THE SENATE

Minutes

This paper presents the confirmed Minutes of the last meeting of the Senate held on Wednesday 27 January 2021 via Teams.

The Senate approved these Minutes as a correct record at its meeting held on 21 April 2021.

Dave Hall
University Secretary

Becky Sexton
Working Secretary to the Senate
Email: becky.sexton@open.ac.uk
Tel: 01908 653351

Attachments:

S-2021-01-M Minutes of the meeting of the Senate held on 27 January 2021
THE SENATE

Minutes of the meeting of the Senate held on Wednesday 27 January 2021 via Teams.

PRESENT:

Professor Tim Blackman  Vice-Chancellor
Professor Josie Fraser  Deputy Vice-Chancellor
Dr Liz Marr  Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students)
Professor Kevin Hetherington  Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research, Enterprise and Scholarship)
Professor Ian Fribbance  Executive Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Professor Devendra Kodwani  Executive Dean, Faculty of Business and Law
Professor Nicholas Braithwaite  Executive Dean, Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
Professor Fary Cachelin  Executive Dean, Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies
Professor Denise Whitelock  Director, Institute of Educational Technology
Professor Eileen Scanlon  Associate Director Research, Institute of Educational Technology
Mr Gary Elliot-Cirigottis  Director of Library Services
Mr Nicholas Barratt  Director, Learner and Discovery Services

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS)

Dr William Brown  Dr Elaine Moohan
Dr Jovan Byford  Dr Deborah Drake
Dr Alison Penn  Professor John Wolffe
Dr Andrew Griffiths  Dr Donna Loftus
Dr Emma Barker  Dr Karen Hagan
Professor Nicola Watson  Professor David Johnson

Faculty of Business & Law (FBL)

Miss Carol Howells  Dr Kristen Reid
Dr Caroline Clarke  Mr Mike Phillips
Ms Eleanor Howie

Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)

Dr Helen Fraser  Dr James Hague
Dr Janet Haresnape  Professor Simon Green
Dr Magnus Ramage  Dr John Baxter
Professor David Rothery  Dr Leonor Barroca
Dr Robert Brignall  Dr Hayley Ryder
Dr Toby O’Neil  Dr Mark Slaymaker
Dr Andy Hollyhead  Dr Claire Kotecki
Mr Donald Edwards  Dr Fiona Moorman
Dr James Bruce  Dr Jon Golding
Dr Kaustubh Adhikari

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS)

Dr Anna Comas-Quinn  Mr Andy Rixon
Dr Severine Hubscher-Davidson  Mr Jeremy Wilcock
The Senate approved the minutes of the meeting of the Senate held on 14 October 2020 subject to the following amendment (insertion in italics and deletion in strikethrough):

Minute 10.2: PROMOTIONS REVIEW IMPLEMENTATION
Clarification was requested on the rationale for lowering the expectation of outputs from four to three in the most recent 6-year period across the board for all staff categories profiles, as it did not seem to address the objective of mitigating disadvantage and may
have detrimental consequences for research intensity, academic standards and institutional reputation.

2 MATTERS ARISING

The Senate noted the responses to the matters arising from the minutes of the meeting of the Senate held on 14 October 2020 (S-2020-04-M).

3 REPORT FROM THE CHAIR

3.1 The Vice-Chancellor welcomed members to the meeting, noting that it was also Holocaust Memorial Day.

3.2 The results of the autumn staff survey demonstrated not only high levels of satisfaction but also the effect of the pandemic on workloads and stress, on top of the University delivering major IT changes. While there had been some challenges with implementation of the IT changes, he thanked those who had worked hard to resolve the issues and noted that apologies would be sent to both ALs and students who had been affected.

3.3 Externally, the UK Government’s Skills White Paper and interim response to the Augar review showed a clear direction of travel. While all UK nations were moving toward the creation of a single post-18 tertiary education system, in England it was taking the form of a strong differentiation between academic and technical routes. The UK Government was focused on incentivising the new T-levels at level 3 and higher technical qualifications (HTQs) beyond that in England. There was also continued focus on degrees which were not deemed to deliver good employment outcomes, but the OU was committed to students having a range of subjects to choose from.

3.4 The University is making final preparations for its REF submission at the end of March, which reflects a huge amount of work by the Institutional Review Team, Faculties as well as many other colleagues. He added his thanks on behalf of the Senate, to Professor Kevin Hetherington, who would be stepping down as PVC-RES in April.

3.5 The OU continued to grow and increase in popularity. As the nature of higher education changes, the University must continue to adapt and lead change. Areas to consider included: 18 and 19 year old learners, full time study, paid-for short courses and microcredentials and opportunities arising out of the shift of skills planning to local level. The new strategy would also be re-energising the University’s social mission and values, especially equality, diversity and inclusion, and response to the environmental crisis. Progress is being made by the University on sustainability, including working with the Carbon Trust on becoming carbon neutral by 2030, developing an integrated institutional sustainability plan and playing a role in COP26 in Glasgow later in the year.

3.6 It was anticipated that USS would publish its conclusions about required contribution rates to maintain current benefits in mid-February. There would then be further consultation with employers and discussions with UCU and UUK. The OU had been and would be doing all it can to mitigate impacts on what must continue to be an excellent pension scheme. (Post meeting note: The University’s response to the USS consultation last autumn had been shared here.)

3.7 It was noted that members of the Senate would receive an email update from the Academic Governance Review (AGR) Oversight Group in February.
4 FUTURELEARN STRATEGY

4.1 The Deputy Vice-Chancellor introduced the paper and thanked members for their input at the webinar and panel discussion. The clarifications made as a result were welcomed by members.

4.2 The focus on microcredentials from the Scottish Government was highlighted. The OU had received over £1m so far, with the likelihood of further funding to come. The development of a pipeline of new microcredentials was ongoing and the involvement of the Faculties and Nations in the collaborative meetings would be key. It was also noted that the OU was also involved in the FutureLearn Academic Network.

4.3 When evaluating microcredentials the usual monitoring processes applied, such as student numbers and success rates, as well as KPIs around financial measures monitored by VCE. The suite of microcredentials produced by IET to help the HE sector move online had attracted large numbers, some wanting accreditation to show employers, which had been particularly important for people during the current pandemic. It was noted that testing and learning was still ongoing, but the production so far had been collaborative and agile.

4.4 The risk of staff overload was being carefully managed by the microcredentials team. Options were also being explored around outsourcing production, with OU staff performing quality checks. For the Learner and Discovery Services team, there was allocated resource, separate to core production, which could be managed fluidly.

4.5 Aspects of the student/learner experience had not been included in the paper, but it was noted that there was further work needed on the status of, and the language used to describe those studying microcredentials on FutureLearn. It was also emphasised that the marketing should be very clear about the different routes available.

4.6 The Chair thanked members for their contributions. Subject to agreement that the Senate would be kept updated as the academic framework develops, with monitoring thereafter, the Senate gave cautious approval for the direction of travel for the OU’s use of FutureLearn as a channel to reach distinct groups of learners within the OU’s overall portfolio.

5 APPROACH TO ACADEMIC DECISIONS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 S-2021-01-04

5.1 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research, Enterprise and Scholarship) provided additional information on funding available to PGR students. This included funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) for Doctoral Training Partnerships in April 2020. This funding was distributed via Research Councils and matched by the University to give additional support to OU funded students. A second allocation of UKRI funding was made directly to the OU in November 2020, which the University has again match-funded to support other students. The University also established a hardship fund to which PGR students could apply and this has been extended following an award of additional funds to the OU from the Office for Students.

5.2 The Senate noted the update.

6 DEFINITION OF ANTISEMITISM S-2021-01-05

6.1 The Senate was asked, by Education Committee, to debate and vote on three options, outlined in the paper.

6.2 Clarification was sought on the choice of the caveat within the third option presented, a version recommended by the Home Affairs Select Committee. Concern was expressed
that using the caveat would be deeply discriminatory, as it focused on the perpetrator’s motives and intent, instead of focusing on the impact on and the experiences of victims.

6.3 The Senate discussed the adoption of the definition across the sector. An example was given of a university that had consulted with their Heads of Schools. In another institution, a working group of academics had recommended to their Council that the definition should be retracted or that it should explicitly state that it had no legal force. A member also highlighted the publication of a letter from a group of academics, calling for universities not to adopt the definition.

6.4 It was noted that adopting the definition would be an important statement. However, a number of Senate members did not yet feel in a position to agree on one of the options set out in the paper and requested further consultation with University colleagues and students. Some members expressed that they would like to understand further the consequences of adopting the definition on other Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies, what it might mean for other marginalised groups and any impact there may be on staff and students. Concerns were also raised around the practical impact that adopting the definition would have on teaching certain subjects and potential implications for freedom of speech.

6.5 A motion was then proposed by Sarah Jones and seconded by James Bruce:

That the paper be deferred to the next ordinary meeting of the Senate on 21 April 2021, following further consultation.

6.6 The motion was carried overwhelmingly.

7 INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE REPORT TO SENATE

The Chair welcomed Hâf Merrifield, the new Director of Strategy, to introduce the Institutional Performance Report. The following clarifications were given:

a. Publication of the first iteration of the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) would now take place in February 2021.

b. The University planned increased activity around the National Student Survey (NSS) in order to reach the publication threshold for 2021. It was noted that the required sample would also increase to 27,000 thousand this year.

c. Acute and temporary problems relating to Adobe Connect would be mitigated by a new version. Further details of the migration would be circulated to the Senate. 

**Action:** Director of Strategy

d. The Vice-Chancellor outlined some of the actions being taken to reduce the risks around staff capacity (page 22), including around £8m being spent on staff; £6.2m to Faculties and a further £2m made available in year for teaching costs including additional ALs, Nations and Academic Services staff. Further work on resources and priorities would be achieved through the consideration of any additional business cases presented by Units.

8 EMERITUS PROFESSORS

The Senate approved the recommendations from the Chairs Subcommittee that the title of Emeritus Professor is awarded to:

a) Professor Hazel Rymer, Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
b) Professor Paul Garthwaite, Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

9 RESEARCH INTEGRITY REPORT AND DRAFT ANNUAL STATEMENT TO COUNCIL

The Senate recommended to Council the seventh annual statement on research integrity at The Open University.

10 ACADEMIC QUALITY AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

The Senate noted the unconfirmed minutes of the meeting of the Academic Quality and Governance Committee held on 10 November 2020.

11 EDUCATION COMMITTEE

The Senate noted the unconfirmed Minutes of the meeting of the Education Committee Meeting held on 2 December 2020 and by correspondence between 10 and 24 December 2020.

12 STRATEGIC PLANNING AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

The Senate noted the unconfirmed Minutes of the meeting of the Strategic Planning and Resources Committee held on 9 November 2020.

13 RESEARCH COMMITTEE

The Senate noted the unconfirmed Minutes of the meeting of the Research Committee held on 4 November 2020.

14 CENTRAL DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE

14.1 It was noted that the timeliness of case handling was being addressed and an update would be reported to the Senate.

Action: Central Disciplinary Committee

14.2 The Senate noted the Annual Report from the Central Disciplinary Committee.

15 SPECIAL APPEALS COMMITTEE

The Senate noted the report from the Special Appeals Committee of the Senate.

16 ACADEMIC PROMOTIONS: ANNUAL REPORT

The Senate noted the report of academic promotions for 2020 considered under the remit of the Academic Staff Promotions Committee (ASPC).

17 CHAIR’S ACTION

The Senate noted action taken by the Chair since the last meeting of the Senate.

18 THE COUNCIL

The Senate noted the unconfirmed minutes of the last meeting of the Council held on 24 November 2020.
19 AL CONTRACT UPDATE

19.1 The University Secretary suggested that in light of the number of detailed questions received in advance of the meeting, a question and answer session dedicated solely to the AL Contract update would be organised for Senate members.

19.2 The members of Senate who had submitted questions in advance, agreed that their questions could be deferred to the dedicated AL Contract session. Members were also informed that they could reflect on the written answers to the pre-submitted questions, located in the January 27 Senate folder.

20 PROMOTIONS REVIEW IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT – UPDATE

The Senate noted the completion of the project objectives and the handover plan of the project implementing recommendations from the Review of the scheme commissioned by Senate in 2018.

21 STUDENT LEARNING ADJUSTMENTS STRATEGY – UPDATE

21.1 Concerns were raised around several of the mitigations outlined, such as student access to printers and some students not being contacted through the proactive outbound calling campaign. It was noted that the points raised would be captured and explored further. Members welcomed the planned research with students to understand how they use printed packs.

21.2 In responses to concerns raised on the impact of the process on curriculum managers, the PVC (S) explained that the process would be redesigned and improved but noted that it was not a simple process and required changes across the organisation.

22 DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS

Wednesday 21 April 2021 (Council members in attendance)
Wednesday 23 June 2021

Dave Hall
University Secretary

Becky Sexton
Working Secretary to the Senate
Email: becky.sexton@open.ac.uk
Tel: 01908 653351