

University of York

Senate

Executive Summary of the meeting held 17 Oct. 2023

1. The Vice-Chancellor thanked Dr Wayne Campbell (Academic Registrar) and Dr Philip Evans (Assistant Secretary to Senate) who were attending their last meeting. Eleven new members were welcomed and it was noted that an election would be held in the period November 2023–January 2024 to replace elected members whose term of office finished on 31 January 2024. Senate also endorsed its own Terms of Reference, noting that no changes were being recommended.
2. Senate approved the minutes from its last meeting and also of a Chair's Action to establish an Interim Board of Studies for the new Department of Architecture and the Built Environment. As regards the University position on working with organisations related to fossil fuels, information had been gathered from RIKE colleagues on the small amount of research undertaken with fossil fuel companies. The YUSU President had also co-authored a report on the University's endowment income related to companies associated with defence and fossil fuels, and a response to this report was being drafted which would entail positive changes to the University's Statement on Responsible Investment. In the new Research Strategy there was also a commitment to develop a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Framework which would look at a range of potentially sensitive partnerships and activities including in research, teaching and knowledge exchange activities.
3. Senate considered an overview report from the Vice-Chancellor who drew particular attention to a range of current financial challenges and the University response through cost containment, rebasing of international student recruitment targets and plans for more efficient estate usage. As regards industrial action, it was noted that UCU and UUK had reached agreement on USS (subject to consultation with members) and that a local deal with UCU had averted planned strike action at the start of the new semester. The Vice-Chancellor also reported his impressions from attending recent party political conferences (Conservative and Labour). As regards the current conflict in Israel and Gaza, Senate joined the Vice-Chancellor in expressing its horror at the appalling loss of life, especially among civilians. In discussion of such an potentially divisive issue and its impact on campus life, it was agreed that the University should continue to focus its response on those most directly affected by the conflict and the support it could offer, while also seeking to provide a safe and tolerant space for discussion. Regular dialogue would be maintained with student societies, academic departments, the SUs and Colleges to understand concerns and how best to respond to them. In the context of the expected political scrutiny of universities during the conflict, the Vice-Chancellor clarified that no institutional position statements would be adopted for external publication but rather the focus would be on establishing a safe environment for reasoned debate of difficult issues with mutual respect. While uniting to reject any forms of racism, Islamophobia or antisemitism, the University would be seeking to remain a compassionate community in which freedom of speech within the law would continue to be protected.
Senate resolved to approve the recommendation that Professors Kieran Gibson (Head of the School of PET) and Kiran Trehan (Pro-Vice-Chancellor/P&E) be re-appointed to the University Council for terms of one and three years respectively¹.
4. The Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor (TLS) presented a report on the outcome of the National Student Survey (NSS) 2023, drawing particular attention to changes in some of the questions, the slightly reduced response rate and, despite an improvement in absolute scores, a reported decline in all areas except *Student Voice* when compared to the sector. It was noted that the main area of concern was the timeliness and quality of feedback to students, an area which needed to be addressed as a priority and would be picked up in a new data-driven annual review process in which programme-specific "targets" would be discussed with Departments. The importance of a standardised central approach to module/programme evaluation was also emphasised to enable early detection of problem areas and also shareable good practice. The previous "you said—we did" campaign would also be revisited as part of the broader action plan. In discussion Senate focused on the criticality of good feedback for student learning, the benefits of open exams, the possibility of enhanced software solutions in the marking process through the new VLE and also the importance of pedagogical CPD. It was also generally agreed that adherence to centralised processes and systems was vital

¹ Professor Gibson's re-appointment for one year is co-terminous with his membership of Senate until 31 July 2024.

to ensuring consistency across Departments while also helping to align data sources, which in turn would facilitate more in-depth assessment of specific issues.

5. The Deputy Director of Student Careers & Systems presented the outcome from the HESA Graduate Outcomes Survey 2020/21 which had collected information from graduates about their activities 15 months after completion. Particular attention was drawn to the overall improvement in *The Times* 'Graduate Prospects' metric (up 2.4% to 84.4%), the declining response rate (particularly among non-UK domiciled graduates), the results at Faculty level and the slight improvement in the 'Graduate Reflections' questions. Senate noted that the Graduate Outcomes Task Group, the re-launched Employability Strategy Group and the Faculty Employability Managers would all continue to work with the data in order to assess the impact of University initiatives, while a newly appointed Information & Engagement Officer would work to raise the profile of the survey among staff, students and alumni. Noting the decline in responses, Senate encouraged Careers to continue lobbying HESA for a return to use of follow-up phone calls to non-UK graduates and also to undertake further analysis of non-respondents more generally to identify groups to whom the survey might be more strongly promoted.
6. The Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor (TLS) presented a report on the headline outcome from the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023, drawing particular attention to the University's overall 'Gold' award and its overarching assessment as "*typically of outstanding quality*". Senate noted the separate ratings for 'Student Experience' and 'Student Outcomes', with the latter receiving a 'Silver' award and therefore being an area for improvement. The importance of high-quality case studies drawn from every discipline was noted and also the effective collaborative working with YUSU. Other elements contributing to continued success in the TEF would be to drive improvement in NSS and Graduate Outcomes scores, embedding data-drive evaluation of the impact of specific initiatives and being better able to evidence 'educational gain'. It was noted that although PGT outcomes were not part of TEF, case studies of best practice from across the University's whole teaching portfolio needed to be pro-actively collated, shared and promoted. Various methods for doing this were discussed, including via the annual Learning & Teaching Conference and integration with other University-wide initiatives.
7. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) presented a report on the Sparks Programme which had replaced the Research Theme Champions as the mechanism for identifying and then supporting emerging research excellence. Attention was drawn to aspects of the process for identifying the sorts of projects which it was hoped would develop into nationally recognised areas while also contributing to the strategic aim of delivering curiosity-driven and action-oriented research. Senate noted the three projects, one from each Faculty, selected for an initial period of two years funding and received a presentation on the chosen Social Sciences project (*Administrative Fairness in Healthcare—A New Research Agenda*). The Pro-Vice-Chancellor also outlined how some of the other, un-funded proposals would also be supported in order to incubate a culture of aspiration, achievement and research excellence.
8. The University Secretary reported verbally on the external regulatory environment including the first public statements by Professor Arif Ahmed (OfS Director for Freedom of Speech) and a recent critical report on the OfS by the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee. It was noted that the OfS had started to undertake quality assessments in some HEIs after assuming this role from the QAA.
9. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor presented a further progress report on the ongoing review of academic promotions criteria, noting that key considerations had included capturing the full breadth of academic contributions as well as clarifying the promotion pathway for staff on T&S contracts. The Leads of the criteria and process workstreams also set out the top-level recommendations and principles from each project. Comments were noted in respect of ensuring equity in the weighting of research/teaching contributions; the proposed extension to the application window; inter-connection with other University projects (e.g. gender pay gap); the importance of clarifying the 'citizenship' aspect and the exact levels of contribution required to be successful; and the improvements required to the application pro-forma (including accessibility and integration with other University systems such as the PURE research database). Senate **resolved to approve** the proposed top-level principles, noting that a final report and recommendations would be submitted to the next meeting.
10. Senate **endorsed** the proposed new Ordinance 13 (Academic Organisation), noting that it was intended to address a gap in the Ordinances for a high-level description of the key features of the University's structure as it pertained to Faculties, Departments/Schools, Institutes/Centres and Colleges.

11. Senate noted its draft Schedule of Business for 2023/24 and **endorsed** changes to Terms of Reference approved by the Teaching and Research Committees under the new Senate Scheme of Delegated Approvals. It also noted reports from the following sub-committee meetings: Teaching Committee (13 July and 28 September 2023), Academic Promotions Committee (July-October 2023) and Research Committee (28 September 2023).
12. In response to a query on the 2022 OIA report on student complaints at York (Category 2 agenda, S.23-24-II/30), the Academic Registrar clarified that the 28 complaints found to be 'justified' were all part of a single group complaint relating to marketing and delivery of the York Online Computer Science programme (for which a significant compensation payment had been made by the University).