UNIVERSITY OF YORK

COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting held on 20 May 2016

Present: The Chair of Council
The Vice-Chancellor
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor
The Treasurer
Pro-Chancellor (Mrs J McAleese)
Pro-Chancellor (Mr D Tecwyn)
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor D Smith)

Mr C Cecil
Professor A Field
Mr M Galloway
Mr R Hide
Dr R Ibrahim (GSA)
Mr B Leatham (SU)

Mrs M Loffill
Professor Q Summerfield
Dr B Szczepek Reed
Mrs C Thomson
Ms J Unwin
Mrs S Wadsworth

In attendance: The Registrar and Secretary, Dr D Duncan
The Director of Finance, Mr J Lindley
Governance Officer, Dr P Evans

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs D Jagger and Mr J Lister.

15-16/51 Visit to Environment Department

Before its formal meeting Council visited the new Environment building on Campus West.

15-16/52 Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

Members were invited to declare any potential conflicts of interest relating to the business of the meeting. None were declared.

15-16/53 Students’ Union President

Noting that it was his last meeting, Council thanked the outgoing SU President for his contribution to its work during 2015/16.
Minutes

The unreserved minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2016 were approved (C.15-16/50).

As regards the action-schedule based on the minutes (C.15-16/51), the following points were noted in respect of the items not on the agenda for this meeting:

- Outline details of a capital project approved by UEB (extension to Psychology building) would be reported to the next meeting for information [item1].
- The regional LEP had decided in March 2016 not to support the University’s bid for £8m capital funding for the Bivale project, which, together with the withdrawal of the associated ERDF bid, meant that the building project was no longer being taken forward. The LEP would however be considering a bid for equipment (£1m) in July 2016 and had established a Biorenewables Task Group to demonstrate its ongoing commitment to this area of activity [item 4].
- Audit Committee had considered a series of reports on risk management and was satisfied with the proposed developments being led by UEB (M15-16/61 below refers) [item 11].
- Council would receive the updated Internationalisation Strategy for information in November 2016 following its approval by the newly established International Committee [item 13].
- Following positive input from the recruitment consultants and a short-listing exercise by the Working Group, interviews for the Chair position were scheduled for 2 June 2016 [item 16].

Urgent Decisions Group

Further to M15-16/32 (Urgent Decisions Group), Council received for information the constituency and terms of reference for the new Urgent Decisions Group as approved by the Finance and Policy Committee.

At the request of the SU President, Council approved the suggestion that both the SU and GSA Presidents be included in the constituency (but not the quorum) for the group, except for
consideration of items of “reserved” business as defined in the statutes (i.e. any business regarding the personal affairs of any individual staff member or student).

15-16/56  **Funding of Piazza Building**

[FOI exempt/commercially confidential]

15-16/57  **Executive Report from the Vice-Chancellor**

Council received an Executive Report from the Vice-Chancellor on the key items of business recently considered by UEB (C.15-16/53). These were noted and discussed as follows:

(a) Further powers had been delegated to faculties through the creation of Faculty Executive Groups, Faculty Research Groups and Faculty Learning & Teaching Groups.

(b) The process and methodology for monitoring implementation of the University Strategy had developed, including secondment of a dedicated project manager. A full report would be submitted to Council in November 2016.

(c) Rollout of the institutional pedagogy to PGT programmes had been postponed by one year as a consequence of significant workload issues in departments and the associated risk to full and successful implementation. UEB’s decision had taken into account risks relating to marketing and strategic development of PGT programmes. As regards the proposed re-wording of the relevant section of the University Strategy, Council approved the generalised wording, which did not refer explicitly to PGT programmes, but on the proviso that close monitoring would be undertaken of the rollout across UG programmes, with any difficulties or delays reported in a timely manner to Council.

(d) The voluntary severance and early retirement (VSER) scheme had closed with 79 staff being granted VSER, at a cost of £1.23m in the current year but with significant savings in subsequent years.

(e) An invitation to tender had been issued for estates master-planning, with no further building projects to be approved until this process had been completed. Noting that development of a
finance strategy was dependant on this work to challenge and update the existing estates strategy, the Director of Finance confirmed that work had nevertheless already begun to appraise options for inclusion in the associated finance strategy, which would allow for relatively swift progress following the estates master-planning process. Noting that these inter-linked strategies were central to maintaining the University’s market position, financial sustainability and resilience at a time of considerable risk and uncertainty, Council decided that it should receive at its next meeting a paper setting out the proposed timeline of decision-making points and associated financial implications of the project, including reference to its own role in providing top-level governance oversight. Council agreed that the new master-planning approach represented a valuable opportunity to consider the fundamental features of the campus (e.g. people flows, ingress/egress, general look and feel etc.) as the starting-point for its holistic development, although it also acknowledged the comment from the SU President that in certain areas there was clearly a need to progress re-development as a matter of some urgency.

(f) UEB had approved all the recommendations of a detailed report on student mental health issues drafted by a task group led by Professor Hilary Graham (former Head of the Department of Health Sciences). Following its publication the report had attracted some media attention and implementation of its recommendations would be closely monitored by UEB and the Student Life Committee (which would in future report directly to Council and Senate, M15-16/59 below refers). It was noted that the report provided focus for further work of the type already undertaken by student organisations in respect of awareness raising, building personal resilience etc. Council commended the executive for its transparency in publishing the report, which had helpfully contributed to developing a climate of greater openness in discussion of mental health issues. It was noted in this context that the issues and pressures referenced in the report were not specific to the University or the city of York, and that as such the report represented an exemplar project of wider interest to the sector. As regards the adequacy of its recommendations in the short-term, it was noted that some interventions were immediately possible, e.g. enhanced resourcing of student support, while others would take longer to achieve in collaboration with the local mental health service
(currently contracted to the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust).

(g) Council noted the mitigating actions taken by UEB to address the lower than expected PGTO recruitment in the current year and consequential budget shortfall. It was noted that these actions include a four-month recruitment freeze in both academic and support departments. As regards the replacement of vacant professorial posts with lecturer posts, it was noted that this had been duly assessed in the context of research income and REF considerations. In response to a query from an academic member, it was noted that the annual academic promotions round was conducted separately from budgetary considerations.

(h) HEFCE’s annual assessment of the University’s risk status remained unchanged (“not at higher risk”), but had included a specific reference to the development of a new estates strategy in response to discussions that had been held with officers. It was also significant that the letter from HEFCE openly acknowledged that future projections of reducing surplus and cash levels and the rise in borrowing across the sector were not sustainable in the long term. In this context Council noted the benchmarking data appended to the letter which confirmed the University’s profile as regards the proportion of poor estate condition combined with high levels of borrowing, a situation which had been recently discussed with HEFCE officers.

(i) The government had published its White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, on 16 May 2016. The document corresponded largely to the previously published Green Paper and included *inter alia* the following elements:

- merger of Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the learning and teaching functions of HEFCE into the new Office for Students (OFS);
- merger of research councils and Innovate UK into a new body called UK Research and Innovation (UKRI);
- maintenance of the current “dual support” system of research grants and quality-related (QR) funding;
- less stringent requirements for new providers seeking to enter the market;
• introduction of a three-tier Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) linked to tuition fee levels and assessed against a number of metrics related to student satisfaction, retention and graduate employment.

The SU President commented on the need to monitor the impact on students of potential increases in fees and to continue to oppose where possible the use of proxy measures for teaching quality (e.g. graduate earnings).

(j) On 28 April 2016 the university employers had made a final offer of a 1.1% pay increase, with higher increases for the lowest paid, from 1 August 2016. Following a ballot of its members, the University and College Union (UCU) had rejected the offer and notified the University that it would be calling on its members to take both strike action and action short of a strike (ASOS), specifically a two-day strike on 25 and 26 May 2016 and ASOS in the form of working to contract and not working in excess of the maximum hours stipulated in contracts of employment (including withdrawal from external examining at other institutions). Council noted that the likely level of participation in the action could not be accurately assessed and that contingency plans would be put in place to minimise the impact on students and staff.

15/16/58

Executive Report: Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research

Council received the annual Executive Report from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research (C.15-16/54), which covered the following areas:

• post-REF 2014 activities and preparing for REF 2021;
• development of research infrastructure (including Associate Deans for Research, Research Champions and review of research entities);
• implementation of the five elements of the Research Strategy;
• research performance 2015/16 and monitoring grant income;
• recent research funding successes.

During discussion the following points were noted:

(a) The impact of the new Research Champions would be assessed through a qualitative review of their performance after one
year, with a more quantitative review (e.g. in respect of research income) after two years. It was reported that a number of interesting new projects were coming forward under the influence of the Research Champions, who were already developing a more strategic approach to bringing together individuals from different disciplines.

(b) As regards the predicted research income for the next four years arising from the annual medium-term planning process with departments, it was noted that the relatively flat forecast arose partly from the decline in available research council (RC) funds at national level, which was being felt even more severely at some Russell Group competitors. It was hoped that the situation might be partly redressed by the availability of new funding sources, such as the Global Challenges Research Fund (£112m available in 2016/17) and the planned growth in interdisciplinary activity at the University.

(c) On the question of possible over-reliance on declining RC funding, it was noted that consideration was being given to greater diversification of the funding mix to improve performance in other areas (e.g. research funding from charities and industry).

(d) As regards comments from some student protest groups about acceptance of research funding perceived to be from “arms companies”, it was noted that a process of ethical review at departmental level considered each project on a case-by-case basis, and there was no blanket ban on research activity with companies who had an involvement in the defence sector (unlike work for the tobacco industry, which was explicitly prohibited in the University’s Code of Practice and Principles for Good Ethical Governance).

(e) Relationship management with large funders such as the Wellcome Trust was undertaken by staff in the Research and Enterprise directorate, which had recently been re-structured to improve such linkages, supported by senior staff where appropriate.

(f) While the role of the Research Champions was to bring people together to ignite new research possibilities, Heads of Department were more concerned with ensuring that the
departmental research culture and ethos were supportive and that grant application rates were monitored and improved (for which a considerable volume of data was now available at an individual level).

(g) As regards the item on Council’s action schedule to receive a presentation from the Dean on progress to develop the York Graduate Research School, it was agreed that this should be scheduled at either the Autumn or Spring Term meeting in 2016/17.

Following the above discussion, Council noted that, given the ongoing government-imposed austerity agenda and its effect on research funding, it was important to diversify into new areas of funding and to prioritise those activities most likely to deliver success (for which there was now a reliable evidence base and improved infrastructure at the University).

15-16/59  

**Council Effectiveness Review**

Council considered a report from its Effectiveness Review Group (C.15-16/55).

Introducing the report, the Registrar reminded Council of the seven specific questions it had asked the group to explore and highlighted the recommendations proposed in areas such as Council membership, the sub-committee structure and performance monitoring (especially as regards academic quality). As Chair of the group, the Chair of Council also commented on the need to ensure that Council remained fit for purpose in terms of its governance and strategic guidance role, while respecting the distinction between this role and executive/operational management.

The following comments were noted in discussion:

(a) The group was commended for its thorough discussion of matters such as the size and constituency of Council, reporting lines from committees (especially the Student Life Committee) and how best to approach matters of academic quality assurance.
(b) It was suggested that the group’s terms of reference might usefully have also included consideration of how Council might better understand and influence the broad strategic direction of the whole HE sector, not just the University. It was agreed that this might be best addressed at the annual away day, with input from external speakers.

(c) The evident tension was acknowledged between seeking to draw new members from a wider geographical base while also involving them more in the day-to-day life of the University (especially as regards student events/activities).

(d) In terms of possible performance indicators, it was noted that these often focussed on input measures rather than outputs as regards the value added by the University (e.g. as demonstrated by degree class distribution).

(e) As regards matters of ‘board development’ and reference in the report to lay members’ difficulty in understanding sectoral terminology, it was noted that this applied generally across a number of areas, including finances/accounting. It was agreed that the general ambition should be to ensure that all members felt sufficiently able to contribute in such a manner that the quality of Council discussion was enhanced. It was suggested that this was easier to achieve when Council was discussing ‘softer’ topics that were better suited to general discussion rather than more technical or financial matters.

(f) In response to the suggestion from one lay member that Council did not engage sufficiently with sectoral development (e.g. in the creative sector), it was noted that, while there might be opportunities for greater advisory input here, it did not form part of Council’s terms of reference and governance role. As regards finding other means for Council members to provide such input (e.g. through departmental advisory boards), it was observed that the more detailed skills audit proposed by the group [R2 refers] would help to identify and harness such capacities and opportunities.

(g) A new member of Council explicitly endorsed the recommendation that the current induction process be followed up at an appropriate point during the first year of membership
[R15 refers] in order to further enhance the contribution of individual members.

(h) As regards a perceived need to maintain an international perspective in Council, it was agreed that this was best achieved by drawing members from a wider and more diverse base rather than through the introduction of any specific ex officio positions.

(i) It was agreed that the proposed change of reporting line for the Student Life Committee [R8 refers] should be amended to include dual reporting also to the Senate.

Following the above discussion, Council approved the group’s recommendations, subject to the review group submitting any additional/amended recommendations arising from the points made above to the next meeting.

15-16/60 Financial Performance Data

Council received for information financial performance data for the period ending March 2016 (C.15-16/56).

15-16/61 Business from Committees

Business from the following committee meetings was noted and/or approved (C.15-16/43):

(a) Nominations Committee
(b) Equality & Diversity Committee: 25 February 2016
(c) Audit Committee: 4 March 2016
(d) Finance & Policy Committee: 11 March 2016

From the Nominations Committee report Council noted in particular that it was appointing Mr Chris Thompson (Non-Executive Director and Chair of Audit Committee, Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust; formerly Chief Financial Officer, University of Nottingham) to fill an ongoing vacancy for a lay member of Council, with immediate effect for an initial period of two years until 31 July 2018.
15-16/62 Unreserved Business from Senate

Council noted the following unreserved business from the Senate:

➢ register of validated programmes/collaborative provision (C.15-16/58)

15-16/63 Use of Seal

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

15-16/64 Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was noted as Friday 22 July 2016.