

THE COUNCIL

Minutes

This paper presents the confirmed Minutes of the extraordinary meeting of the Council held on 16 April 2020 at 2.30pm via Microsoft Teams.

The Council **approved** these Minutes, subject to revisions in minute 7.1 and 7.3, as a correct record at its meeting held on 12 May 2020.

Dave Hall
University Secretary

Sue Thomas
Working Secretary to the Council
Email: sue.thomas@open.ac.uk

Attachments:

C-2020-03-M Minutes of the extraordinary meeting of the Council held on 16 April 2020

THE COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Council meeting held on 16 April 2020 at 2.30pm via a remote Microsoft Teams meeting.

Present: Malcolm Sweeting, John Wolffe, Barbara Tarling, Bob Spedding, Tim Parry, Tim Blackman, John Brooks, Mary Curnock-Cook, Maggie Galliers, Robert McCracken, Cath Brown, Frances Chetwynd, Anna Henderson, Ruth Giradet, Paul Greenwood John D'Arcy, Greg Walker, Rachel Lock, Jovan Byford, Richard Heffernan

In Attendance: Dave Hall (University Secretary), Laura Lauer (Head of Governance), Paul Traynor (Chief Financial Officer), Becky Sexton (Senior Manager, Governance), Sue Thomas (Senior Manager, Governance)

Apologies: Sandy Begbie (Proxy received)

1 CHAIR'S BUSINESS

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed members to the virtual meeting and thanked them for participating at short notice in such extraordinary times. The purpose of the meeting was to focus on matters relating to or impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. All other business would be addressed at the regular business meeting on 12 May 2020.
- 1.2 The Chair informed members that the Chairs of the Audit and Finance Committees had been receiving regular reports from the Vice-Chancellor and University Secretary on the University's operations during the pandemic. He reflected that the University had risen to the challenges it faced in a very impressive way and staff were doing an excellent job to maintain services to students.

2 VICE-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT

- 2.1 The Vice-Chancellor reported that he had been humbled by the way in which University staff had responded and maintained services for students. 3500 staff were currently working from home. At present, 80% of students' queries were being answered within five days and often quicker than that service level indicator. Other business was also progressing, and the University was about to commence Unit Planning and budgeting for the forthcoming year.
- 2.2 The University Emergency Management Team had been convened with several subgroups addressing key business areas. A detailed Communications Plan had included the issue of messages to students and staff and with the exception of a small number of sequencing issues, the reactions to these had been positive with staff and students appreciating the information.
- 2.3 IT teams had handled significant numbers of requests for laptops to enable home working. There had been cybersecurity threats including a denial of service attack on FutureLearn's platforms, but the University was improving its resilience in the different working circumstances. Staff wellbeing whilst working remotely had been a major area of focus

with emphasis on staff being encouraged to take annual leave and seek assistance if required. Students had also been made aware of hardship funds available to them and eligibility criteria were being relaxed to enable more students to be supported during these unprecedented times.

- 2.4 Interest in the University's OpenLearn resources had risen significantly since the pandemic started. The University would be providing resources for furloughed workers hosted by the National Careers Service. The Vice-Chancellor had been appointed to the Board overseeing this resource. Universities UK had recently published a package of proposals to mitigate the challenges of Covid-19 and ensure the sector was able to play a key role in the UK's recovery. A response from Government was awaited.
- 2.5 Looking forward, the Emergency Management Team was changing into a Recovery Planning Group and work was starting on planning the reopening of offices and staff returning to sites once the official position was announced it was safe to do so. The Group would also reflect on lessons learned from the handling of the pandemic and whether ways of working could change as a result.
- 2.6 In response to a question on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on awards and assessment, the Vice-Chancellor explained that the University had acted very quickly to provide clarity for students and cancelled the majority of end of module assessments (EMA) and exams. Students had been offered various options within existing regulations to either postpone their results and submit an EMA at the next opportunity or receive an award based on their continual assessment work. These decisions were compliant with guidance subsequently issued to institutions by the Office for Students. Feedback from students had been a little mixed as it was acknowledged that many saw submission of a strong EMA as important in achieving a good module result.
- 2.7 Council members pointed out that there may be opportunities at this time for the University to actively investigate, such as furloughed workers considering career changes. The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that the Vice-Chancellor's Executive (VCE) would be discussing this imminently. A marketing campaign was currently running for recruitment for autumn presentations of modules and it was important that the University was not perceived to be exploiting or taking advantage of the pandemic circumstances. VCE was also cognisant of the fact that many other universities had increased their online capabilities to support their students currently and may be investigating increased online opportunities commercially. Professor Blackman assured the Council that the University would focus on its traditional aims of high quality materials and pedagogy and would be flexible when considering what new opportunities were pursued. It was also pointed out that robust data should underpin any intentions to increase offerings to students to ensure sufficient tutors were recruited.
- 2.8 The Council **noted** the report.

**3 PRO-VICE-CHANCELLOR, RESEARCH ENTERPRISE & STRATEGY C-2020-03-01
(PVC-RES): RECRUITMENT PROCESS**

- 3.1 The Vice-Chancellor informed the Council that Professor Kevin Hetherington's term as PVC-RES ended on 31 December 2020. While it was hoped that appropriately qualified and experienced members of the University would apply for the role, a recruitment process that was also open to external candidates would allow the University to construct a strong shortlist of candidates. It was therefore proposed that the role was advertised concurrently to OU staff and externally. Professor Blackman acknowledged the challenges in conducting recruitment during the pandemic but hoped that it would be possible to commence preparatory work such as appointing a recruitment agency. It was hoped on that basis that role could be filled by January 2021.

- 3.2 Members of the Council supported the proposed process and the intention to commence recruitment and not to delay preparatory work.
- 3.3 In accordance with Statute 7(1) and the recommendation of the Senate, the Council **approved** the process to be followed for the appointment of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research, Enterprise, and Scholarship).

4 EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT TEAM UPDATE **C-2020-03-02**

- 4.1 The Chair welcomed Dave Hall, University Secretary, to his first meeting of the Council. Mr Hall informed the Council that the Emergency Management Team (EMT) had been convened to enable the University to act decisively, enabling it to remain open to students and for staff to be supported to work from home wherever possible. At present, traffic to the University website had increased by 43% and reservations for autumn presentations of modules were looking strong.
- 4.2 Students were being supported by staff via email and webchat channels with use of the latter increasing significantly. Inbound telephony services were currently withdrawn but it was hoped to reinstate a limited service imminently. He acknowledged that this had resulted in additional workloads for Associate Lecturers as students directed their questions to them. Curriculum maintenance on modules for October 2020 had been suspended to minimise risk of non-delivery to students and 15 new modules planned for October/November 2020 that replaced end of life curriculum had been postponed with existing curriculum being extended for another year.
- 4.3 The closure of prison education units had affected students studying in secure environments (SiSE), as there was currently no way to send materials/receive work from students. The University was looking at mitigations.
- 4.4 The University Secretary assured the Council that the University was beginning to focus on recovery work, ways of working and identify where backlogs of work might exist and how these would be addressed. In the light of the increased interest in OpenLearn resources and traffic to the website, the University would be considering options for upgrading the host platform
- 4.5 Members of the Council acknowledged the scale of the response to the pandemic which enabled the University to remain operational and able to support students. It would however be important to focus within recovery on monitoring recruitment and retention for the 20J presentation (October 2020) to identify the impact of the pandemic on student numbers. Students currently registered on 20B and 20D presentations and just starting their studies could also need additional support and advice as they could be struggling to cope with immediate issues such as illness, home schooling or supporting their families. The University Secretary assured the Council that the University was carefully monitoring student decisions and behaviours. Proactive contact was being made with students wherever possible and particular attention would be given to the cohorts identified.
- 4.6 While significant efforts had been made to maintain operational activity, members observed that some elements of the emergency planning had not been handled well. Attention was drawn to sequencing of communications and the issuing of important messages to students late on Friday evenings when limited support was available and Associate Lecturers (ALs) not always being informed of decisions in advance of students. It was suggested that a different composition of the EMT might have helped to avoid such issues. The University Secretary assured the Council that it would be important to reflect on the University's response to the pandemic overall and a report on lessons learned would be presented to a future meeting of the Council. The subgroups established to

support the EMT assisted in keeping the EMT a manageable size and had included staff working on front line operations and these groups reported regularly into the EMT.

Action: University Secretary

- 4.7 In response to a question the University Secretary informed the Council that the issue of cybersecurity relating to ALs using their own IT equipment had not yet been resolved. Provision of equipment for ALs continued as part of the negotiations on the implementation of the new contractual arrangements for ALs.
- 4.8 The President, OU Students Association informed the Council that she was a member of three of the subgroups supporting the EMT. Levels of anxiety amongst students had been very high and this was evidenced via social media and other informal fora. The University had moved at pace with teams demonstrating significant goodwill and working very long hours to assist students. Whilst acknowledging some aspects had not been perfect, there had been no intention to exclude groups from communications and often it had simply been a case of wanting to issue a message very quickly to support students.
- 4.9 On behalf of the Council, the Chair recorded his thanks to the Executive Team, the EMT and the staff of the University who had worked very hard in unprecedented circumstances to maintain the operations of the University and support students.
- 4.10 The Council **noted** the report.

5 OPERATIONAL DASHBOARD

C-2020-03-03

- 5.1 The University Secretary introduced the paper and explained that the Dashboard was still under development, but the intention was for managers to be able to use it to understand the University's operational effectiveness in the light of the pandemic.
- 5.2 The Council welcomed the construction of the dashboard and noted that information on Associate Lecturers would be included in future versions. It was observed that it did not currently reflect how staff were sharing knowledge and expertise with external bodies. It was confirmed that no University staff were currently furloughed. Third-party contractor staff (cleaning and catering staff) were furloughed through their own employers and the University was topping up their salaries.
- 5.3 The Council noted that the University's operations and financial position were currently satisfactory and sought clarification on the key risks facing the University from the pandemic. The University Secretary reflected that the full extent of the risks faced were unknown, and clarity was required on student withdrawals and deferrals to understand the impact of the pandemic. The impact on the University's apprenticeship programme was still being understood and it was possible that future programmes might need to focus on key worker roles rather than high level qualifications.
- 5.4 The Council **noted** the report.

6 FINANCIAL IMPACT REPORT

C-2020-03-04

- 6.1 The Chief Financial Officer explained that the report provided a summary of the early assessment of the financial impact of the pandemic on the forecast outturn for 2019/20. At present the impact was modest but the position would be monitored carefully. The most significant financial impact identified related to the fall in stock markets and the impact of unrealised losses from long term investment holdings. The Council was also informed that the potential reduction in grant of £2million from the Higher Education Funding Council in Wales (HEFCW) would not be implemented. At present there were no

forecasts of impact on FutureLearn but meetings were scheduled with the senior management team for next week.

- 6.2 The Council enquired whether the University was increasing hardship funds to support students and assist them to continue studying if their financial circumstances were adversely affected due to the pandemic. The Chief Financial Officer confirmed that funds were financially robust, and that the University was currently examining the criteria for the funds with a view to flexing them to ensure significant numbers of students could be supported. Members requested that students and ALs be made aware of the availability of the funds.

Action: Vice-Chancellor

- 6.3 The Council **noted** the report.

7 CORE SYSTEMS REPLACEMENT (CSR) PANDEMIC IMPACT: UPDATE

- 7.1 Following the last meeting of the Council on 10 March 2020, the Chair of the Council and Chairs of the Audit and Finance Committees had met virtually with the Vice-Chancellor, University Secretary and Chief Information Officer to discuss the Core Systems Replacement project. More detailed information on the CSR Project would be presented to the Council at its next meeting in May 2020.
- 7.2 The University Secretary informed the Council that the ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) element of the project had not been materially impacted by the pandemic but was still considered to be at high risk. PA Consulting was examining the risks, particularly those associated with User Acceptance Testing (UAT) and the impact on the proposed implementation date of November 2020. The Student Life Cycle (SLC) part of the project had been affected by the pandemic as staff Academic Services staff working on aspects of the project had been directed back to their original roles to support front line services to students. The University Secretary confirmed that the project was aiming to be more agile in its work in line with recommendations from PA Consulting. It was also confirmed that the new Delivery Board for the SLC project would provide a focus on the student experience and not just on technology issues.
- 7.3 The Chair of the Audit Committee commented that robust assurance to Council had yet to be provided on a range of concerns, including project costs and plans to remedy structural deficiencies, and it was hoped this evidence would be available at the next Council.

Action: Chief Information Officer

- 7.4 The Council **noted** the report.

8 ASSOCIATE LECTURER (AL) CONTRACT PANDEMIC IMPACT: UPDATE **C-2020-03-05**

- 8.1 The Chair drew attention to the timeline for the project which had been included in the paper. At present, work had not been impacted by the pandemic, but a more comprehensive update would be provided at the next meeting.
- 8.2 Concern was expressed over the capacity of Staff Tutors, whose workloads comprised both AL management and roles within module teams, to be able take on additional work related to the implementation of the new contract. The timeline indicated such implementation work would be peaking in the autumn of 2020 when they would be handling the start of the 20J module presentations. It would also be important to examine dependencies between this project and the CSR project particularly if the CSR schedule

changed. The University Secretary acknowledged these points and assured the Council that the newly established Project Delivery Board for the AL Contract project would be considering these issues at its first meeting later in the month.

8.3 The Council **noted** the report.

9 CONCLUDING REMARKS

9.1 The Chair thanked members for joining the meeting and considered that using Microsoft Teams had worked well. Any feedback from members would be appreciated.

9.2 The Chair reiterated his remarks at the start of the meeting in respect of the remarkable efforts made by University staff in recent weeks to enable the University to continue to deliver services and support to students. He would liaise with the Vice-Chancellor to issue a note of appreciation on behalf of the Council.

10 DECLASSIFICATION OF COUNCIL PAPERS

The confidential papers for the meeting were:

Paper Number	Title	Classification
C-2020-03-03	Operational Dashboard	Remain Confidential
C-2020-03-04	Financial Impact	Remain Confidential
C-2020-03-05	AL Contract	Remain Confidential

11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next ordinary business meetings of the Council would be held on:

12 May 2020

14 July 2020

It was possible that an additional meeting would be convened in June 2020.

Meetings were scheduled to take place in Milton Keynes, but confirmation of the arrangements in the light of the pandemic would be issued nearer to the meetings

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University Secretary

Sue Thomas
Working Secretary to the Council
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