

Minutes of a special meeting of the Council of the University of Ulster held by Zoom
on Monday 30 March 2020

Ulster University

Council

30 March 2020

Mrs J Pyper (Chair), Professor P Bartholomew (Interim Vice-Chancellor), Mr D Clements, Mrs G Horgan, Mr P Lobban, Mr A McAnallen (Students' Union), Dr P McNaney, Mrs H Quigley, Mr P Sheridan, Mr R Sloan, Dr J Stuart, Dr E Way

APOLOGIES

Professor K Burnett, Mrs M Lindsay

IN ATTENDANCE

Professor C Gormley-Heenan (Deputy Vice-Chancellor), Mrs F Kane, Mrs N Lamond, Mr E Mullan

PRESENT BY INVITATION

Mr D McAlister (Director of People and Culture)

The Chair opened the meeting by paying tribute to Aidan Langan. Aidan, who had passed away since the last meeting of Council, had been an outstanding servant to the University and would be much missed. Council expressed condolences to Aidan's family. The University Secretary will make contact with his widow Anne to convey these and propose a memorial service in the autumn.

She also commented, that although there was a formal agenda, she had agreed with the interim Vice-Chancellor that several of the items were interlinked. Firstly, she acknowledged the significant impact which Covid 19 and the lockdown was having on the University and she thanked staff for the very considerable efforts that were being put into trying to keep business going during the pandemic. She particularly noted the importance of the ongoing communications from the interim Vice-Chancellor. The Chair agreed to take the business in the order recorded below.

1. Financial Sustainability

The Chair invited Professor Bartholomew to comment. He referred to the sustainability review and SR 2034. The academic plan, he said, was based on increasing regulated and unregulated income. As a University, he said, we had previously budget on anticipated income but that that had to change to budgeting

on actuals. Financial sustainability plans, he said, would be based on the following assumptions:

- A flat line income
- Spend on everything already in the planning would mean an in-year deficit of £14m
- No unexpended balances
- Vacancy control

Professor Bartholomew went on to say that pay and pension increases continued to bring pressure on costs. In response to a query in respect of whether pension costs had been included he said that he would confirm after the meeting. In respect of making savings he informed members that this would lead to redundancies of about 10% of staff, but that these would be mostly managed through vacancy control. He also confirmed that there had been early discussions with the trades' unions. He also informed Council that the University's deficit was likely to be much higher because of COVID-19, although other institutions with greater exposure to the international market faced greater deficits. He also said that there were ongoing discussions with DfE officials, who recognised that there was a profoundly changed context. Members commented on the importance of universities and queried whether there had been discussions on this point. Professor Bartholomew commented that that had not happened yet but that he expected that it would.

2. Greater Belfast Development

Professor Bartholomew then outlined the outcomes of a meeting with Somague. Somague had informed him that they were in cashflow difficulties and were seeking ways to address this, including cash advances and secured Spanish government bonds. He commented that Somague considered COVID-19 to be a major factor but Mr Clements suggested that there were other factors. Ms Lamond commented that Somague operated globally and that the supply chain was very much at risk. She also commented that, given the circumstances, it would be unreasonable to impose the agreed liquidated damages.

Professor Bartholomew commented that, regardless of the reasons, the University was willing to help if possible, but options were being considered in conjunction with the Department, based on full transparency and open book accounting. He went on to say that going back to procurement was becoming a likely option and, if he had to do this his view would be to accept delay if it was financially beneficial to the University, particularly as Jordanstown remained viable. He also commented that, given all the current circumstances, it was likely that the bid for FTC would be referred back to the Case Committee, not least to consider easing some of the conditions as a result of the current climate. Professor Bartholomew informed Council that Department officials had been proactive in making it clear that COVID-19 had created exceptional circumstances and that that would be taken into account in any discussions. He also commented that EY had been commissioned to review the current situation in context on standard terms.

In response to a query, Ms Lamond said that there was a risk that construction sites would be closed, but that because of difficulties in the supply chain that work would soon dry up in any event.

Members agreed that the University should assist with the cashflow issue if possible but that it should also take legal advice on any potential new procurement or other consequential changes to the contract. Members also commented on the need to future proof, and to emphasise the importance of universities as anchor institutions in communities.

3. Update from Crisis Management Team on response to COVID -19

Mr McAlister opened his report by commenting on the difficulties faced by the University community as a result of the pandemic, but said that he was full of admiration for how that community had responded. He informed Council that a COVID-19 team group had been established in late January following Public Health agency advice . It continued to meet regularly and provided reports to the Senior Leadership Team. He outlined the structure in place and mentioned that the situation had been rapidly changing since 16 March, with the University's proximity to the border being a significant issue.

Mr McAlister then covered several areas where the University had taken decisive action, viz.

- Placement students abroad had been provided with support to get home
- Students in University accommodation have been permitted to cancel their contracts without financial penalty
- Clear guidance had been given to staff on who could be on campus and support had been given to enable most people to work from home
- Guidance had been developed on student fees
- Graduations ceremonies had been postponed/cancelled
- Carparking fees had been suspended for those that had to come on Campus – this amounted to about 50
- Facilities Services have been cut back and due to canteen closures Mountcharles had had to lay off staff
- Regular meetings were being conducted with the Unions
- Assessment methods had been approved by Senate and were in line with QAA guidance.

Professor Bartholomew said that to date there had not been a huge call for a rebate on fees but where students could not continue because of lack of technology or other reasons then either a rebate or a leave of absence with the fee carrying would be offered.

Mr McAlister then said that the daily communication to staff and students had been welcomed but that this was likely to become more thematic. He then went on to inform Council of the Civic Contribution, with most final year nursing students

finishing early to assist the NHS. Bio-medical sciences staff were also instrumental in upscaling the testing capability, with C-TRIC at the centre of that effort in conjunction with the Western Trust. The University was also exploring how best staff can volunteer, given possible insurance barriers.

In respect of recruitment, Professor Bartholomew commented that there was a risk of poaching by other institutions but that steps were being taken to prevent this, including a moratorium on unconditional offers.

KPMG had been asked to complete an Audit Report on the steps the University had taken, and it was hoped that that would be presented to Audit Committee in May.

Finally, Professor Bartholomew informed Council that the Senior Leadership Team had agreed to award staff two extra days at Easter and that the University would stop business for the holiday on Thursday 9 April.

The Chair commended the Interim Vice-Chancellor and Mr McAlister for the comprehensive report and for the University response to date. She also commended the daily communication and Professor Bartholomew paid tribute to the Communications team in that regard. Council agreed that it was essential that positive messages should continue to be provided to the media not least in relation to the UU contributions to tackling the coronavirus.

Ms Horgan, among others, commented that it was important to retain confidentiality on the Civic contribution until messages were clear. This was agreed and all agreed that the University should be appropriately recognised for its contribution.

Generally, members commented on the need to have an eye to the future. Whilst, while the current situation prevails it was right to focus on health and safety, civic contribution and academic quality, it was important to consider future ambitions whilst recognising that the immediate future was the priority.

4. Health Sciences Consultation

Mr McAlister informed Council that following a screening exercise conducted in line with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act that a full Equality Impact Assessment Consultation would be launched shortly, and all parties would be kept fully informed

5. Any other Business

Professor Bartholomew commented the Professor Nixon's mother had passed away recently and members asked that a note of sympathy be sent.

Members agreed that the Chair, the interim Vice-Chancellor and the University Secretary should agree principles for flexibility around decision making for the duration of the lockdown