed that the project needed to be viewed as a process of collaborative working rather than as a concept linked to specific cities/regions.

(c) Rumoured government plans to deliver savings in BIS through removal, or conversion to loans, of student maintenance grants were not currently being discussed with sector representatives. In the event of such developments, the University would analyse and seek to address the potential impact on its own students.
(d) Management interaction with local government in York was currently focused on lifting certain access and parking restrictions which were hampering the development and operation of the Heslington East campus. It was reported that planning permission had recently been granted for the Field Lane retail and health centre development.

(e) The University’s slippage in the latest Guardian league table, which did not take account of any research measures, would be addressed through ongoing work on National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes and graduate employability. As regards the NSS, it was noted that operational and pedagogical improvements took a number of years to have an effect on cohorts responding to the survey in their final year, especially as the issues differed across departments. There was likewise a degree of time-lag in the outcome of actions to enhance employability rates, although the current plan aimed to deliver relative improvement by 2018. It was also noted that some variations in employability rates between institutions related to their vocational/non-vocational subject mix, which in turn required employability data to be considered at departmental level in order to compare like with like and identify realistic targets.

(f) Following clear feedback from the Leeds and YNY&ER Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), the BioVale capital funding bid would shortly be re-submitted with additional evidence of demand and support from key industrial partners. If the bid was not successful, alternative funding resources would be required to accommodate the ongoing expansion of the Biorenewables Development Centre. After the detailed presentation of the BioVale concept to Council in November 2014 (M14-15/12 refers), it was agreed that Council should receive further updates on this important regional project as it developed.

(g) Successful visits to Penn State and Michigan State Universities in the US had generated plans for reciprocal visits to York to consider partnerships in the area of translational research. It was also notable that there was a growing US interest in collaborations in non-STEMM disciplines. The recent visit to China had confirmed the ongoing high levels of demand there for education abroad and in particular the market attractiveness of the UK as a destination.
(h) The University had won a consortium bid to host one of four Quantum Technology Hubs in a national network funded by the EPSRC. Council would be further briefed on this cutting-edge science initiative which had commercial application in secure and high-speed communications.

Following discussion of his report, the Vice-Chancellor agreed to provide an update on implementation of the University Strategy to the next meeting.

14-15/64 Revolving Credit Facility
[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

14-15/65 Executive Report: Pro–Vice-Chancellor (Research)

Council received the annual Executive Report from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Research (C.14-15/59), who highlighted the following:

- analysis of REF2014 outcome and strategic planning for the next exercise in 2020 (including formal review of six departments);
- successful recruitment of ‘Research Champions’ to lead on the seven inter-disciplinary research themes of the new Research Strategy;
- appointment of the first Dean of the new Graduate Research School to promote improvements to the experience of all PhD students;
- annual statement on research integrity, as required by the UUK Concordat to Support Research Integrity (note: Council approved the statement);
- detailed statistical monitoring of research grant performance, including benchmarking against the Russell Group and analysis per FTE, by market share and across faculties;
- recent research funding successes, including in respect of the EPSRC-supported Quantum Communications Hub, the N8 Agri-Tech Food Resilience Programme, European H2020 funding and award of Leverhulme Research Fellowships.

During discussion Council noted the following points:

(a) There were different issues to be addressed in the six departments selected for formal research review, a process that would involve members of the Research Committee, other senior colleagues and external input.
(b) The lengthy consultation process around the Research Strategy had fostered a bottom-up process as regards identification of the research themes, which in turn had neutralised departmental opposition to the appointment of the Research Champions and the risk of feeling excluded from the cross-departmental opportunities provided. It was noted that the Research Champions had been appointed initially for three years, on a 50% buy-out basis from their departments.

(c) The University’s performance in winning research council grants was related to the lack of large-scale engineering and clinical medicine research at the University, as these areas represented the bulk of available funding. It was however noted that the University performed well relative to comparable competitors in accessing research council funding, especially in the arts and humanities (first in UK for AHRC awards in 2014). As regards the potential for development of greater activity in the clinical medicine area, it was noted that a pragmatic decision had been made to pursue opportunities in departments other than HYMS in order to maximise the contribution made by existing pockets of excellence in translational research. Other factors related to the Research Strategy included consideration of the financial risks, e.g. in those areas where research was conducted at a loss and also in the context of potential government cuts to the research councils.

(d) In response to data provided to the Finance and Policy Committee on research income forecasts for the current financial year, it was reported that work was ongoing in the Finance Department to ensure that research grant income was maximised as much as possible at the year end. It was noted that the terms and conditions of collaborative grants were increasingly complex, with many aspects under the control of the principal investigator holding the grant. As regards the accuracy of research income forecasting through the annual medium-term planning process, it was noted that this was gradually improving through identification of more realistic targets.

Following the above discussion, Council thanked the Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Research for a useful and informative report.
Council received the annual Executive Report from the HR Director (C.14-15/59), who drew particular attention to the following:

- professional development initiatives for support staff including the first Professional@York conference (attended by 700 staff) and the launch of Development and Assessment Centres to nurture leadership potential;
- a positive upwards trend in staff engagement, as reported in the 2014 staff survey;
- expansion of the leadership development programme to include all members of departmental management teams;
- successful recruitment to an increasing number of posts each year (752 posts in 2014/15);
- ongoing work to finalise and roll out an updated performance review process for all staff, including provision of mandatory training for reviewers, in order to improve the University’s capacity to manage performance and change.

In response to the Director’s report, the following points were noted in discussion:

(a) Although largely complete and accurate across support departments, recording of sickness absence in academic departments remained an issue as many shorter term absences were often not logged. Council agreed that a consistent approach was required to this important indicator of staff well-being, especially in the context of data provided by the staff survey on workplace stress and mental health issues.

(b) In addition to the revised performance review process, other developments in the area of performance management included agreement of a ‘University Statement on Teaching Performance’ (M14-15/50 refers), current development of a similar statement on research performance and revisions to academic promotion criteria (to be considered by Senate in July 2015).

(c) Some initiatives had been introduced to link reward and recognition more closely to strategic imperatives (e.g. through the Rewarding Excellence initiative), with further consideration to be given to the most appropriate mechanisms. It was noted that for academics the main priorities were personal achievement and contribution to their discipline, with alignment to institutional priorities requiring a cultural shift in terms of mind-set. Council acknowledged the associated need to consult, negotiate and compromise in order not to lose the
goodwill and high levels of individual discretionary effort on which the University’s academic reputation was built. The HR Director suggested that further progress would be required in this area in order to keep pace with broader cultural developments across the Russell Group.

(d) A number of factors lay behind the relatively high level of turnover for staff on teaching-only contracts (31% in 2014/15), including short-term contracts to provide cover for staff undertaking research contracts and recruitment patterns in specialist units such as the Centre for English Language Teaching and the Languages for All programme.

(e) The decline in recent years in the average number of candidates per post related to a more targeted approach to recruitment that more successfully filtered out unsuitable/unqualified applicants.

Following consideration of the specific points above, Council thanked the Director for her annual report.

**14-15/67 Financial Performance Data**

Council received for information financial performance data for the period to the end of Q3 (C.14-15/61). A revised version of the paper was also tabled showing the actual consolidated income and expenditure figures for the year to date. The Director of Finance reported that the Treasurer and Deputy Treasurer would be consulted regarding possible refinements to the format of future in-year financial reporting to Council.

**14-15/68 HEFCE Assessment of Institutional Risk**

Council received for information HEFCE’s annual assessment of institutional risk (C.14-15/62).

**14-15/69 Business from Committees**

Business from the following committee meetings was noted and/or approved (C.14-15/63):

(a) Audit Committee: 20 February and 15 May 2015  
(b) Equality & Diversity Committee: 26 February 2015  
(c) Nominations Committee: 24 April 2015  
(d) Remuneration Committee: 11 May 2015  
(e) Health, Safety and Welfare Committee: 19 May 2015
Council: 12 June 2015

(f) Finance and Policy Committee: 13 March and 29 May 2015

14-15/70 Unreserved Business from Senate

Council noted the following unreserved business from the meeting of the Senate held on 5 May 2015:

(a) undergraduate degree attainment (C.14-15/64)
(b) register of validated programmes/collaborative provision (C.14-15/65)

14-15/71 Use of Seal

Council approved the use of the Common Seal of the University (details available in the Registrar’s office).

14-15/72 Festival of Ideas

Council members offered their congratulation to all University staff involved in the current Festival of Ideas for organising such a successful and popular event in the city.

14-15/73 Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was noted as Friday 24 July 2015 (12:00 onwards).