UNIVERSITY OF YORK

SENATE

Minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2010

Present: The Vice-Chancellor (Chair)
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor
Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Dr J Grenville

Professor D Attwell
Professor S Bell
Professor J Bennett
Dr J Buchanan
Professor R Burrows
Professor C Brown
Ms C Camp
Dr L Caves
Dr J Clarbour
Dr C Dytham
Professor M Festenstein
Dr A Frisch
Professor B Fulton
Professor M Goddard
Professor C Godfrey
Dr D Hall

Professor M Hallett
Professor A Higson
Dr J Hill
Dr S King
Mr T Ngwena (SU)
Professor T O’Connor
Mr G Osborn (SU)
Professor J Robinson
Professor P Simmons
Professor D Smith
Professor L Stewart
Professor T Stoneham
Dr C B Thomas
Professor S Toms
Professor A Warner

In attendance: The Registrar and Secretary
The Academic Registrar
University Governance Officer, Dr P Evans
SU Academic Affairs Officer, Mr B Humphrys
Director of the Careers Service, Ms E Smith (for M10-11/8)
Deputy Director of HR, Ms P Tunbridge (for M10-11/9)

Apologies for absence were received from Professor B Chambers, Professor S Donkin, Dr C Fewster, Professor S Gathercole, Ms E Heaps, Mr R Huang, Dr R Jacobs, Mr O Lisagor, Professor J Local, Professor M Luckhurst, Professor M Maynard, Professor J McDermid, Professor C Mellors, Dr R Ogden, Professor W J Sheils, Professor R Taylor and Professor J Wainwright.

10-11/1 Membership

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As it was the first meeting of the 2010/11 academic session, the Vice-Chancellor welcomed new members to Senate (S.10-11/1). It was noted that further student members would be elected before the next meeting.

10-11/2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 July 2010 were approved.

10-11/3 Appointments to Committees

Further to M09-10/58, Senate noted the appointments to committees which had been approved by the Vice-Chancellor since the last meeting (S.10-11/2).

10-11/4 Examination Results

Further to M09-10/70*, Senate received a report from the Academic Registrar confirming the process for approving and ratifying final examination results (S.10-11/3).

It was noted that the formal approval sequence was as follows:

1. Boards of Studies make recommendations for the award of degrees;
2. the Standing Committee on Assessment (SCA) approves these recommendations, in accordance with the authority delegated to it by Senate in 2003 (M03/09 refers);
3. Senate ratifies the decisions of the SCA at its next meeting;
4. ‘conferment’ refers to the ceremonial bestowing of an award (in person or in absentia) which was recorded on a parchment and to which the graduand was entitled following ratification of his/her result by Senate.

Senate noted that the point at which a student had been granted his/her degree was following ratification by Senate. This was noted to be of particular relevance to overseas postgraduates who might have specific visa or funding requirements.

With regard to the presentation to Senate for ratification of results approved by the Standing Committee on Assessment, it was agreed that the wording should reflect the process outlined above (i.e. should refer to ratification, not conferment).

10-11/5 Statement by the Vice-Chancellor: Browne Report and Comprehensive Spending Review

The Vice-Chancellor reported verbally on the Independent Review into Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the ‘Brown Report’), which
had been published on 12 October 2010, and the government’s Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), which had been announced on 20 October 2010.

Senate noted the following details:

Browne Report core proposals

- The current cap on fees of £3,290 per year to be removed, allowing universities to decide their own fees structure. Since publication, the government had announced that universities would be able to charge £6,000 per year with a higher tier of £9,000, the latter subject to demonstrating support for widening access to students from poorer backgrounds.

- No up-front payment for learning by students whether full-time or part-time. Students could apply for a loan of up to £3,750 (non means tested) and, in addition, there would be a means tested grant of up to £3,250 available to students from low income families, offered in full to households with an income of below £25k and then on a pro-rata basis for households with an income of up to £60k.

- Graduates to begin repaying their loan when they reach annual earnings of over £21,000 a year (up from £15,000 under the current system). However, the loan would accrue higher rates of interest than under the current system. Since publication, the government had announced plans to make the repayment terms more progressive.

- Higher fees would be accompanied by more scrutiny of teaching quality and efforts to widen access and participation.

- A 10% increase in student places to be factored into the system over the next four years. The cap on student numbers would be lifted, but the overall rise in student numbers would be rationed nationally and spread across institutions according to student demand. Student access to finance would be determined by a minimum entry standard based on aptitude.

- The current four regulatory bodies (HEFCE, OFFA, QAA and OIA) to be replaced by one single Higher Education Council. Here too the government had indicated that it might not accept this proposal in its entirety.

- An increased focus on providing better information to prospective students about the nature and quality of courses, how the courses would be delivered and related employment data.
• Initial proposals to be brought to Parliament before Christmas 2010, with the main Bill in early 2011, to enable universities to announce fees for 2012/13 by the summer term of 2010/11.

Comprehensive Spending Review

• reduction in funding to support teaching from £7.1bn to £4.2bn by 2015;
• continuation of the dual funding system for research;
• flat cash for science and research over the next four years, representing a cut of approximately 9% in real terms (if the funding were weighted towards research related to medicine/health, a larger real-terms cut in funding for other areas of research could be expected);
• possibility of greater concentration of QR funding across institutions.

Discussion by Senior Management Group (SMG)

Following initial discussion of the above matters, the SMG had concluded that they should be considered in more detail department-by-department as part of the long term planning process during the Autumn Term. Discussion would include how to determine fee levels if the cap were lifted, taking into account a range of considerations such as the nature of a given subject area, the University’s desired position in the new market and the social impact of fee levels. Also being considered were the implications for home undergraduate recruitment, the information and reporting requirements that might come with a different fees regime, and the likelihood of rising student expectation with regard to SSRs and facilities.

Given the overriding need to ensure the University’s financial sustainability, the SMG was taking an essentially conservative approach to future financial scenarios, and would continue to do so until there was greater clarity about the funding situation. It had been agreed that the University must remain committed to:

- excellence in teaching;
- continuing efforts to improve and enhance student experience;
- attracting the best students regardless of background;
- the right balance of home and overseas students;
- maintaining strengths across all the subject areas.

Discussion by Senate

During discussion of the Vice-Chancellor’s report, the following points were noted:
a) The University already devoted considerable attention to benchmarking itself against competitor institutions as regards the broader student experience beyond teaching and learning.

b) In the context of planned national student demonstrations against the proposed new funding regime, it was noted that the role of the Students’ Union was to represent student opinion at York. The University’s position would be as outlined above by the Vice-Chancellor, with emphasis on the key objectives of the University Plan such as excellence, sustainability and inclusivity.

c) The media reporting of the Browne Review as a withdrawal of government support for arts/humanities and social sciences was inaccurate and not supported by recent statements from the Minister for Universities and Science. The government’s intention was rather to shift from a supply-led to a demand-led system of funding and the Browne Report suggested that, even within such a predominantly demand-led system, there nevertheless remained a strong case for additional and targeted government investment in certain courses, especially those that delivered significant social returns. The University’s commitment to maintaining a breadth of provision across all subject areas would be enacted through a collegial approach to the medium-term planning process that ensured areas of financial strength helped to support areas of relative weakness (cf. the approach adopted to the RAE).

d) The University’s commitment to the broader student experience was demonstrated by its high level of investment in capital projects (e.g. library refurbishment, the sports village, new colleges etc), its ongoing support for the collegiate system and work to improve graduate employability (M10-11/8 below refers).

e) The budget-setting process would be based on a conservative assessment of the future financial situation, with the current assumption being that there would not be major changes to overarching University forecasts and plans when viewed in toto, although there were likely to be changes to the plans of individual departments.

10-11/6  University Development Plan

Further to M09-10/21, Senate considered a final draft of the University Development Plan and received summaries of the eight strategies supporting the University Plan (S.10-11/4).

During discussion the following points were noted:
a) The Development Plan acknowledged (§18 refers) that as the University grew beyond 15,000 students it would become increasingly difficult to retain the collegial atmosphere that was so important for inclusivity and interdisciplinarity, and that more complex management arrangements might therefore become necessary.

b) The question of optimum size for an academic department (§21 refers) related to issues of critical mass and responded to the increases in student numbers over the last twenty years. The Plan did not exclude the possibility of departments outside the stated optimum range but rather sought to highlight that such matters were central to future sustainability.

c) The objectives listed in the strategy digests represented a summary, with further detail provided in the full strategy documents that were currently being finalised by the relevant officers and/or committees.

Following the above discussion, Senate approved the University Development Plan.

10-11/7 National Student Survey 2010

Senate considered a detailed report from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor on the 2010 National Student Survey (NSS) results (S.10-11/5).

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor highlighted the following points:

- institutional trend and sector ranking since 2006 (Figure 1 refers);
- the position of individual departments relative to national sector quartiles (Table 2 refers);
- ongoing improvement in respect of assessment and feedback (sector ranking from nearly 90th to around 20th over three years);
- a disappointing decline in some other dimensions including teaching quality and overall satisfaction;
- substantial improvements in some departments which had performed poorly in recent years;
- the likely increased significance of the NSS in the post-Browne funding regime (M10-11/5 above refers);
- the challenge for academic leaders in each department to ensure that all staff worked in a concerted manner to deliver a “consistent culture of quality”, in accordance with the new Teaching and Learning Strategy.

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

a) Given the potential effect on outcome that small changes could make, as demonstrated by considerable changes in ranking for some departments
nationally, it was important to communicate clearly to students examples of actions that had been taken in response to their feedback. Teaching Committee and the Academic Support Office could advise on the limits of such communication to ensure that it did not cross over into a perceived attempt to manipulate results.

b) The survey did not demonstrate volatility at an aggregate level, although it was acknowledged that different cohorts might respond differently and a varied experience was possible across different years. Given the very close distribution of departments in national comparisons, a constant process of engaging and involving students was vital to avoiding inconsistency of performance. It was notable in this respect that there was a consistent pattern as regards the highest performing departments and the positive comments from students in those departments provided an insight into successful strategies.

Following the above discussion, it was reported that the 2010 NSS results would be considered at the forthcoming HoDs Forum. The Vice-Chancellor emphasised the importance of a collegial effort to maintain the University’s reputation for quality.

10-11/8 Destination of Leavers Survey and Employability Strategy

Senate considered a report on the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education 2009 (S.10-11/6) and, related to this, the new Employability Strategy (S.10-11/7).

Presenting the destination statistics, the Director of the Careers Service drew attention to the following:

- data were collected six months after graduation and the target population for HESA was all UK and EU domiciled students;
- the survey did not take account of certain activities (e.g. travelling) as it was focused solely on employment and further study;
- employment and graduate-level destinations had both decreased since the previous year, while further study had increased;
- the University’s underperformance against its HESA employment performance indicator had an impact on newspaper league tables;
- the breakdown by department incorporated graduate jobs and further study to show ‘graduate-level destinations’.

Presenting the Employability Strategy, the Academic Registrar highlighted the following:

- four key aims and seven objectives of the Strategy;
- definition of employability;

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proposed performance indicators;
- detailed action plan for the Careers Service.

During discussion the following comments were noted:

a) Although the percentage of York graduates opting for further study (significantly exceeding 1994 and Russell Group averages) did not outweigh the overall poor performance that affected league table outcomes, it was nevertheless a consistent York trend that should be celebrated.

b) Workplace learning needed to be described in a range of terms appropriate to different disciplines (e.g. internships, industrial placements etc).

Having noted the destination statistics, Senate approved the Employability Strategy and associated action plan. As with the NSS results, it was reported that the topic of employability would be considered at the forthcoming HoDs Forum as this was another area of increasing significance in which improved performance would be required across all disciplines.

10-11/9 Employment Statute

Senate considered a report from the Registrar on work to replace the current University Statute 24 (the so-called ‘Model Statute’) with a short, enabling statute, backed up by a suite of new procedures (S.10-11/8).

The Registrar commented that the new Statute would bring the University into compliance with best HR practice and contemporary employment law and that the associated procedures would be part of collective agreements between the University and the campus unions. Tribute was paid to the HR Department for its role in drafting the new procedures and to union representatives for their collaborative approach in negotiations on the proposed new statute.

The Vice-Chancellor suggested that the section of the report describing the desirability of the new employment statute might be re-worded to emphasise more strongly the benefit to individual members of staff as well as to the University.

Senate approved the new employment statute, noting that it would be submitted to the University Council for approval and then to the Privy Council, as required by the University Charter.

10-11/10 Undergraduate Supervision/Combined Degrees
Senate noted new policies approved by Teaching Committee in respect of undergraduate supervision and combined degrees (S.10-11/9).

10-11/11  Business from Committees

Senate noted and approved business from the following committee meetings (S.10-11/10):

- Special Cases Committee
- Planning Committee: 27 July 2010
- HYMS Joint Senate Committee: 14 October 2010
- Teaching Committee: 18 October 2010

10-11/12  Professional Associates in TFTV

Senate approved a Professional Associates Scheme in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television (S.10-11/11).

10-11/13  Community & Volunteering Unit

Senate received for information the Annual Report of the Community & Volunteering Unit (S.10-11/12).

10-11/14  Date of next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of Senate was scheduled for Tuesday 1 February 2011 at 3.15pm.