

Council

20/01 A meeting of the Council was held in Room 201, Carrington Building, on Thursday 23 January 2020 at 2.15pm.

The President
The Vice-President (Mr R.E.R. Evans)
The Vice-President (Mrs K. Owen)
The Vice-Chancellor
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor M. Fellowes)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor E.M. McCrum)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor D. Zaum)

Mr T. Beardmore-Gray
Professor J. Board
Miss M. Cleaver
Professor C.L. Furneaux
Mrs H. Gordon
Miss G. King

Mr J Magee
Mr P. Milhofer
Mr N. Richards
Dr C. Shaw
Mr J. Taylor
Ms S.M. Woodman

In attendance:

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary
The Chief Financial Officer
The Director of Quality Support and Development

Apologies were received from Mr K. Corrigan, Mrs P. Egan, Ms S. Maple, and Mr S.C.C. Pryce.

The President welcomed to their first meeting of Council Mr James Magee, elected to membership under Class 6, and Professor Elizabeth McCrum, recently appointed Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education). He also welcomed Professor Yaqoob who was attending her first meeting in her capacity as Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

The President noted that, as a consequence of his appointment as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education), Professor Julian Park had relinquished his membership of Council under Class 3. The Council thanked Professor Park for his significant contribution to the Council's work.

20/02 The minutes (19/55-19/82) of the meeting held on 27 November 2019 were confirmed and signed.

Items for note

20/03 Documents sealed and to be sealed (Item 4.1)

The Council received a list of documents sealed and to be sealed.

Resolved:

"That the Council approve the action taken by the Officers and Members in affixing the University Seal to documents sealed since the last Ordinary Meeting of the Council and authorise the Seal of the University to be affixed to the documents to be sealed as now reported."

Main item of business: strategic and governance matters for discussion

20/04 Research Excellence Framework (Item 5)

The Council received an update report on REF 2021, which was introduced by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) (Professor Zaum) and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

Professor Zaum outlined the University's Research and Innovation Priorities, key features of the REF 2021 process, and an evaluation of the University's current position in relation to the REF criteria, and the expected progress until the submission date in November 2020. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor explained some of the wider considerations in relation to research funding and the recovery of full research costs.

Professor Zaum explained that the outcomes of REF 2021 would inform the national allocation of 'Quality Related' (QR) funding for the next 5-7 year period. The level of funding received by the University would depend on its performance and the number of staff returned to the exercise. Changes in the REF 2021 methodology meant that this exercise would be more competitive than REF 2014.

Professor Zaum referred to other indicators of the University's research excellence, including:

- an increase in research income from £32m in 2014/15 to almost £40m in 2018/19
- the award of two Research Council Doctoral Training Centres to consortia including Reading

- the award of funding from Horizon 2020 and European Research Council Synergy Grants
- the award of €3.9m for projects to EIT Food, a European Knowledge and Innovation Community led by Reading.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor explained that, across the sector, research activity had consistently failed to recover its full economic cost and was sustained by a cross-flow of income from non-publicly funded teaching, and that the more research-intensive the university the greater the cross-flow from other income to research.

In response to questions, Professor Zaum explained in greater detail some of the changes in the REF 2021 methodology, including a new requirement that all staff on Teaching and Research (TR) and Research Intensive (RI) contracts be included in the submission. In the REF 2014 exercise, the University had submitted a higher proportion of such staff than many of its competitor universities, and, in consequence, the adverse impact of this new requirement was expected to be relatively small. He acknowledged that colleagues on TR contracts were constantly balancing their teaching and research commitments and that this could present challenges. TR contracts did not specify the proportion of time to be spent on teaching and research, but work allocation models generally assigned a higher teaching load to those TR staff who made a smaller contribution to research.

In response to further questions, Professor Zaum explained that the Impact component of the evaluation was double-weighted and was therefore critical to a successful outcome; in consequence, the University had invested in a dedicated research impact team to support the development of case studies. He referred to a number of case studies, which illustrated the far-reaching impact of research at Reading. He also outlined the impact of the REF outcome on the University's reputation, its success in accessing other funding streams, its ability to recruit and retain staff, its league table ranking (especially international tables), and its ability to recruit students.

In response to a question on the implications of Brexit, Professor Zaum noted that, while the government had guaranteed the continuation of existing EU funding, there remained considerable uncertainty about future funding.

The President thanked the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Professor Zaum for a comprehensive and illuminating account of the complexities and challenges in managing research in the University.

20/05 Update from RUSU on priorities (Item 6)

The Council received an oral update from Miss Cleaver and Miss King on progress in respect of RUSU's priorities for the year.

They reported on the work of the various officers, including:

RUSU President

- The renovation of the Mojos event space was in train and was expected to be completed over the summer
- RUSU was working with the University to identify the location of glass pods across the campus to provide outdoor informal social spaces
- RUSU was engaged in a number of environmental initiatives and each month would focus on a particular environmental issue
- RUSU had promoted voter registration in advance of the General Election, had co-hosted a hustings, shuttled students to polling stations, and had otherwise supported debate and participation

RUSU Welfare Officer

- Plans were progressing for the development of a welfare directory to guide students towards support on and off campus, for 'calm and craft' sessions (in collaboration with Student Wellbeing), and for a week of activities for a University Mental Health Day
- Information and guidance to students on renting housing was being enhanced and made more widely available
- RUSU was running a series of events to promote a more informed approach to alcohol

RUSU Activities Officer

- RUSU was working to promote inclusivity in sports clubs, including the development of a booklet of LGBTQ+ definitions, the creation of a video of LGBTQ+ students' experiences (positive and negative) of sport at Reading, and a planned sports day to promote LGBTQ+ participation in sport
- RUSU had worked with the University to create three running routes on campus
- RUSU had held a very successful community exhibition to allow the public to learn more about the project for a 3G pitch, including its contribution to widening participation. An application for planning permission would be considered in February

RUSU Diversity Officer

- A series of events had been held to celebrate Disability History Month in November/December, and events would be held to celebrate LGBT History Month in February
- In collaboration with the University, RUSU hosted a series of BAME Matters lectures
- A programme of networking events was being planned

RUSU Education Officer

- RUSU was running a joint campaign with the University to improve assessment feedback, which sought to support both markers in giving helpful feedback and students in making best use of feedback
- RUSU was working with the University to improve the processes and structures through which the student voice and partnership between students and staff were promoted. Changes would be proposed in relation to the School and Course Rep roles, and the Student-Staff Liaison Committees.

Miss Cleaver circulated the RUSU Impact Report 2018/19 and a booklet identifying recent initiatives in which the University and RUSU had collaborated to improve the student experience. In response to questions, Miss Cleaver explained that the RUSU officers had sought to define the scope of their priorities to be achievable within their one-year term of office, but that, if work was ongoing or issues were outstanding, the RUSU officers would ensure continuity across years through a thorough handover. The President thanked Miss Cleaver and Miss King for their full and helpful report.

20/06 Report of the Vice-Chancellor (Item 7)

The Council received the Report of the Vice-Chancellor.

The Vice-Chancellor reported that he would be inviting all members of Council to one-to-one meetings with him to discuss their expectations of Council and of him as Vice-Chancellor, and to discuss how engagement with the academic and other activity of the University might be built more effectively into the Council's work.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) (Professor McCrum) reported that the Electronic Management of Assessment project would come to a close on 31 January 2020. The project had delivered all its objectives

Its benefits included an improved assessment and feedback experience for students, more accurate and more accessible data for staff to inform reflection on the design of programmes, and a data dashboard for students which enabled them to track their performance progress more readily and provided the basis for discussions with their Academic Tutor. The project was sector-leading in its integration of the student management system and the virtual learning environment, and had won national awards for innovation from sector organisations. Feedback from staff and students had been very positive. In response to questions, Professor McCrum confirmed that the features of the assessment and feedback delivered by the project were highlighted in marketing to prospective students.

Professor McCrum also reported on the progress of the Academic Tutor System project. The project established the new role of Academic Tutor which replaced the previous Personal Tutor role. The Academic Tutor had a stronger focus on the student's academic progression, while more complex personal issues were referred to a Welfare team; in consequence, the new system served a more positive, developmental function rather than simply reacting to students' crises and problems. The project had also developed and curated a range of resources to support Academic Tutors in their role. Students had indicated high levels of satisfaction with the process and reported that they had easier access to their tutors.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Strategy and Planning) (Professor Fellowes) reported that applications for undergraduate programmes had relative to last year,

Applications for Psychology had and for Henley Business School while other Schools had also enjoyed substantial increases. He explained that the University had generally reduced its published A level offer by one grade to reflect the grades on which students were admitted; as a consequence, the University appeared to be attracting stronger candidates who were seeking an insurance in case they failed to achieve the results required for entry to a Russell Group institution. He referred to two Schools which had experienced a decline in applications. Professor Fellowes reported that applications for overseas postgraduate taught programmes had increased, in part due to the government's extension of post-study work visas to a two-year period and the declining attraction of the USA as a study destination. In response to questions, Professor Fellowes explained that the increase in applications would allow the University greater flexibility at confirmation and clearing, and would allow the University to hold to a higher quality threshold, increasing student numbers only where the required entry tariff could be maintained. He indicated that the University, as part of its widening participation commitment, routinely made reduced offers, on a case-by-case basis, to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Chief Financial Officer reported that the construction of the British Museum (BM) storage facility adjacent to Thames Valley Science Park (TVSP) was making good progress and was expected to be completed this academic year. The project had been well-received by Wokingham Borough Council and the local community. The University and the BM were building an ever stronger partnership, had identified joint research projects, and had established a joint research fellowship. She indicated that there had been expressions of interest from other national collections about locating similar storage facilities on adjacent sites, which might lead to the creation of a 'culture quarter' on TVSP.

The Vice-Chancellor referred to a number of challenges facing the University and the sector, including the Augar review proposals which were likely to be revived following the re-election of the Conservative government, and the UCU industrial action in support of demands related to salaries, pensions and other issues. In relation to the industrial action, he reported that there had been little substantial progress towards a settlement of the dispute and little prospect of further progress in the near future. The Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) Joint Expert Panel (JEP), which included representation from the University and College Union (UCU) and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), had produced a report proposing a new model of governance for the valuation of scheme which might offer a solution in the longer term but did not provide the basis for a more immediate resolution. The UCU had adopted the position that there should be 'no detriment' to staff (i.e. neither an increase in their contributions nor a reduction in benefits), and the publication of the JEP report would not, of itself, halt future industrial action since it had not adopted this 'no detriment' principle. Since a majority of relevant UCEA member institutions were not subject to industrial action, UCEA had no mandate to negotiate an improved pay offer with UCU. The industrial action was therefore likely to continue, with ongoing action short of a strike and plans for strike action for periods in February and March. The impact of the strike in November/December had been limited, with only a small number of schools substantially affected. The President noted the

adverse impact of the industrial action on students' academic experience and its consequences for the NSS results and league table position; this, in turn, compromised the University's work to establish a virtuous cycle of a strong student experience, high ranking in league tables, quality-focussed recruitment, and strong attainment and graduate outcomes.

Resolved:

“That the Report of the Vice-Chancellor, now submitted, be approved.”

20/07 Report of the Strategy and Finance Committee (Item 8)

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee held on 10 January 2020.

The President reported that the Committee had discussed at length the handling of the £75m intercompany debt owed to the National Institute for Research in Dairying (NIRD) Trust and the future exercise of the Council's responsibilities as its trustees. Proposals in relation to both these matters were being developed, would include advice from a QC, and offer a number of options; they would be presented in March for discussion and decision by the Council in its distinct capacities as the University's governing body and as the NIRD Trustee. The Council noted that the purposes of the Trust were to support research into agriculture and food at the University, and that its financial strength would enable further major investment in the University's world-leading work in these areas. In accordance with the terms of the Trust, there would be close consultation with the BBSRC on future projects to be funded from the NIRD Trust and it was expected that this would be a productive relationship with a wider strategic benefit for both the Trust and BBSRC. Mr Evans confirmed that the University's NIRD Negotiating Committee, which he chaired, and the NIRD Trust Committee were pleased with progress and were agreed on the nature of the proposals which were now being finalised.

In response to questions, the President acknowledged that the Council would need to manage carefully potential conflicts of interest arising from its dual role as the University's governing body and as Trustee. As Trustee, it was responsible for ensuring that any allocations of funds or other actions were consistent with the charitable purposes of the Trust. The trust deeds would be circulated to all members of the Council, and the QC would advise on other information and guidance which would be useful to members in fulfilling their responsibilities as Trustees.

The Council confirmed that they were satisfied with the progress achieved to date and with the planned submission of proposals to its March meeting.

The Chief Financial Officer reported on the Quarter 1 Forecast.

The Overall Group forecast was compared to the budgeted , with the variance due principally to a positive movement in the pension deficit provision forecast and the removal of the surplus on the sale of land at Cutbush A, which was uncertain to take place in the current year. The University of Reading Malaysia (UoRM) was forecasting a in line with the budgeted The Chief Financial Officer would

submit a more detailed report on UoRM shortly since costs arising from regulatory changes by the Malaysian Ministry of Education would extend the period of financial recovery.

The Chief Financial Officer reported that the University had recently appointed Casenove, part of the Schroders group, as its Investment Advisor, and a formal announcement would be made shortly. Casenove had been judged to fulfil most closely the University's environmental priorities for its investment portfolio while also providing the prospect of a good return. The RUSU Diversity Officer had been a member of the selection panel. In response to questions, the Chief Financial Officer explained that there was considerable interest among the student body in the environmental impact of the University's investments, and that, as part of the agreed package, Casenove was committed to communicating effectively to students the environmental credentials of the University's investment strategy.

The President noted the improvement in the University's league table position and the Vice-Chancellor's cautious optimism about its future performance. The President welcomed the University's renewed focus on league tables and their contribution to improving the quality of the student entry.

The Council welcomed the University's Health Strategy and looked forward to receiving in due course the associated action plan which was currently being developed.

Resolved:

“That the Report of the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee held on 10 January 2020, now submitted, be approved.”

20/08 Report of the Investments Committee (Item 9)

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Investments Committee held on 9 December 2019.

Mr Evans, on behalf of the Chair of the Committee, reported that:

the review of the Committee's terms of reference had made good progress and a draft would be available shortly; and a decision was expected by the end of March in respect of the University's appeal against Wokingham Borough Council's rejection of the planning application for Cutbush Lane A.

Resolved:

“That the Report of the meeting of the Investments Committee held on 9 December 2019, now submitted, be approved.”

20/09 Vice-President of Council

The President advised that Mr Evans had given notice that he would retire from Council at the end of the academic year. He thanked Mr Evans for his tireless service and important contribution to Council. He noted that, as a consequence of

Mr Evans's retirement, a vice-presidency would fall vacant, and invited eligible members of Council, if they were interested in serving in this capacity, to consult the current Vice-Presidents in the first instance and then to advise the President of their interest.

20/10 Dates of further meetings of the Council in the Session 2019/20

Further meetings of the Council in this Session had been scheduled for:

Monday 16 March 2020 at 2.15pm

Monday 6 July 2020 at 2.15pm.