

Council

22/14 A meeting of the Council was held in Room 201, Carrington Building, on Monday 14 March 2022 at 2.15 pm.

The President	
The Vice-Presidents	(Mr T. Beardmore-Gray, Mrs H. Gordon, and Mrs K. Owen)
The Vice-Chancellor	
The Deputy Vice-Chancellor	
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor	(Professor E.M. McCrum)
The Pro-Vice-Chancellor	(Professor D. Zaum)

Professor J. Board	Mr B. Knowles
Mrs S. Butler	Miss G. Loweth
Mrs P. Egan	Mr J. Magee
Professor R. Frazier	Mr P. Milhofer
Professor J. Gibbins	Mrs S. Plank
Professor U. Kambhampati	Mr N. Richards

In attendance:

- The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary
- The Chief Financial Officer
- The Director of Quality Support and Development
- The Director of Digital Technology Services (for Minutes 22/18-22/20 only)
- The Director of Estates (for Minutes 22/18-22/20 only)
- The Strategy and Space Manager (for Minutes 22/18-22/20 only)

Apologies were received from Mr K. Corrigan, Professor M. Fellowes, Ms S. Maple, Ms L. Moses, Mr S.C.C. Pryce, and Dr C. Shaw.

The President advised that, due to the unavoidable absence of a number of lay members, the meeting was inquorate. The meeting would consider the scheduled business and the outcomes of its discussion would be reported to the absent members for their consideration; if the absent members gave their assent, the resolutions would become effective.

22/15 The Minutes (22/01-22/13) of the meeting held on 25 January 2022 were confirmed and signed. Arising on the Minutes:

Minute 22/07: Report of the Senate (Item 3.1)

The Council received the implementation plan for Programme Expectations and Blended Learning. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) (Professor McCrum)

explained the key elements of the plan, which was being managed through two workstreams, focused on Enabling Programme Design and on Enabling Operations. In response to questions from Professors Kambhampati, Frazier and Gibbins, and from Mr Magee, Professor McCrum acknowledged that the implementation of the Portfolio Pathway would make additional demands on staff who were already under pressure. She indicated that there was an allocation of resource to provide support for Schools, although backfilling senior staff was not always feasible, and that discussions with Schools to date had included consideration of how to create capacity and protect research. She noted that the implementation of the Portfolio Pathway implied different levels of demand on Schools, depending in part on the extent of changes introduced in recent years as part of the Curriculum Review. Professor McCrum undertook to consider the comments at Council and give further thought to the resource available to Schools and how best to safeguard time available for research.

Minute 22/10: Audit progress (Item 3.2)

The Council noted that, after the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee on 28 February 2022, the President had approved and signed the year-end accounts and the annual financial submission to OfS. The President thanked the Chief Financial Officer, Director of Finance, and Financial Controller (Specialist Accounting) and her team for their exceptional support for the audit process.

Minute 22/10: Audit progress (Item 3.2)

Mr Richards, as Chair of the Audit Committee, reported that, following wider initial interest, two firms had submitted formal tenders for the contract as the University's external auditor and had given presentations to the selection panel. The Audit Committee's recommendation would be available shortly. The Council authorised the Chair to consider and, if appropriate, approve the recommendation on its behalf, given the benefits of early confirmation.

In response to questions, Mr Richards explained that the receipt of only two tenders reflected the state of the market, which was characterised by a general reluctance to bid for audit work, and that the quoted charges in both tenders were reasonable.

Items for note

22/16 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.'

22/17 Disclosure of Interests (Item 4.2)

The Council received a list of members' interests and members were asked to notify the University Secretary of any amendments.

Main items of business: strategic and governance matters for discussion

22/18 Introduction to presentations on the Digital Strategy and Estate Strategy

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary introduced the discussion of the emerging Digital Strategy and Estate Strategy. The two strategies were interrelated and underpinned the Strategic Foundations Programme. The Council, at this stage, was invited to comment on the direction of travel, and, in September, would receive both strategies for approval, together with the five-year capital plan to inform their consideration.

He acknowledged the complexity of the strategies and invited members to contact him, in the first instance, if they had any questions following further reflection after the meeting.

The President noted that Mr Milhofer had provided valuable support and advice to the team responsible for developing the Estate Strategy. The President invited any members who might be interested in supporting and advising the team working on the Digital Strategy (or in providing additional support to the team working on the Estates Strategy) to contact the Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary.

22/19 Presentation from the Director of Digital Technology Services on the emerging Digital Strategy (Item 5)

Mr S. Brown, Director of Digital Technology Services, gave a presentation on the emerging Digital Strategy.

Mr Brown explained that the vision inspiring the Digital Strategy was to create a digital environment which 'empower[ed] all students and colleagues to achieve more in an increasingly competitive world'. Core values, which would inform every aspect of the strategy and its delivery, included cybersecurity, rationalisation, the development of digitally fluent staff and students, an 'experience first' culture where the user experience was a priority, and data-driven decision-making. He outlined some of the developments which would be advanced through the strategy, such as new library systems, 'smart' buildings and facilities, personalised digital engagement with the student throughout their university lifecycle from prospect to alumnus, and the development of blended and hybrid teaching spaces which accommodated physically present and remote students.

He reported that the investment required by the Strategy had been structured under three categories: Essentials, which represented the minimum feasible provision and was based on risk mitigation; Optimise, which offered some options for improvement above a baseline, but was not transformative; and Transformative which would place the University above average in the sector. He noted that the University's current investment in digital relative to turnover was lower than the sector average. He advised that, in a modern digital estate, the balance of operational and capital costs had shifted towards operational costs due to the reliance on digital subscription services based in the cloud rather than reliance on servers and large kit; this presented particular challenges for the University which had access to capital funds, but did not have significant operating margins.

Mr Brown outlined some priorities, including: improvements in the recently introduced student app, which enjoyed a large uptake and high-volume use, but needed to be further developed; digital classrooms to support hybrid teaching; digital marketing; and compliance with Cyber Essentials, which was increasingly becoming a requirement when working with partners.

Mr Brown referred to the importance of strong central governance of the digital estate and services, which would then enable greater devolution to local hubs, closer to staff and students and their needs.

Mr Brown noted that successful delivery of the strategy depended on a more highly skilled and more flexible workforce. Recruitment of staff was challenging given the disparity between salaries offered by the University and the private sector. The University was mitigating this risk by taking on apprentices and by formalising career paths.

In response to a question from Mrs Gordon, Mr Brown advised that around 90% of services for which DTS was responsible were delivered in-house, and that those which were outsourced tended to be specialist services. Outsourcing of digital technology services had generally not worked well in the sector and was not part of the University's strategy, except where there was a need for specialised services, for example in relation to cybersecurity.

In a response to questions from Mr Milhofer and Mr Beardmore-Gray, Mr Brown confirmed that greater standardisation of equipment and processes, where possible, delivered significant efficiencies, but indicated that there was a need for flexibility, particularly in relation to research, which often required specialist hardware and software. Digital Technology Services (DTS) was mindful of the opportunity costs involved in supporting multiple systems and sought to rationalise where circumstances allowed.

In response to questions from Mr Richards and Professor Board, Mr Brown indicated that the Digital Strategy would necessarily involve significant cost, in part because the University needed to make up for several years of underinvestment in its digital infrastructure which placed it at a competitive disadvantage in the sector. Investment in the Digital Strategy was a key enabler for the delivery of the University Strategic Foundations Programme.

In response to a question from Professor Kambhampati, Mr Brown noted that training and development for staff across the University was essential for the success of the strategy. Recruitment of technical staff was challenging given the salary differential between the University and the private sector; in consequence, it was essential that DTS invested in training and developing new and existing technical staff. No less important, training for the wider staff and student community empowered them to use digital technology confidently and effectively.

In response to further questions, Mr Brown spoke of the importance of achieving buy-in from staff and students across campus, and indicated that, within a strong governance framework, there was scope for more locally based staff and greater responsiveness to local need. It would be important for staff to understand how the Digital Strategy contributed to the achievement of objectives in the University Strategy which were most relevant to their concerns, for example to student recruitment, environmental sustainability, and an improved working environment. Training and development for staff across the University was essential for the success of the strategy.

Mr Brown elaborated on the challenges of cybersecurity and the tension between tight controls and academic and personal freedoms, and on how the University benchmarked its services against others in the sector.

The Council thanked Mr Brown for his presentation and endorsed the direction of the emerging strategy. They asked that further thought be given to the balance of costs/benefits

and its implications for a realistic level of investment, and to the scope for further rationalisation and standardisation around core systems and processes.

22/20 Presentation from the Director of Estates and the Strategy and Space Manager on the emerging Estate Strategy (Item 6)

Mr A. Casselden, Director of Estates, and Mr David Wallace, Strategy and Space Manager, gave a presentation on the emerging Estate Strategy.

Mr Casselden explained that the Estate Strategy set out a ten-year framework to enhance, optimise and reconfigure the estate and was designed to support the University Strategy and its objectives. It had a strong academic focus, while also addressing the University's commercial interface and its investment priorities, and it sought *inter alia* to ensure that the estate was fit for the future and sustainable, accommodated steady growth, created a 'smart' campus, and offered an outstanding student and staff experience.

Mr Wallace outlined key metrics informing the strategy, its major drivers, and some of the challenges which the strategy addressed. Strategic drivers included environmental and financial sustainability, engagement with the local community and local authorities, and ensuring that the University was fit for the future and well-adapted to changes in student numbers and expectations, requirements of staff, and supporting diversity and inclusion. Challenges included the poor condition of parts of the estate, where decisions on the future of several major buildings would be required, and the achievement of net zero carbon by 2030, which was an ambitious target and would involve investment of £40-50m. Student numbers were expected to grow by some 11% (from a 2018/19 baseline to 2026/27), which would require spaces to be repurposed for teaching and student use. Mr Wallace spoke of the role of place and space in creating community, and explained how the campus would be planned around: a 'heart space' which was a destination to which students would gravitate and would include common spaces and new study and learning spaces; 'main space' which was used for a range of purposes, including teaching, staff offices and specialist facilities; and 'edge space', which was complementary and could be let commercially or developed. This model would inform the development of the campus and help to foster a dynamic community.

In response to question about Schools' and Functions' accountability for the space they used, Mr Casselden advised that Schools and Functions were not charged for their space and that several universities where such a model had been implemented had encountered problems and had drawn back in favour of their previous or other practices. Mr Wallace spoke of alternative approaches to ensuring efficient use of space, including the adoption of space standards, which were used at Reading and were currently being revised to rebalance space usage from academic offices to teaching, learning and student spaces.

In response to a question from Mr Magee, Mr Wallace explained that decisions on the future of buildings and prioritisation of backlog maintenance were informed by an evaluation of functional suitability and assessment of risk, and were carefully considered to ensure safe, cost-efficient solutions.

In response to other questions, Mr Casselden explained that thinking about the campus in terms of 'heart space' and 'main space' did not imply prioritisation of common spaces over School spaces, but was designed to help make the campus a more coherent and attractive space for students and encourage them to spend longer there. He also spoke of the importance of good design in buildings and the impact of excellent architecture in creating a

sense of place, the possibility of working with partners to share the costs of buildings, and work in hand to model likely student numbers and the implications for space.

The Council thanked Mr Casselden and Mr Wallace for their presentation and endorsed the direction of the emerging strategy.

22/21 Presentation from the Vice-Chancellor on league tables, how they work, and our position in them (Item 7)

The Vice-Chancellor gave a presentation on league tables, how they worked, and the University's current ranking.

The Vice-Chancellor observed, as context, that his role was governed by the twin imperatives of improving the University's reputation and ensuring that the University remained financially sustainable. The two imperatives were closely linked: in order to become financially self-sustaining, the University needed to grow its reputation consistently year-on-year. Rankings in domestic and world league tables served as an index to, and a major influence on, the University's reputation.

The Vice-Chancellor explained that the principal domestic league tables were:

- The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide
- The Guardian University Guide
- The Complete University Guide.

While the various league tables drew on many broadly similar measures, they used different methodologies (including different criteria, weightings, and reference years) to generate their rankings. Notably, the Guardian University Guide focussed exclusively on student- and teaching-related measures, and did not include any research measures, which meant that its rankings were often substantially different from the others. There were significant lag factors in league tables, which meant that recent changes in student profile and improvements in teaching were not fully reflected in rankings. Moreover, given the bunching of many measures, marginal differences in scores could lead to large differences in rankings.

The Vice-Chancellor indicated that measures in which Reading tended to be strong in domestic league tables included: research quality, graduate prospects, 'good' degrees (i.e. proportion of Firsts and 2:1s), completion and facilities spend, while teaching quality (based on the NSS), entry standards and student experience tended to be negative factors. While the University's ambition was that all disciplines should be in the top quartile in league tables, placement in a quartile was sometimes not a reliable measure, particularly where the discipline was offered by only a small number of institutions. League tables needed to be interpreted with care and a good contextual understanding.

The Vice-Chancellor explained that the principal global league tables were:

- THE World University Rankings
- QS World University Rankings (which was important for international markets).

They drew on data such as reputation surveys among academics and employers, bibliometrics, research income from research bodies and industry, number of PhD students per member of academic staff, and proportion of international staff. About 60% of the weighting related to research measures; methodologies, however, differed. The University's strengths tended to be in bibliometrics and reputation, and income from industry tended to be a relative weakness (in part, due to differences in cultures of funding). The University was currently ranked in the

low 200s (and around 30 in the UK) in the global league tables; a small improvement would mean inclusion within the top 200 universities globally, which would transform the University's ability to attract applications and scholarship funds since many prospective students and funders restricted themselves to the top 200 list.

In response to a question from Mrs Plank, the Vice-Chancellor explained that Home students tended only to refer to domestic league tables, and often only at the overall rank for a university rather than the subject rank. He advised that Schools were identified for growth on the basis of a range of factors and trends (for example, volume of applications for the subject across the sector, enrolments on A level (and GCSEs) in the subject); where a School had an expanding market but performed poorly in the NSS, the University, generally, would seek to improve the NSS before growing numbers.

In response to a question from Mr Milhofer, the Vice-Chancellor advised that the University strongly promoted participation in the NSS, and noted that, generally, the higher the completion rate, the better an institution's performance. He reported on a project being undertaken in Henley to promote positive engagement with the NSS to improve completion rates and to encourage students to complete it more reflectively.

Mr Knowles and Miss Loweth noted that social media tended to be a more important influence on student choice than league tables. Social media sites offered a richer, more personal and experiential account of a university or programme, whereas league tables were viewed as being susceptible to institutional manipulation.

Matters for report

22/22 Report of the Student Experience Committee (Item 8)

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Student Experience Committee, held on 31 January 2022.

Mrs Owen, as Chair of the Committee, commended to Council the Annual Learning and Teaching Report, which provided assurance that the University was maintaining academic standards and the quality of education. She advised that the Committee had identified a number of possible themes for particular consideration in the next Session, including student wellbeing, space, students' skills awareness, careers support, transitions, and the cost of living; the Summer meeting would decide which theme to take forward.

Miss Loweth, RUSU Welfare Officer, reported that RUSU had reviewed and reconfigured its full-time officer roles and had succeeded in improving the diversity of candidates. Next year's officer team had been elected and would take up their roles in June. She also reported on her contribution to an Advisory Group which was addressing issues around sexual harassment and consent, and the translation of those issues into a student-led campaign. A review of the #NeverOk platform, currently in train, was proving useful.

Mr Knowles, RUSU President, reported on RUSU's networking events which provided students with insights into how leaders in industry and other sectors had reached their current positions, and served to raise students' awareness of opportunities beyond conventional career paths. He was working closely with the RUSU Chief Executive on a three-year strategy for RUSU with the overarching theme 'helping students to have the best time'.

Mrs Owen thanked the RUSU officer team for their contributions to the Committee and the University over their term of office.

Resolved:

‘That the Report of the meeting of the Student Experience Committee held on 31 January 2022, now submitted, be approved.’

22/23 Report of the Senate (Item 9)

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Senate held on 2 March 2022.

Professor Frazier reported on the work of the Senate Review Group and the Sub-Group for the Review of Council-Senate Effectiveness, which was jointly owned by Senate and Council. He outlined themes discussed by the Senate Review Group, including clarity about members’ roles, induction into the roles, the diversity of membership, and changes in process which would support more active engagement with the business of meetings. He noted that the Sub-Group had now met twice, was making good progress, and had been considering how to promote a better mutual understanding between the two bodies.

In response to questions, Professor McCrum advised that the Annual Learning and Teaching Report had been well-received by Senate as a fair analysis of quality, standards and the student experience, which accurately reflected the University’s strengths and weaknesses and identified how the latter were being addressed. She reported that the work on decolonising the curriculum was in its early stages, but was progressing well and was expected to effect an improvement in student outcomes. Mr Knowles indicated that, in comparison with some other universities of which he was aware, Reading was well advanced.

Resolved:

1. ‘That the University Annual Learning and Teaching Report for Council (Spring Term 2022), now submitted, be approved;’
2. ‘That the Report of the meeting of the Senate held on 2 March 2022, now submitted, be approved.’

22/24 Report of the Vice-Chancellor (Item 10)

The Council received the Report of the Vice-Chancellor.

Further to his written report, the Vice-Chancellor provided an update on the University and College Union’s (UCU) industrial action in relation to pensions. UCU had called a strike for five days which straddled the end of term and the beginning of the vacation, and was re-balloting to extend the period of industrial action beyond the current mandate, which ended on 5 May. Strike action to date had had limited impact on students, with reported loss of only 1% of classes, and the University would continue to strive to minimise all impacts.

Resolved:

‘That the Report of the Vice-Chancellor, now submitted, be approved.’

22/25 Report of the Strategy and Finance Committee (Item 11)

The Council received the Report of the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee held on 28 February 2022.

The Council noted that the projected outcome for the year had improved since Q1, and that the deficit budget was being addressed through the Strategic Foundations Programme. The Sustainable Planning System had now completed its current round; the minor capital pot had been reinstated at its normal level, following its reduction last year, and targeted funding had been agreed for a small number of high priority requests.

Resolved:

‘That the Report of the meeting of the Strategy and Finance Committee, held on 28 February 2022, now submitted, be approved.’

22/26 Update on the one-to-one meetings with members of Council (Item 12)

The Council received an oral report from Mrs Owen on appraisal discussions with Council members. She thanked all members for their engagement and reported that feedback had generated many excellent suggestions about ways of working and topics for future discussion, and individuals had volunteered to engage with particular topics and areas of business. The formal report would be completed shortly.

22/27 Update on the appointment of a new President

Mrs Owen reported on the process for the selection of a new President. She informed Council that the role had attracted a strong field, and four candidates had been shortlisted and would be interviewed shortly. A short exceptional Council meeting would then be convened online to consider the selection panel’s recommendation.

22/28 Outgoing RUSU Officers

The President noted that Mr Knowles, RUSU President, and Miss Loweth, RUSU Welfare Officer, would complete their terms of office before the next scheduled meeting of the Council. He thanked them for their valuable contributions to the Council and thanked the RUSU officer team for their hard work in support of RUSU and the University community.

22/29 Dates of further meetings of the Council in the Session 2021/22

The final meeting of the Council in this Session had been scheduled for:

Monday 4 July 2022 at 2.15pm.