Council

25/01 <u>A meeting of the Council was held Tuesday 21 January 2025, in Room 201 Carrington Building Whiteknights.</u>

Present at the meeting on Tuesday 19 November:

The Vice President	(Mr K Corrigan, in the Chair)
The Vice President	(Ms K Owen)
The Vice-Chancellor	
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor	(Dr C Baylon)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor	(Professor E. McCrum)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor	(Professor D. Zaum)

Mr S. Alexander	Mrs S. Maple
Mr S Ali	Mr. A. McCallum
Mrs S. Butler	Mr P. Milhofer
Professor R. Frazier	Mr P. Milner
Mr S. Gandhi	Mrs S. Peck
Professor J Gibbins	Mrs. S Plank
Mr J Haxell	Dr C. Shaw
Mr J. Jack	Ms Janet Young
Mr J. Liu	

In attendance:

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary
The Director of Finance
Ms E Ashley, Deputy Director of Finance
The Director of Estates (for Minute 25/05 only)
Mrs E Murphy-Boyce (minute secretary)

Apologies had been received from Helen Gordon, Parveen Yaqoob, Katija Strohfeldt, and Elena Beleska-Spasova

25/02 <u>Vice President's opening remarks (Item 1)</u>

The Vice President confirmed that he would be chairing the meeting in the absence of the President, and that he may change the order of the items set out on the agenda to make best use of the time available.

The Vice President noted that the newly appointed Provost of the University of Reading Malaysia, Professor May Tan-Mullins, would be joining Council for lunch.

25/03 <u>Vice-Chancellor's opening remarks (Item 1)</u>

The Vice-Chancellor informed Council that there had been a recent update in relation to the planned rebuild of the Royal Berkshire Hospital, which included proposals to relocate the hospital to either Thames Valley Park or Thames Valley Science Park. The Government had

announced that the start of any construction would be delayed until 2037, at the earliest. The Vice-Chancellor informed Council that he would discuss this in further detail later on in the meeting as there was likely to be implications of this decision for the University.

25/04 <u>Background note on SportsPark ahead of the visit (Item 3)</u>

The Council received the background note on the Sports Park ahead of the planned visit.

The Vice President clarified that the paper had been authored by Professor Peter Miskell, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience). The background to the paper and the visit was that it was considered important for Council to undertake visits to different parts of the University to understand the context in which they were receiving information and making decisions. Further, sport at Reading was considered regularly by the Student Experience Committee. The Estates Strategy 2022-2032, approved by Council, contained various improvements to the sports facilities in the latter five years of the period; with the subsequent reduction in the capital budget, that timeline was to be reviewed.

Items of particular strategic significance

25/05 <u>Loddon Garden Village Disposal Options (Item 4)</u>

The Council received the proposal on Disposal Options for Loddon Garden Village.

The Vice President reminded Council members that the proposed options had been considered by both the Scrutiny and Finance Committee and the NIRD Trust Committee, and that the respective minutes were included in the papers provided to Council prior to the meeting.

The Vice President assured Council members that there had been a lively, constructive and challenging debate on the options at Scrutiny and Finance Committee. The Vice President invited comment and discussion on the item.

The Vice-Chancellor reminded Council members of the background to this matter:

- The University had been in talks with Wokingham Borough Council since 2020 regarding development of land known as Loddon Garden Village to assist Wokingham Borough Council meet the housing targets set out in their Local Plan.
- The plan originally included development of 4500 houses on the designated land.
- The first part of the permission (under S18) had been granted under the previous government. [redacted, section 43].
- The University had engaged external consultants to help it understand the best way to achieve the most desirable outcome for the University, and consequently an analysis of the associated risks.
- The University had started this process with seven disposal options and had reduced that down to three, following advice and consultation.
- The option being proposed to Council for approval involved sale of the land following the granting of outline planning permission.
- Council had agreed previously that, in its capacity as Trustee of the NIRD Trust, it would seek to maximise the receipt on the land (balanced against associated risks), in the best interests of the Trust.

Ms Janet Young provided an update in her capacity of Chair of the NIRD Trust Committee:

- The NIRD Trust Committee had received and considered the remaining three options for disposal of the land known as Loddon Garden Village. This land is owned by the NIRD Trust.
- The Committee had concluded that in accordance with the objects of the Trust, and in order to secure the most economical outcome for the Trust, sale of the land with outline planning permission was the best option.
- The NIRD Trust Committee was keen to understand in more detail how the proposed Eco Valley project would operate and the interaction between NIRD and the University bearing in mind the land plot proposed was significant in size and contained areas owned by both entities.
- The Committee was conscious of the potential associated risks, and these had been discussed in detail during the meeting.
- Following the meeting, the NIRD Trust Committee had concluded that it supported the University's recommended option.

In response to questions from members of Council:

- The Vice-Chancellor clarified that, in his view, the plans outlined in the English Devolution White Paper, that proposed the abolition of District Councils and the creation of Mayoral Combined Authorities, were unlikely to affect the existing housing targets placed on Wokingham Borough Council, and as a result the University's plans in relation to Loddon Garden Village should not be adversely affected.
- The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that, to his knowledge, there had not been a negative reaction to the Loddon Garden Village plans from neighbouring authorities. He noted that he had not seen the full response yet, but that both local MPs had been supportive of the planned development. It was further noted that the proposals for development were in response to an external demand to release the land from Wokingham Borough Council, in order to assist them in meeting the required housing targets.
- The Director of Finance reminded Council that the University/NIRD was responding to a need to meet housing targets in the area and had not initiated the proposed sale of land. As a result it was noted that the high level tax considerations associated with the proposed disposal option as outlined had been fully explored and that it was at an acceptable risk level for the University, but this needs to be kept under review until point of sale.
- The Director of Finance noted that while it was unusual for a single option out of a number of options to have both the highest potential return and the lowest potential risk, this was the case in relation to the disposal option being proposed to Council for approval.
- [Redacted, section 43].
- The Vice-Chancellor noted that the Internal Communications team at the University were able to provide PR support as required and external advice could be called upon quickly if urgent advice was needed.
- The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that Council would be kept informed of progress in relation to Loddon Garden Village, and that final decisions in terms of disposal of the land at the relevant time would be brought back to Council.
- The Director of Estates noted that while there could be some risk to any future development related to the availability of enough power to the site for new houses, the University had the ability to reserve power where needed, and that the matter would be addressed properly as part of the planning process.

- A member of Council confirmed that the potential reputational risks to the University of proceeding with the proposed option had been considered in detail at Scrutiny and Finance Committee. Details of the discussions could be found in the minutes of the relevant meeting.
- The Vice-Chancellor noted that staff engagement on the broader proposals for Loddon Garden Village had taken place at a previous 'all staff talk' and that there had been an exhibition on the plans, but that the University would look to provide a update to staff in the coming months on Loddon Garden Village.

The Vice-President of Council confirmed that any decision taken by the Council would be as Trustees of the NIRD Trust and as the governing body of the University. Council had received and understood the legal advice pertaining to any potential trustee conflicts of interest.

Resolved:

1. "That, acting in its capacity as governing body of the University and having due regard to the input from Scrutiny and Finance Committee, the recommended disposal option for Loddon Garden Village, so submitted, be approved"
2. That, acting in its capacity as Trustee of NIRD and having due regard to the input from the NIRD Trust Committee, the recommended disposal option for Loddon Garden Village, so submitted, be approved."

25/06 AI in teaching and Learning (item 5)

Professor Elizabeth McCrum, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience), gave a presentation on the use of AI in teaching and learning at the University which featured videos of staff speaking about their experiences using AI within teaching and learning.

Professor McCrum noted that AI had the potential to enhance the teaching experience at Reading, and that use of AI was important to students not only while studying but also for employment beyond University. She explained Reading's approach on the use of AI in T&L, noting that the University supported its use, with an emphasis on critical thinking. This was an approach similar to that undertaken by the Russell Group.

Professor McCrum explained that the University recognised the importance of supporting staff to adapt their teaching practices to include AI, while ensuring that integrity in T&L was maintained. She recognised that teaching staff were at different levels in terms of their understanding and use of AI and so various training guides had been created, as well as face to face training. A community of Practice on AI had been formed where colleagues particularly interested in the area could share their experiences of effective use of AI.

For students, the emphasis was on being clear about what they can and can't do with AI, including clear guidance from staff setting out the parameters for appropriate use when setting tasks. Skills guides for students had been produced by the University.

In terms of use of AI in assessments, the focus was to ensure that use of AI could be incorporated where appropriate and where academic integrity could be maintained.

Professor McCrum noted that the University was aware of the potential risks when using AI, and was alive to issues such as the inherent bias and negative stereotype reinforcement in AI, potential Data Protection issues, loss of University owned IP, and sustainability and ethical use concerns.

Council members were provided with examples of the guides that had been written to support staff in making use of AI in a T&L context. Professor McCrum confirmed that further presentations on the use of AI in Professional Services, and in Research would take place in the June and September meetings of Council respectively.

Members thanked Professor McCrum for the presentation and found it very encouraging. Members were pleased that the University was not seeking to ban the use of AI, but rather set out principles on its use within relevant disciplines. It was noted that the videos of colleagues' experiences of using AI showed great creativity and were very interesting to watch.

Members asked Professor McCrum to expand on how the University was ensuring academic integrity and preventing academic misconduct. Professor McCrum explained that since the University had provided frameworks for the use of AI in teaching and assessment, cases involving academic misconduct had gone down. Professor McCrum confirmed that students are required to disclose the use of AI used in tasks and assessments on a coversheet which helped to ensure that the University was aware of the level and extent of AI use. She confirmed that currently there were no good regulatory tools available that could reliability spot AI within assessments, and so the best way to try and prevent academic misconduct was to set out clear parameters for students to work in. Quality assurance was embedded in all the work on AI. Professor McCrum confirmed that the University's legal colleagues and Data Protection Officer had fed into the proposals and were continuing to provide advice given the complex and constantly changing parameters associated with the use of AI. Members asked about the role of Senate within this context, given its obligations around academic quality assurance. Professor McCrum noted that Senate had already been engaged on this matter and confirmed that there would be continued engagement.

Members asked whether the University was providing basic training to students on AI to ensure equality of opportunity. Professor McCrum confirmed that students are able to access the Study Smart Course prior to starting their studies at the University and that this course includes information on AI and permitted use. Some members expressed a desire to be better informed on this topic and asked whether some Council specific training could be provided to Council, in order for them to ensure they had an appropriate level of understanding.

Resolved:

1. "That the presentation on use of AI in teaching and learning was received."

25/07 Update on the delivery of RSU priorities (verbal update) (item 7)

A verbal update on the delivery of RSU priorities was provided to Council by Mr Haxell and Mr Gandhi.

Mr Gandhi informed Council about the RSU highlights for 2024, which included:

- Facilitating 5 refurbished venue spaces
- 8600 members attending RSU fairs
- An increase in attendance at commercial events
- An increase in attendance at student get-togethers
- A 2055% increase in use of the RSU app (since the previous year)
- Active membership at RSU clubs and societies reaching 8759, an all time record.

Mr Haxell covered some of the RSU successes in further detail, explaining that RSU had worked on student employability (including introducing paid RSU internships), continued with work on RSU's Green Impact and the University's Mental Heath Charter. RSU had facilitated the 'Reclaim the Night' march in the centre of Reading to campaign for an end to violence against women, and provided a range of accessible sports to students.

Mr Gandhi and Mr Haxell gave a brief update on the current projects RSU were working on, these included:

- Accessible/ emergency housing
- Attendance Shortage Research
- Segmentation Project
- Men's Mental Health Campaign
- Sustainability Review
- Summer Ball
- Student Safety
- Lunar New Year
- One World

Mr Haxell confirmed that the work on the segmentation project would be presented to Council at the March 2025 meeting. The project had identified 7 distinct segments and RSU was developing its strategic aims around these.

The Vice-President of Council thanked Mr Haxell and Mr Gandhi for the aspirational and upbeat presentation, and congratulated them for their hard work and achievements.

Resolved:

1. "That the update on delivery of RSU priorities, so delivered, be received"

25/08 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (item 6)

The Council received a paper on awarding gaps authored by Peter Miskell, Al Laville, Anne-Marie Henderson and [redacted, section40].

Professor Miskell, Anne-Marie Henderson (Director of CQSD) and [redacted, section40] (a final year student at the University and a University of Reading student inclusion consultant) delivered a presentation on the awarding gap.

The Director of CQSD explained that the session would focus on awarding gaps and the current University initiatives to tackle them, as it was an area where making progress has been challenging. There had been a narrowing of the gap during Covid but it had since reemerged. The Director of CQSD explained that she was seeking input from Council on the proposed approaches and would welcome comments and suggestions.

The Director of CQSD showed Council slides that demonstrated the awarding gaps between black and white students across the sector, noting that the University's gap was slightly below the sector average but still needed improvement. Council were informed of some of the root causes of the awarding gap, including :

- the curriculum (in a broad sense) including content, policy and practices,
- Relationships, i.e. asking for help, integration and social networking, some cultures feel worried about asking for help
- Social, economic and cultural capital, including financial hardship (multiple jobs/full time work), family members who have attended university, readiness for HE
- Psychological factors including safety and wellbeing, representation and the need to ensure the University has high expectations of all students.

The Director of CQSD set out potential solutions according to literature and then according to students. [Redacted, section40] explained some of the solutions proposed by students that the University was taking forward. These included the use of inclusion consultants to help work on University policy, constructive feedback on assessment, flexible approaches to teaching and learning, and unpacking 'how to play the game' of higher education, including understanding sector specific terminology that may not be clear to everyone who starts at University.

The Director of CQSD confirmed that the University's approach to addressing the awarding gap involved using available evidence, student voice and evaluation and impact to focus on three main areas; inclusion for all (holistic programme design and assessment, equitable policies, sense of belonging and fostering high expectations of all students), prioritising targeted areas (focusing attention on academic areas with the highest gaps, providing bursaries for specific groups), and individual support (wellbeing and hardship support and building relationships).

In response to questions and comments from Council members:

- The Director of CQSD confirmed that 'student voice' is captured in a number of ways including the inclusion consultants, student/staff partnerships as part of academic programmes, and (in future) learning analytics would support this work.
- The Director of CQSD confirmed that Law, Pharmacy and HBS would be targeted as areas with a larger awarding gap. She confirmed that these types of vocational courses are favoured by students from economically challenging backgrounds.
- Current systems, structures and policies were developed when universities were different and not as diverse and therefore were not always able to support students adequately.
- The Director of CQSD discussed the outreach work undertaken by the University in relation to secondary schools and their work with students on free school meals which could be used as a similar proxy to identify those students who come from an economically challenging background.
- The Director of CQSD agreed that there were lessons to be learned from the pandemic when access to teaching materials was more flexible as everything moved online.

The Vice President thanked the Director of CQSD, Ms Williams and Professor Miskell for the very helpful insight into the work being done in this area. It was noted that of the 10 strategic priorities, two related specifically to EDI and that further work on this would be coming back to Council in future meetings.

Resolved:

1."That the paper and presentation on the awarding gap was received."

Items for report

25/09 Report of the Vice-Chancellor (item 8)

The Council received the report of the Vice-Chancellor.

The Vice-Chancellor informed Council of three matters that had arisen since he had written the report :

1. Advertising had commenced for the new Chief Financial Officer role at the University, to replace Andrew Grice when he retires.
2. The Vice-Chancellor acknowledged [redacted, section40], the Welfare Officer from Reading Students' Union, who played an important role in the organisation of the University's White Ribbon Event, which had been a great success.
3. Advised that Council would need to start thinking about whether the University would be supportive of any future plan to build the new Royal Berkshire Hospital on University land, and, if so, how the fact that the Government has significantly delayed the funding available for the project may impact any decision. The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that Council would be asked about this more formally in a future Council meeting.

Resolved:

1. "That the Report of the Vice-Chancellor, so submitted, be received"

25/10 Report of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee (item 9)

The Council received the report of the Scrutiny and Finance committee.

It was noted that the committee had been looking holistically about how the University's investment reserves were used. The work on this project would be shared with Council at a later date.

The Vice-Chancellor provided Council with a brief update regarding the Global Sustainability Scholarship scheme which was designed to attract high performing students as part of the University's growth strategy. The scheme would be formally launched on 22 January 2025, and around 4000 offer holders and applicants would be contacted following the launch.

The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that Learning Analytics had been approved for use within the University and would help the University to identify and support vulnerable students. [Redacted, section 43] and that a paper proposing future size and shape of academic schools would be considered by UEB on Monday.

The Vice-Chancellor noted that a small and targeted voluntary redundancy scheme had been opened in order to ensure the most appropriate staff/student ratios within certain schools, and that the work on Directorates was ongoing.

Resolved:

1. 'That, the update from the Vice-Chancellor on delivering next steps related to the new mission and vision, be noted.
2. That, the report for Financial Quarter one, so submitted, be noted.
3. [Redacted, section 43].

25/11 Suggested items for future Council meetings (item 10)

The Vice President noted that any suggested items for discussion at future Council meetings should be provided to the President of Council or the University Secretary.

Resolved:

1. "That, the paper setting out discussion items for future Council meetings, so submitted, be received"

Items for note

25/12 Minutes (24/86-24/114) of the meeting held on 19 and 20 November 2024 (item 11)

It was agreed that the Minutes of the meeting help in 19 and 20 November were an accurate record.

25/13 Matters arising not arising elsewhere on the agenda, if any (item 12)

There were no matters arising

25/14 Decisions taken by the President on behalf of the Council (item 13):

To note that the President, advised by the Chair of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, has:

(a) [Redacted, section 43].
(b) [Redacted, section 43].

25/15 Decisions taken by the Council by circulation since the last meeting (item 14):

To note that following a competitive recruitment process and on the recommendation of the Appointments Committee, the Council has approved the appointment for a second and final term of Professor Elizabeth McCrum as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) from 1 August 2025 to 31 July 2031

25/16 Documents sealed and to be sealed (attached) (item 15)

25/17 Any Other Business (item 16)

It was noted that the President and Vice Presidents of Council would be contacting Council members to arrange appraisal discussions.

25/18 <u>Dates of meetings of the Council for the Session 2024/25 (item 17)</u>

      Monday 10 March at 10.00am
      Monday 30 June at 10.00am

25/19 Vice-<u>President to lead on brief reflections on the meeting of Council that has just concluded (item 18)</u>