



Minutes Meeting of the Council

Date: 5 October 2023

Present: Martin Temple, Pro-Chancellor (in the Chair)

Claire Brownlie (Pro-Chancellor), Adrian Stone (Pro-Chancellor), Rob Memmott (Treasurer), Professor Koen Lamberts (President & Vice-Chancellor), Lily Byrne, Professor Graham Gee, Professor Sue Hartley, Dr John Hogan, Varun Kabra, Alison Kay, Professor Janine Kirby, Dr Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, Phil Rodrigo, Dr Phil Tenney, Professor Gill Valentine, Professor Mary Vincent

Secretary: Jeannette Strachan

In attendance: Anna Campbell, Jo Jones, David Swinn, Rob Sykes

Apologies: Dr Brian Gilvary, Gemma Greenup

1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting, in particular Dr John Hogan and Varun Kabra, who were attending their first meeting, and Professor Janine Kirby, who was attending their first meeting of a new term having been reappointed following election by the Senate.

2. Declaration of Conflict of Interests

2.1 No conflicts were declared.

3. Approval of Category C Business

3.1 Council considered Category C business, which is covered in Minutes 8-14, below.

4. President & Vice-Chancellor's Report

4.1 Council received and discussed the President & Vice-Chancellor's report, in which they provided information on key current and forthcoming developments in the policy environment and against each of the themes in the University's Strategic Plan. Attention was drawn to the following updates and developments since the written report was prepared:

(a) Industrial Relations:

On 29 September, UCU's local strike action in response to the University's position on pay deductions for MAB participants had ended. Although senior University representatives had met with the local UCU branch leadership it had not been possible to reach an agreement to call off the action, with UCU unable to commit or offer any guarantee that the University would not face any further industrial action if the current live vote returned a mandate.

The University had updated its industrial action guidance to include information on what to do once UCU's mandate for action expires. In particular, colleagues would be asked to make up for work that was missed as part of their participation in the industrial action, including that missed teaching be rescheduled or that outstanding marking completed. In order to ensure that management instructions were reasonable, consideration would be given to individuals' workloads, but HoDs were entitled to set priorities for what work should be undertaken, which could prioritise education-related work over research activity.

UCU was currently balloting members to renew their mandate for action. If such a mandate were returned, then the earliest that any further industrial action could take place was 20 November. As such, during the period to 20 November the University was emphasising the importance of ensuring that colleagues made up any missed work. The University would continue to monitor closely how the disputes developed in the coming weeks.

(b) Arts Tower Occupation:

On 28 September a group of protesters from Sheffield Action Group had occupied part of the Arts Tower. An Incident Management Team had been convened immediately and scheduled teaching moved elsewhere on campus with access to the building restricted before the building was closed. After negotiations over the next two days, the occupiers vacated the Arts Tower and the building opened as usual on the morning of Monday 2 October.

In recent years there had been a number of student occupations of University buildings, causing significant disruption. It was noted that the risk of occupations was high at Sheffield, not only because they often coincided with industrial action but also because of external factors which activist groups used to maximise impact. In order to help students understand the University's approach to student protests, good practice guidance had been developed to clarify when protests were lawful and when they were not.

Additionally, the University had developed an overview of its approach to occupations so that staff and students understood the steps to be taken when a building is occupied in order to safeguard the health, safety and wellbeing of the University community. Staff had also been reminded about the importance of following good building security practice, to be extra vigilant and secure doors and documents, and not to take any action that may put colleagues in danger if an occupation did take place.

(c) Party Political Conferences:

Having also taken part in the recent Lib Dem party conference, the University was represented at the Conservative Party Conference, holding discussions on key policy issues for the institution, particularly around research funding.

The only policy announcement emerging from the Conference specifically aimed at universities was the announcement that the Education Secretary would consult on imposing 'minimum service levels' in universities in response to concerns about the impact of strike action on students. This was a significant intervention with potentially profound implications for trade union members' ability to take lawful industrial action.

The government had also confirmed that the northern legs of HS2 were to be cancelled, which represented a notable setback for cities like Sheffield, where improved connectivity was key to growing the local economy and improving productivity. This cast doubt on the future of other key infrastructure projects like the Northern Powerhouse rail, designed to connect northern cities including Sheffield. Although there was a government commitment to use the savings from HS2's cancellation to support other key infrastructure projects and improve transport links across the UK, the announcement had been widely regarded as damaging and several regional mayors had responded to the announcement in those terms.

The University would host an event with the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority on innovation-led growth at the forthcoming Labour Party Conference as well as holding conversations with policy-makers on key policy issues.

(d) Student Recruitment and Marketing Design Project:

The formal consultation for the Student Recruitment and Marketing Service Design Project began on 20 July, and would run until 19 October. In response to feedback from staff, adjustments had been made to the structure and two additional posts had been agreed. It was pleasing to note that the project was on track and progressing as planned.

(e) PGR Voice Survey:

Analysis of the results from the University's PGR Voice survey earlier this year were reported. This was the first University-wide PGR survey since 2019 and had sought feedback on a range of areas. The overall response rate of 47% was relatively strong and provided the views of PGRs at all stages of their programme across the University.

Overall the results were positive, with the significant majority of PGRs reporting that their experience had been good, excellent, or satisfactory. 74% had reported that the research culture in their department was positive or very positive, which was particularly encouraging given the increasing importance of research culture in national frameworks, e.g. the REF. Furthermore, 73.6% of those still in their tuition fee paying period expected to submit during this timeframe, which was pleasing as a specific area of institutional focus, and 92.9% said that their doctoral programme had fully or partially matched the expectations they had when starting the programme.

(f) Knowledge Exchange Framework:

Research England had published its Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) results for 2023. The KEF assessed the levels of engagement of universities with partners outside the sector, using benchmarks to assign institutions to a cluster of broadly comparable institutions. Therefore, the fact that the University had performed strongly in its cluster was especially positive.

The University was ranked in the top quintile of English universities for Intellectual Property and Commercialisation, Public and Community Engagement, and Working with Business. The results also showed that the University was highly engaged in Research Partnerships and Working with the Public and Third Sector.

(g) Project COMPASS:

It was reported that contracts for all elements of the project, which Council had approved in July, had been signed off such that the necessary funding agreements were in place and related tendering and procurement could proceed. This was testament to considerable effort and coordination of colleagues from across the University and, as previously noted, was a significant exciting opportunity for the University and wider region.

5. Financial Matters

5.1 Draft Annual Report and Financial Statements 2022-23

5.1.1 Council considered the draft annual report and financial statements, which had been developed with input from professional services colleagues and UEB and which would also be considered by the Council's Finance and Audit & Risk Assurance Committees during October before the final version was presented for approval to the November Committees and Council. It was noted that the external audit was progressing well and that no issues had been raised to date. Clarification was provided that, although some universities did not produce an annual report in this format, there were regulatory requirements that the University regarded were best addressed through this approach.

5.2 Stress testing and Going Concern

5.2.1 Council received and noted an initial report on stress testing of the July financial forecasts for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years, based on risk based scenarios from an analysis of the Corporate Risk Register, current market conditions and sector intelligence. It was noted that audit requirements included the management of an entity assessing its ability to continue as a going concern and the external auditor would undertake a final assessment at the point they signed off the University's accounts in order to receive the necessary assurances to inform an unqualified audit opinion. Attention was drawn to the process that had been followed this year, including previous feedback and work undertaken at the request of the Council Finance Committee. Council would receive a final report for approval at its November meeting.

5.3 Update on the Five-Year Financial Forecast

- 5.3.1 Council received a presentation by way of update on the latest five-year financial forecast figures, during which attention was drawn to: forecast income streams and related challenges to income growth and margin; capital expenditure commitments and plans; income and expenditure phasing to achieve 2% underlying surpluses; the agreed financial principles to which the University was working; actions agreed to date; analysis of changes from the original 2022/23 budget to actual year-end position and the key factors in the improved year-end position; and areas of risk and opportunity, and activity that was not yet reflected in the forecasts.
- 5.3.2 During discussion and with respect to vacancy savings, clarification was provided about areas experiencing particular challenges with recruitment and previous and ongoing work to identify and accurately budget for potential savings in professional services and shared costs, based on historic over performance and actions to reduce duplication and maximise the efficient deployment of resources. This was an area to which Council would return in greater detail in due course. It was also agreed that Members of Council wishing to understand the Financial Model in greater detail would have the opportunity to discuss this with the CFO.

6. Capital Report

- 6.1 Council received and noted an update on the progress of projects in the capital programme, including certain projects recently considered and approved by ECSG, UEB and Finance Committee in accordance with the Council Scheme of Delegation, capital cash profiling, and the status of current capital projects.
- 6.2 Specifically, with respect to the RAPD Project, in order to allow cover during periods of absence, Council agreed to delegate authority to the Director of Finance (in addition to the CFO) to uplift the RAPD project Capital Budget for future customer driven changes on the RAPD project in line with the contract (and delegation already granted to the CFO by Finance Committee in March and Council in July 2023) provided that any uplifts were wholly externally funded and reported to Council to note.

7. Council Effectiveness Questionnaire Responses

- 7.1 Council considered a report on the responses to the annual Council effectiveness questionnaire and actions that were proposed as a result. It was recognised that Council had undertaken significant work during 2022/23 on enhancing its effectiveness and that a formal effectiveness review would need to be undertaken during the present academic year, in line with the regulatory requirements and the CUC Code. Council commended the report and noted that the responses and actions would be reviewed by the University Secretary, Chair of Council and President & Vice-Chancellor, in the first instance, to inform the draft scope for the formal Council effectiveness review which would be presented to Council in due course.

8. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

- 8.1 The Minutes were approved as an accurate record.

9. Action Log and Matters Arising on the Minutes

9.1 Council approved the updated Action Log. There were no other matters arising.

10. Returning Officers Reports on Elections

10.1 Elections to the Council

10.1.1 Council received and noted the Minutes.

10.2 Students' Union Officers Elections

10.1.1 Council received and noted the Minutes.

11. Report on Action Taken

11.1 Council received and endorsed a report setting out action taken on behalf of Council since the previous meeting.

12. Council Business Plan 2022-23

12.1 Council received and noted the business plan, which would be reviewed and updated for 2023/24.

13. Application of the University Seal

13.1 Council received and noted a report on the application of the University seal since the previous meeting.

14. Public Availability of Council Papers

14.1 Council received and approved recommendations concerning the publication on the web of papers presented at the meeting, in accordance with previously agreed proposals on the disclosure of information. It was noted that a number of papers were confidential and would not be made publicly available.

15. Any Other Business

15.1 Approval of recommendations from the Council Nominations Committee:

Council approved the following recommendations from the Council Nominations Committee:

Audit & Risk Assurance Committee:

To appoint Neil Swift as a 'lay member approved by the Council' with immediate effect for the period to 31 July 2026.

Finance Committee:

To appoint Frances Morris-Jones as a 'lay member approved by the Council' with immediate effect for the period to 31 July 2026.

16. Feedback on the Meeting

- 16.1 Venue: Members commented on the sub-optimal audio-visual facilities in the meeting room, with size and resolution of the screen, sound quality and lack of a microphone all impacting negatively on the experience. This would be reported to ITS and EFM. Where possible, presentation slides would continue to be shared with Council in advance of meetings.
- 16.2 Tours and future meetings: Members commented positively on the tour of the Wave building that had taken place on 4 October and raised the positively of holding a future meeting of Council in the building. The high quality accommodation available across campus was reason to consider holding some future meetings away from the Council Room.
- 16.3 Virtual Briefings: It was reported that two virtual briefings had been scheduled, the first on 9 October on a confidential matter and the second on 6 November to cover academic assurance in advance of the joint Council-Senate sub-group and Council's consideration of the Senate annual academic assurance report later in November.