

Ulster University

Council

14 February 2020

Minutes of a meeting of the Council of Ulster University held at the Belfast Campus on Friday 14 February 2020.

#### PRESENT

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

#### APOLOGIES

Professor K Burnett, Mrs M Lindsay, Dr P McNaney

#### IN ATTENDANCE

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

#### PRESENT BY INVITATION

Mrs A Rankin (Director of Strategy Planning and Performance), Mr J Rushforth (AdvanceHE)

#### INTRODUCTION

The Council wished Marie Lindsay a speedy recovery from her recent health issues. The Chair also informed members that Aidan Langan, owing to continuing health concerns had stood down from Council with immediate effect. Council recorded its thanks to Aidan for his outstanding contribution as chair of Audit Committee and welcomed the fact that Elaine Way had agreed to stand in as chair of the Audit Committee.

The Chair thanked her for taking on this additional responsibility which would be reviewed later in the year once new members had been identified.

Council also expressed its condolences to Peter Sheridan on the recent loss of his mother.

The Council noted that Helen Bingham had left the University to take up an external position. All staff and appointed vacancies would be filled during the reconstitution of Council later this year.

## 20.01 MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 15 NOVEMBER 2019, 9 and 18 DECEMBER 2019

The minutes of the meetings held in November and December 2019 were approved.

## 20.02 MATTERS ARISING

### Industrial Tribunal recommendations – minute 19.48

The Council noted that the Governance, Nominations and Remuneration Committee would receive a report on the University's response to the recommendations in the review of the IT decision. Council would receive a report at its May meeting.

### Relationship with Unions – minute 19.50

Council noted that the Joint meeting of Council and Senate would have as its focus industrial relations, with an input from the Labour Relations Agency.

### London School of Economics- minute 19.50

Professor Bartholomew informed Council that following discussions with Pat Loughrey on the sustainability report, he would bring an update to the next meeting of Council.

### Proposal to locate a school on the Coleraine campus-minute 19.52

Council noted that negotiations were still ongoing and that the University would only be providing the site for the school and would not be involved in the merger. The University would provide support where needed.

The Chair asked for an Action Sheet to be produced after each Council meeting to facilitate tracking of following actions.

## 20.03 CHAIRMAN'S COMMUNICATIONS

### The Chairman mentioned the following matters:

- 1 As already noted the Joint meeting with Senate was due to be held on 11 March 2020 on the Jordanstown campus.

Following discussions on the fourteen days of UCU strike action which included 11 March, it was agreed to move the joint meeting to another date.

- 2 The Chair had attended a CUC event in London for new Chairs of Councils. It had discussed the challenges facing all universities. It proved a good session and allowed contacts to be made with other university chairs who can share their experiences and pass on lessons we can learn from.

- 3 The Chair closed discussions by stressing the importance that the communications team were fully engaged in public affairs activity such as attending ETI Committee meetings, monitoring AQs etc.

Mrs Lamond commented on recent contact she had had with her peers from other universities in Ireland, who had similar funding models to Ulster. The Chair suggested that it might be worth considering extending a general invitation to other Irish university chairs for a discussion on common challenges.

#### 20.04 VICE-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT (C/20/01)

The Vice-Chancellor presented his report to Council, drawing member's attention to the following:

##### Brexit implications

Council noted the ongoing uncertainties with Brexit and that the Higher Education sector was facing the same challenges as others, with as yet no real clear way forward on many issues.

##### Graduate Entry Medical School

The Secretary of State had announced support for the project in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, and dialogue with the NIO, DfE and the Department of Health would be progressed.

##### Health Sciences

Council noted that there would be consultation on the preferred option for the location of Health Sciences and a Business Case and consultation document had been prepared. Council noted the deadline for an initial decision, subject to Council and Senate approval, would be driven to a degree by the need to inform students and prospective students as soon as possible and was likely to be before or shortly after Easter.

Council stressed the importance of the issue noting that it would receive a recommendation from Senate following the outcomes of the consultation process and appropriate risk assessment.

Mrs Lamond voiced a word of caution on the logistics of an additional 600-700 students being located at the Magee campus and the implications for resources.

The Vice-Chancellor responded to a comment on the need to work with UCU and students on the relocation of the school by stating that staff and students were at the forefront of the University's considerations. The decision had yet to be made, there was still the need to look at the services structure and the support needed for the additional students on the chosen campus.

The Chair noted the timeline for the decision and stated that Council should see the Business Case. She stressed the importance of managing communications

surrounding the relocation. A special meeting of Council, if needed, could be arranged to consider the options surrounding the proposal.

The Chair sought and received assurance that TUS were being fully engaged in the process and the consultation.

### Strike Action

Council noted that a further fourteen days of strike action by UCU members would commence on 20 February. The dispute has two strands, one relates to changes in USS pension and the other had four elements to it, 2019 pay award, gender and ethnicity pay gaps, casualisation of academic staff and academic workloads. There appeared to be no quick resolution to the dispute.

Council noted the Vice-Chancellor's report.

## 20.05 BALANCED SCORECARD PROGRESS REPORT 2018/19 (C/20/02)

Mrs Rankin presented the report which detailed the progress in year three in achieving top level Key Performance Indicators. The golden KPIs indicate that the University was below targets for student satisfaction under the National Student Survey, (our NSS ranking had fallen), percentage of academic staff who are Higher Education Academy (HEA) accredited and below target on the number of international students.

The Vice-Chancellor commented that the global league tables were harder to break into, but the University had made steady progress.

Members commented on the vast amount of detail and charts provided and suggested the need for a short paper on the key targets and where the University had failed to meet them, outlining the contributory factors to both success and under achievement.

Mrs Rankin informed Council that the overarching picture was that the University was heading in the right direction but had not achieved the increase needed in key areas. She commented that there would be a review of the Balanced Scorecard system, with a planned completion date of September 2020. The Chair commented that it would be important to review how best to present the information to Council which would in turn allow Council members to add value to discussions.

Mrs Rankin agreed to produce a summary of the main points of the Key Performance Indicators contained on the Balanced Scorecard.

The Council noted the current position with institutional and faculty positions and progress towards five and fifty targets. However without any specific proposals before them, Council was not in a position to approve revised targets.

## 20.06 REPORT ON STUDENT ENROLMENTS (C/20/03)

Mrs Rankin presented the paper which gave a summary of the University's position as at 6 December 2019. The paper indicated that the MaSN had improved although still short of plan. Both GB and Overseas numbers were close to the plan in terms of income but the full time taught postgraduate had driven the majority of the losses against the forecast income.

The paper indicated that the total regulated DfE funded full time students stood at 12,874, against a plan of 12,917 but 122 above the previous year's actual. There had been a slight increase in the number of GB students and resulted in an unexpected 30k of income. The overseas population increased by 29. The total shortfall in income stood at £0.8M.

Mrs Rankin responded to a question on the number of applications being rejected by stating that no applications are rejected out of hand but applicants are directed towards a bridging programmes to ensure they reach the required standard.

Professor Bartholomew responded to a comment on feeder schools for the University by informing Council that he intended to revisit school engagement activity. He envisaged the Provosts as school ambassadors promoting the University across their respective areas.

The Chair noted how important it was that the University strived to make the MaSN.

Council noted the position in relation to student enrolment.

## 20.07 GREATER BELFAST DEVELOPMENT UPDATE (C/20/04)

Ms Lamond presented the paper, which recorded that members had, at the special meeting of Council prior to Christmas, approved the proposal that the University enter into a settlement agreement with Somague Sacyr and subject to changes and clarification accept the heads of terms received from the Permanent Secretary.

The Chair commended the paper which was clear and succinct and clearly indicated the actions required of Council. The Chair continued by stating that although the Department had verbally indicated that the Head of Terms agreement would be approved, the University needed it in writing.

Under the Capability Review it appeared that DfE would appoint someone from the Cabinet Office to undertake the review. The terms of reference for the review would be shared with the Chair when received.

The Sustainable Financial Strategy would need the approval of Council by the end of March, having first been reviewed by the Resources Committee. Appropriate meetings would be arranged.

Professor Bartholomew responded to a comment on the handling of the move from Jordanstown to Belfast by stating that a strong communications piece needed to be undertaken.

Council endorsed the approach with the Heads of Terms, including debt service account, subject to the approval of the final legal terms for the loan when available. Council also noted the cashflow projections, the risks in meeting the tight timescale for all preconditions for the draw down.

Council also noted the report on programme assurance and welfare.

The Chair concluded discussions by stating that the progress with the development was encouraging.

#### 20.08 PREVIEW OF CHANGES TO ACADEMIC PLANNING AND SUBSEQUENT BUDGET METHODOLOGIES (C/20/05)

Professor Bartholomew presented the paper, which highlighted the changes to the academic planning process and resulting changes to the way budgets are committed across the institution.

The academic plan will in future comprise of rolled forward student number or continuing students and modes modelled year one numbers that include no component of aspirational growth in existing courses or growth from unproven new programmes in development. It will lead to a greater degree of prudence within student number forecasts which will in turn lead to more modest and accurate budget commitments.

The Council noted the changes to the academic planning process.

#### 20.09 EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW OF COUNCIL (C/20/06)

The Chair introduced the item and informed members that Mr Rushforth had met with UCU representatives prior to the meeting. The report highlighted the key issues and challenges facing Council.

Mr Rushforth commented that overall governance was generally good with governors being committed to their role. The report recommends that it might be appropriate to explore the possibility of creating an additional Council committee with the focus on strategy and performance. Other recommendations included members having a clear understanding of their role and the need to revisit the induction and development programme for members. The support given to the Students' Union representative should also be enhanced. The process for managing meetings should be reviewed along with the type and content of papers presented to Council.

The Student President commented that the additional support for the SU representative would be welcome as would a representative on the Resources Committee as recommended in the report.

The Chair responded to comments on the possibility of Council members attending meetings of the Senate by stating that it would provide an opportunity to explore the relationship between Council and Senate and indeed the boundaries between the two bodies. However, the current annual meeting of Council and Senate should also be seen in that context

Mr Rushforth responded to a comment on Council being kept informed on significant matters as with the recent IT issues, by stating that it is not always possible to know all of what goes on, it was rather more about how you deal, as a Council with the big issues when they arise. The Vice-Chancellor added that it was about trust between Council and the executive and the need to learn lessons as with the IT review.

Mr Mullan informed the Council that he would be developing an implementation plan to take the recommendations forward. The plan would be presented to a future meeting of the Council. Mr Mullan further agreed to ensure Council minutes were able to be viewed externally.

The Chair thanked Mr Rushforth for the presentation and the report. It would be important to look at the Petra Shiels report into the IT judgement and the effectiveness review and see where it is possible to combine the two sets of recommendations. Mr Mullan agreed to do so.

The Chair commented that it was pleasing to note that the report viewed governors as passionate and committed. The Chair asked that the independent report be issued to the Department as it could improve confidence in the governance within the University.

The Council adopted the report.

## 20.10 COMMITTEES OF THE COUNCIL

### a) Audit Committee (02 December 2019 and 3 February 2020) (C/20/07a and C/20/07b)

Dr Way presented the minutes and highlighted the following from 3 February 2020 minutes:

The Committee had received an update on risks associated with the Greater Belfast Development (minute 20.08) and noted that of the 26 risks associated with the project, five were recorded as very high, two high, nine medium and ten low risk. Members had stressed the need for the Committee and indeed the full Council to be kept informed on key developments with the project. This would ensure consistency with any ad hoc meetings with stakeholders and full accountability.

The Committee agreed that a workshop devoted to the GBD risk register would benefit Council's understanding of the project and issues faced by management.

Council endorsed the minutes of the Audit Committee held on 2 December 2019 and 3 February 2020.

b) Governance, Nominations and Remuneration Committee (29 November 2019 (C/20/08))

Council endorsed the minutes of meeting held on 29 November 2019.

c) Resources Committee (13 January 2020) (C/20/09)

Council endorsed the minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2020.

#### 20.11 APPOINTMENT OF AN HONORARY TREASURER (C/20/10)

The Chair presented the paper and informed Council that the Governance, Nominations and Remuneration Committee had agreed to make a recommendation to Council that Mr David Clements be reappointed as Honorary Treasurer for an additional four-year period.

Council endorsed the appointment of Mr David Clements as Honorary Treasurer from 10 July 2020 to 9 July 2024.

#### 20.12 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chair wished Professor Bartholomew well in his role as interim Vice-Chancellor. Council would support him and indeed Professor Gormley-Heenan as the University moves to an important phase in its development. Council formally appointed Professor Bartholomew as interim Vice-Chancellor and Principal Accounting Officer in the interim.

The Council noted that there would be major decisions to be taken in the next few weeks by both Resources Committee and Council. It would be important for potential potholes to be carefully negotiated.

The University Secretary and the Chief Operating Officer would prepare a table/timeline for decisions needed to be taken by Council and the relevant committees of Council.

Finally, the Chair recorded Council's thanks to Professor Nixon and wished him well in his new challenge at the University of Canberra in Australia.