

COUNCIL
Thursday 25 March 2021
DRAFT UNCONFIRMED MINUTES

Present:

Tim Clement-Jones (Chair)	Shamima Akter	Professor Colin Bailey
Professor Alison Blunt	Sarah Cowls	Celia Gough
Professor Colin Grant	Stella Hall	Isabelle Jenkins
Dr Philippa Lloyd	Dr Darryn Mitussis	Bushra Nasir
Professor Mangala Patel	Dr Alix Pryde	Luke Savage
Melissa Tatton	Peter Thompson	Professor Wen Wang
David Willis		

In attendance:

Karen Kroger	Dr Nadine Lewycky	Jonathan Morgan
Mat Robathan	Paula Sanderson	Mike Wojcik [minute 2020.053]

Apologies:

Ade Adefulu

Welcome and apologies

2020.046 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted the apologies. The meeting was being conducted via virtual meeting software to ensure the continuance of good governance during the pandemic.

Minutes of the meetings held on 19 November 2020 and 22 February 2021 (QM2020/39)

2020.047 Council **confirmed** the minutes of the meetings held on 19 November 2020 and 22 February 2021 subject to the addition of Shamima Akter to the attendance list on 19 November 2020.

Matters Arising (QM2020/40)

2020.048 Council **noted** the matters arising from the meetings held on 19 November 2020 and 22 February 2021. The following points were noted in the discussion:

Strategy update

[a] An update on the phasing of the strategy would be brought to Council on 8 July.

Chair's update (Oral report)

2020.049 The Chair said that:

- [a] An update on his recent activity had been included with the papers. He was having regular meetings with the President and Principal and other senior staff members. His annual one-to-one meetings with Council members would start in April. The catch-up meetings with the QMSU Executive Officers had fallen off the agenda but would be picked up again.

President and Principal's Report (QM2020/41)

2020.050 Council **discussed** the President and Principal's Report. The following points were noted in the discussion:

Covid 19

- [a] There had been a low number of cases at the university throughout the pandemic. Research facilities and study spaces were open, and students in the School of Medicine and Dentistry had returned for face-to-face teaching. Students on practical courses in HSS and S&E had been able to return from 8 March.
- [b] The government would make a further announcement on the return of students to campus but it looked unlikely that this would be allowed for the remainder of students on non-practical courses. The government was concerned about the movement of students around the country. Approximately 60-70% of students across the sector had already returned to their term time address.
- [c] As restrictions eased, there would be more social activities on campus and outdoor sport would return. Students who felt that their wellbeing would be better served by being on campus were encouraged to return.

Policy environment

- [d] Proposed government cuts to the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) budget would result in a cut of c.£120m to the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) would not be allowed to restructure its budget to absorb the cuts. We had £5m worth of grants in progress and £4m of grants awarded that would be affected. We would look to support staff who were contracted to these grants.
- [e] Government support for the UK's continued association with Horizon Europe was uncertain. The £1bn per annum required to participate in the scheme would likely come from the existing science budget.
- [f] Council said that, with an expected reduction in funding from the government, the sector should be making the case for its contribution during the pandemic. The government viewed the sector as financially strong and in need of better regulation. Treasury was concerned that the cost of the student loan book should be reduced by decreasing the number of students going to university.
- [g] We were concerned about the National Security and Investment Bill which

would provide for a mandatory notification obligation for sectors perceived to be of the highest national security risk. The state of the UK's relationship with China was a significant risk to the sector.

- [h] A cut of tuition fees down to £7,500 was still a possibility, particularly if the sector agreed to fund an increase in pension contributions. It was not possible to deliver courses for this price.

Financial gateways

- [i] Restrictions on international travel in September was a major risk to overseas student recruitment. The budget provided scenarios for a shortfall in overseas student numbers of 10%, 25% and 50%. We would offer blended courses next year but with increased face to face activity. This may help to mitigate against restricted international travel. The financial gateways would be re-introduced in the summer.

Student and staff wellbeing

- [j] Council asked about the resources to support student mental health and wellbeing. Investment had increased in recent years and the support structures were being reviewed. The move to blended counselling appointments had allowed for support to increase. Dedicated resources to support students from minority ethnic backgrounds were available. While support services were largely based at Mile End, there may be scope to expand support at other campuses.

- [k] Council asked about support for staff dealing with greater workloads. All staff were being encouraged to take their annual leave. The Vice-Principal (People, Culture and Inclusion) was leading on initiatives to support staff and students.

USS Pension scheme update (QM2020/42)

2020.051 Council **noted** the update on recent developments with the USS pension scheme. The following members of staff attending the meeting declared an interest as members of the scheme:

Professor Colin Bailey
Professor Alison Blunt
Professor Mangala Patel
Professor Wen Wang
Professor Colin Grant
Dr Darryn Mitussis
Jonathan Morgan
Sarah Cowls
Karen Kroger
Paula Sanderson

The following points were noted in the discussion:

- [a] The USS trustee published its actuarial (section 76.1) report and the level of contributions required to support the existing benefit structure. Of the three pricing scenarios presented, two would require action to strengthen the covenant to which the sector is unlikely to agree. The Pensions

Regulator had said that only Scenario 1 was compliant with its statutory requirements. All scenarios would be unaffordable to the university and its members and it was clear that benefit reform is required.

- [b] To make the scheme affordable, changes would be needed to the benefit structure alongside different approaches to contributions to address the high opt out rate and intergenerational unfairness. This may involve bringing the threshold down from £59k or changing the indexation.
- [c] Funding for the employer contributions to the scheme was increasingly coming from student tuition fees. Our contribution was £34.5m which equated to c.12% of total tuition fee income.
- [d] Council asked if the growth in the deficit in the 2020 valuation resulted from the valuation taking place during a down turn in markets. Although the timing of the valuation was unfortunate, it did not have a significant impact on the overall value of the deficit.
- [e] A move to a defined contribution scheme would see members adopt greater risk. We had an exclusivity clause with USS which meant that we were unable to offer an alternative scheme for those on grade 4 and above. Maintaining a scheme with a defined benefit element was important as it would guarantee a certain level of pension.
- [f] Only 15% of private defined benefit schemes were open and, of those, USS was the largest and carried the highest amount of risk. Should institutions withdraw from the scheme or encounter financial difficulty, the liabilities of the scheme would fall to the remaining members. There remained a risk that the liabilities could continue to grow the longer the issues with the scheme were not addressed.

QMSU President's report (QM2020/43)

2020.052 Council **noted** the QMSU President's report. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- [a] The elections for next year's QMSU Executive Officers had received the third highest turnout. The new officers would start on 1 August. Council would receive the Returning Officer's report at the next meeting.
- [b] The current Executive Officers had now shifted their focus to preparing for the educational offering for September.
- [c] QMSU was recruiting to its board of trustees and Council members were asked to disseminate this among their networks. The QMSU President would send the advertisement to the Council Secretariat for circulation.
- [d] Council said that the report demonstrated the breadth of activity that QMSU was able to carry out despite the lockdown. In response to a question from Council, the QMSU President said that she would like the stronger relationship that had grown between the university and the Students' Union to continue next year, and work to continue on decolonisation of the curriculum and action against institutional racism.

[e] In response to a question from Council about the Everyone's Invited movement, the QMSU President said that QMSU was in the process of replacing its zero tolerance policy with a new awareness campaign, Act, which would enable students to take control of the narrative in a supportive environment. Plans were in place for a sexual violence advisor to join Advice and Counselling Services.

Action: [c] QMSU President

QMSU Financial statements 2019–20 and latest financial position (QM2020/44)

2020.053 Council **noted** the QMSU Financial statements 2019–20 and the latest financial position. The following points were noted in the discussion:

[a] The external audit had gone well and there were no material adjustments. The auditors had confirmed that the Students' Union as a going concern subject to financial support from the university.

Strategic KPIs (QM2020/45)

2020.054 *Minute 2020.054 is confidential.*

Finance and Investment Committee minutes (QM2020/46)

2020.055 *Minute 2020.055 is confidential.*

Current financial position (QM2020/47)

2020.056 *Minute 2020.056 is confidential.*

Budget 2021–22 and five year forecasts (QM2020/48)

2020.057 *Minute 2020.057 is confidential.*

Audit and Risk Committee report (QM2020/49)

2020.058 Council **noted** the executive summary of the Audit and Risk Committee meeting held on 9 March 2021.

Strategic Risk Register (QM2020/50)

2020.059 Council **considered** the strategic risk register. The following points were noted in the discussion:

[a] Audit and Risk Committee had asked about the risks associated with delaying the implementation of some mitigating actions for over a year. The pandemic had impacted the timing of some actions. The Committee had been reassured that the Senior Executive Team was monitoring this closely.

[b] Council said that, in addition to the Strategic Risk Register, they would like to see risk represented visually. A model would be prepared and shared

with Council.

Action: [b] Chief Finance Officer

Report on consumer protection compliance (QM2020/51)

2020.060 Council **considered** the report on consumer protection compliance during the pandemic. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- [a] The review had identified lessons learned in relation to the language used in communications to students. Terms such as 'blended learning' and 'practical subjects' were not commonly understood, and we would shift our terminology to 'mixed mode learning' next year. Throughout the year, we had moved towards a more templated approach to communications which provided greater consistency and improved the speed with which Schools were able to engage with students.
- [b] Looking ahead, there was scope to set even clearer expectations regarding the education offer. There was also a growing role for Faculty Deans for Education in providing assurance that expectations were being met. There were genuine disciplinary differences that impacted on the type of activities that could be offered and were best managed at the faculty level.
- [c] The student feedback mechanisms had worked well and early dispute resolution had kept the number of formal complaints very low. Students had been involved in developing responses to the feedback.
- [d] Council said that the review had generated some genuine insights and that the university had acquitted itself well.
- [e] Students had reported some confusion when local and central communications had not been aligned at the start of the year. Central communications were responsive to the government's changes to restrictions, but students had been interested in how their own courses were affected. Despite the improvements introduced in response to student feedback, there remained pockets of dissatisfied students. QMSU was obliged to support these students through the advocacy service.
- [f] Students had been satisfied with the online learning experience but there was more work to be done on in-person education. Consumer law was not necessarily the best basis on which to evaluate the student experience. Our co-creation with students was important and had worked well.
- [g] Audit and Risk Committee had considered the report and had recommended that a further review be undertaken on the postgraduate taught provision. Much of the work done on undergraduates would be relevant to postgraduate taught students, but there may be scope for looking at the practical subjects which were at higher risk from the impact of the lockdown.

Senate report (QM2020/52)

2020.061 Council **noted** the executive summary of the Senate meeting held on 4 March 2021. The following points were noted in the discussion:

Freedom of speech

- [a] The current freedom of speech policy would be reviewed over the next few months in light of the government's policy paper *Higher education: free speech and academic freedom*.

Annual report on student casework (QM2020/53)

2020.062 Council **noted** the annual report on student casework. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- [a] Work to promote early informal dispute resolution was showing results with 18% of complaints resolved before the start of the formal process. Senate had agreed to introduce an informal conversation as a compulsory stage of the complaints process. There had been a number cases that had taken longer than specified in our policies but, where this was the case, students had been kept updated. We would need to consider how to support students who had left the university but were in the process of appealing.
- [b] The number of academic misconduct cases had been rising each year. Senate had agreed some additional measures to embed academic practice in modules.
- [c] Issues were increasingly being raised in relation to sexual misconduct and we were developing our response. External support had been brought in for complex cases. We were reviewing our resourcing capability and capacity in this area.

Update on the processes to consider the re-election of the Chair of Council and the re-appointment of the President and Principal (QM2020/54)

2020.063 *Minute 2020.063 is confidential.*

Agenda for the next meeting (QM2020/55)

2020.064 Council **noted** the agenda for the meeting on 20 May 2021.

Dates of Meetings 2020–21

- Thursday 20 May / Friday 21 May 2021 – Residential conference including Council meeting.
- Thursday 08 July 2021, 1600 hours, Colette Bowe Room, Mile End.