Minutes of the meeting held on 20 June 2014

Present: The Chair of Council
The Vice-Chancellor
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor
The Treasurer (Mr D Dickson)
Pro-Chancellor (Mrs L Wild)
Pro-Chancellor (Mr D Tecwyn)
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor C Mellors)

Mr R Armitage
Mr M Burton
Mr M Galloway
Mr B Greenwood
Mrs M Loffill
Mrs J McAleese
Professor P Sells
Professor L Stewart
Mr K Taylor (SU)
Professor R Taylor
Ms J Unwin

In attendance:
The Registrar and Secretary
The Director of Finance
Governance Officer, Dr P Evans
Professor J Robinson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor/T&L
(for M13-14/29-30)

Apologies for absence were received from the GSA President.

13-14/47 Presentation: Urban Studies

Council received a presentation from Dr Rowland Atkinson (Sociology), Director of the Research Centre for the Social Sciences.

13-14/48 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.

13-14/49 Minutes

The unreserved minutes of the meeting held on 28 February 2014 were approved (C.13-14/46). Council also noted the action schedule based on the minutes (C.13-14/47).
Further to M13-14/32 (Executive Reports), the Chair reported that the executive report on research would be considered in the pre-lunch session before the next meeting, with the executive reports in respect of HR and business and the community to be considered in the main meeting.

13-14/50 Vice-Chancellor’s Report

Council received a report from the Vice-Chancellor on current internal and external work and associated issues (C.13-14/48).

The Vice-Chancellor drew particular attention to the following aspects of his report:

- SMG activities and decisions in respect of the foundation college proposal (M13-14/31 refers), the University budget, modification of the planning process and monitoring of student recruitment and research income;
- progress in construction of new academic, sports and residential facilities;
- appraisal of options in respect of the further development of social and catering facilities at Heslington East;
- pay settlement for 2014/15 and resolution of industrial action;
- University participation as a stakeholder (without financial investment) in the joint venture being established to run the Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA) in Sand Hutton.

During discussion the following points were noted:

- As regards interaction with local MPs, the Vice-Chancellor would continue to engage on a number of issues as appropriate.

- It was hoped the new social and catering facility on Heslington East would be in place by October 2016. In the meantime, possible temporary arrangements would be considered in the wider context of the development of both campuses.

13-14/51 University Strategy

Council considered a consultation document which drew together the views of the Vice-Chancellor, SMG and Council as regards the development of a new University Strategy (C.13-14/49).

Introducing the document, the Vice-Chancellor reported that there had already been an intensive and widespread engagement in the
consultation by the University community, including via the public discussion events held in recent months. Attention was also drawn to the proposed timescale for the process, with the intention of bringing a final version of the strategy to Council for approval at its meeting in November 2014.

During discussion the following points were noted:

(a) It was suggested that the strategy did not sufficiently emphasise the University’s commitment to widening access and support for disadvantaged students.

(b) While the key objectives could be viewed as input measures relating to the University’s “offer”, it was proposed that the strategy should also explicitly highlight the outputs and impact of those measures. It was noted that, on the teaching and learning side, this would be addressed by the development of an institutional pedagogy with clearly defined learning objectives. In other areas, the outputs could be described in terms of the attributes of York graduates. This would also provide an opportunity to say more about employability and the University’s role in preparing graduates for the often harsh realities of the job market.

(c) In terms of timescale and implementation, particularly as regards budgeting and resource allocation in support of the new strategy, the Vice-Chancellor confirmed that an outline project plan had already been developed, although in some areas (e.g., student numbers) this could only emerge through a full planning round with departments. Appraisal of financial planning options would also be undertaken in an iterative manner by the Finance and Policy Committee in early 2015, including in respect of any required revisions to the capital plan. Council supported the ambition to move swiftly to implementation, in order to harness the enthusiasm demonstrated by the University community during the consultation process.

(d) The document identified a clear commitment to widening income sources and it was hoped that appropriate suggestions would emerge from the consultation.

(e) The overarching vision statement focused on ‘excellence’ as the concept of being ‘world-leading’ was over-used and difficult to demonstrate in areas other than research. It was suggested that the University’s commitment to the application of knowledge
might be more strongly emphasised as part of the opening vision statement.

(f) The faculty proposal sought to maintain the current structure of three academic clusters which had evolved over time, but this did not preclude consideration of the pros and cons of a potential fourth cluster in the health/medicine area.

(g) The SU President welcomed various elements of the strategy, including support for disadvantaged students, internationalising the student experience and streamlining bureaucratic processes. Community engagement work in the city was also suggested as an area that might usefully be referenced.

(h) During a lengthy discussion about the University having regard to the Living Wage in setting remuneration levels for staff, the Vice-Chancellor observed that it was possible to commit ethically to the principle of the Living Wage, but that the requirements of formal accreditation could have undesirable consequences (including job losses), while also relinquishing financial control over all staff costs. Some Council members expressed their discomfort at this approach which could be interpreted as mealy mouthed: it was suggested that it might be preferable to abandon reference to the Living Wage altogether if there was no accompanying commitment to implement it in practice. Alternatively, it was proposed that reference to addressing low pay issues might be included. It was generally agreed that in order to reach an informed decision on this matter further analysis should be undertaken of the implications of pursuing accreditation in the context of HR data on salary levels.

(i) Given the stated ambition to increase student numbers, the view was expressed that the strategy might place greater emphasis on the role played by colleges in supporting and enhancing the student experience. It was also suggested that the collegiate nature of the University might be made more prominent in future marketing materials, although it was important to extend and embed the current re-organisation of college structures before such a marketing initiative was undertaken (M13-14/52 below also refers).

(j) With regard to recruitment of the “best students”, it was acknowledged this was a problematic and contested area in terms of the need to balance a commitment to inclusion and
widening access with preservation of the University’s profile as expressed by its entry requirements (a key quality indicator in a number of league tables). It was suggested that the complexity of this issue could be overtly recognised in the strategy, with reference if necessary to relevant research.

(k) As regards the parallel development of a new Research Strategy, the Vice-Chancellor confirmed that this was currently under consideration by Research Committee and would be responsive to the research councils’ focus on quality, scale and impact as the key aspects of fundable research. The linkage was noted with the stated ambition to enhance engagement with business and industry (enabling objective 3).

(l) In response to a query on the academic response to the proposed institutional pedagogy, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (T&L) reported that consideration was still being given to the possible implications for existing programmes. It was also noted that there were considerable differences across disciplines/departments and a need in some areas to acknowledge that students did not always make effective use of independent study time, which in turn reinforced the need to focus strongly on the design of their work (the ‘artisan’ role of lecturers) and the high quality of contacts with academic staff. Carefully considered programme design was the distinctive feature of the proposed pedagogy, which would require clear explication to prospective applicants, especially those who might have a consumer mind-set fixated on contact hours. It was generally agreed that the development of persuasive arguments about ‘distinctiveness’ represented one of the major challenges for the strategy.

Following the above discussion, and noting that the consultation period ran until mid-July, the Chair invited members with any additional comments to submit them directly to the Vice-Chancellor (vc-consultation@york.ac.uk).

13-14/52 Executive Report: Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Teaching & Learning

Council received the annual Executive Report from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching & Learning (C.13-14/50).

Attending the meeting to present his report, Professor Robinson drew particular attention to the following:
- teaching and learning strategy
- portfolio development
- student surveys (NSS, PTES, PRES)
- centres for maths and writing skills
- teaching building
- revised UK Quality Code (QAA)
- information strategy
- wireless infrastructure
- library developments (including Customer Service Excellence accreditation)

In response to comments and queries from Council members, the following points were noted:

(a) Individual deficiency in teaching quality was known at departmental level and formal measures to address this had been developed as part of a wider performance excellence project facilitated by HR. Further evidence of poor teaching was provided by student feedback and in the open comments section of the NSS survey. The Vice-Chancellor also reported in this context that a performance appraisal had been undertaken across the professoriate, and that, once reviewed, the methodology would be rolled out to other staff groups to improve consistency of performance across and within departments. One Head of Department noted that it was certainly possible to improve teaching performance with interventions such as peer observation.

(b) As regards different possible structures for the academic year, there was no direct evidence of any one being superior to the other. Academic opinion at York regarding the benefits of three terms versus two semesters was divided equally, with some staff wary of what would be high transformational costs in swapping one for the other. The situation was complex and impinged on many other key areas of University activity (e.g., research activity).

(c) Departments identified in the last NSS as in need of significant improvement had each put in place a transparent action-plan and were now at different stages in achieving these. Improvements in ‘assessment and feedback’ had been made by sharing best practice and drawing on the consultation outcomes in respect of the T&L strategy. The ‘organisation and management’ dimension was easier to resolve as it was normally possible to identify the specific issues that had provoked student dissatisfaction. It was acknowledged that remedial actions could in some cases take a few years to show an effect.
(d) In response to reported comments in respect of a recent GSA survey of PhD students, it was noted that the response rate was relatively small and in some areas reflected a mismatch of expectations across disciplines (eg in respect of personal desk space). There was also inconsistency in student views as regards preferences for a departmental or inter-disciplinary location, and inevitably there were different levels of student engagement and interaction. The comments in the survey relating to library resources had been highly discipline-specific.

(e) With regard to the previous year’s NSS outcome for the Department of Theatre, Film and Television, it was reported that a full departmental review had recently been undertaken, with three external panel members and participation by relevant support staff. As a general point, it was agreed that Council should be provided with guidance as to how it might best consider (and record in its minutes) performance issues at departmental level, without impinging on SMG’s executive role.

(f) As regards escalation of action and invoking of HR procedures relating to poor performance, the Vice-Chancellor supported the view that such matters were a leadership and management issue, and as such he had taken on management responsibility for performance review across the institution.

(g) On the specific matter of Open Access publishing, it was noted that the associated (and unfunded) costs were a sector-wide issue. As a requirement of some research councils and potentially also a future REF requirement, this was a live issue which was being monitored closely by Research Committee. Council decided to ask the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) to clarify the University’s current position on this matter in her forthcoming executive report.

Council thanked the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for his report and confirmed that it was happy with the new format whereby additional information on specific matters was provided in appendices.

13-14/53 Executive Report: Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Students

Council received the annual Executive Report from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, as Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Students (C.13-14/51).

Dr Grenville drew particular attention to the following:

- pilot of new college management structures;
refinement of college functions to underpin the academic and employability agendas;

impact of over-recruitment on service and accommodation provision;

data on volume of contact between students and support services.

During discussion, the following comments were noted:

(a) The Student Financial Support Unit used a formulaic calculation to assess eligibility for bursaries and access to hardship funds. There were no known issues relating to oversight, control or equity in its work.

(b) The budget for student support was diffuse as it was spread across relevant functions (colleges, academic registry etc). This could create an accounting difficulty when it came to assessing the relative return on investment in this area.

(c) There had been a step-change in the professional support provided for student employability, for which thanks were specifically offered to the Director of Careers and the Academic Registrar. The focus of this activity was increasingly on attainment of graduate-level employment.

(d) The Deputy Vice-Chancellor confirmed that her main ambition was successful achievement of the refinement of the college model to ensure that colleges were able to play a wider role than simply provision of pastoral support and social events. The pilot would be assessed by the Student Experience Committee early in 2014/15 and SMG would then decide whether it should be rolled out across all the colleges. The important role of colleges in alumni relations was also acknowledged.

(e) Planning was underway in respect of the coming summer admissions round, with particular emphasis on communications between departments and the Admissions Office at crucial points in the cycle, including the flexibility to invest in departments as necessary. In terms of accommodation capacity, the situation was expected to be easier with the availability of a new college and as a consequence of changes to the terms of the accommodation guarantee to students entering through clearing.

Council thanked the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for her report and confirmed that it was happy with its current format.
Centre for Reviews and Dissemination

The Registrar reported that, as the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination had lost a major contract to another institution with effect from March 2015, assessment was currently being made of the likely staffing implications. It was noted that if more than ten people or more than 10% of the total staff could no longer be employed by the Centre, Council would be asked to consider formal proposals for redundancy. It was noted that considerable activity was underway in an attempt to prevent this situation being reached.

Financial Performance Data

Council received for information financial performance data for the period ended 30 April 2014 (C.13-14/52).

HEFCE Risk Assessment

Council received for information HEFCE’s annual assessment of institutional risk (C.13-14/53).

Business from Committees

Business from the following committee meetings was noted and/or approved (C.13-14/54):

(a) HYMS Joint Board: 4 February 2014
(b) Audit Committee: 21 February and 23 May 2014 (including approval of the revised Risk Management Policy and Strategy)
(c) Equality & Diversity Committee: 3 March 2014
(d) Nominations Committee: 14 May 2014
(e) Health, Safety & Welfare Committee: 27 May 2014
(f) Finance & Policy Committee: 14 March and 6 June 2014

Unreserved Business from Senate

Council noted the following unreserved business from the meeting of the Senate held on 13 May 2014:

(a) discussion of University Strategy (C.13-14/55)
(b) register of validated programmes and collaborative provision (C.13-14/56)

Use of Seal

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

The date of the next meeting was noted as Friday 25 July 2014.