

# Council

24/18 A meeting of the Council was held on Monday 11 March 2024 at 10.00am in Room 201, Carrington Building, Whiteknights.

Present:           The President                   (in the Chair)  
                  The Vice Presidents       (Mr K. Corrigan and Mrs K. Owen)  
                  The Vice-Chancellor  
                  The Deputy Vice-Chancellor  
                  The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Dr C. Baylon)  
                  The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor E. McCrum)  
                  The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Professor D. Zaum)

Mr S. Alexander	Ms S. Maple
Mr S. Ali	Mr A. McCallum
Professor E. Beleska-Spasova	Mr P. Milhofer
Mrs S. Butler	Mr N. Richards
Mrs P. Egan	Dr C. Shaw
Professor R. Frazier	Miss I.A. Sujau
Professor J. Gibbins	Professor K. Strohfeltd
Mr E. Gregory	Dr J. Young
Mr J. Jack	

In attendance:

The Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary  
The Director of Finance  
The Director of Quality Support and Development

Apologies had been received from Mrs S. Plank.

24/19 President's opening remarks

The President:

- Welcomed Miss Sujau, RSU Welfare Officer, to her first meeting of Council;
- Reported that Miss S. Jordan, RSU Education Officer, had resigned earlier in the Spring Term;
- Noted that the full-time RSU officers would have completed their terms of office before the next meeting of Council. The Council thanked Mr Gregory, RSU President, Miss Jordan and Miss Sujau for their contribution to Council and all the RSU Officers for their work to support students and to improve their experience at University;
- Noted that Mr Swanson would be retiring from the University before the next meeting of Council, and thanked him for his outstanding work in supporting Council over the past ten years.

## 24/20 Disclosure of Interests (Item 2)

The Council received and noted a paper from the University Secretary in regard to Disclosure of Interests. Mr Ali reported that he had recently been appointed to an advisory role in the financial sector; the Declarations of Interest Register would be updated shortly.

## ***Internationalisation Strategy***

### 24/21 Internationalisation Strategy: a new approach to global engagement (Items 3.1-3.3)

The Council received the following papers:

- Internationalisation and Global Engagement: context and background information
- Developing an Internationalisation and Global Engagement Strategic Framework for the University of Reading.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) (Dr Baylon) gave a presentation which offered an overview of the University's international activities, global league table rankings and position in global markets, and which set out an Internationalisation and Global Engagement (IGE) Strategic Framework for the University. She indicated that the IGE Framework was a work in progress and that she would welcome feedback to inform its further development.

#### *Rankings and recruitment*

Dr Baylon noted that the University had achieved 169<sup>th</sup> position in the QS World University Rankings, which represented a substantial improvement on previous years and had led to a significant increase in international applications. While the University was ranked 61<sup>st</sup> for sustainability by both QS and THE, its rankings for academic reputation were much lower (241<sup>st</sup> and 263<sup>rd</sup>) which reflected historic underinvestment in brand-promotion. [Redacted, Section 43].

Dr Baylon spoke of the need for investment in international branding, marketing and recruitment, for greater integration of international-related activities across the University's organisational boundaries, and for the development of a strong culture of internationalisation and global engagement.

In response to questions, Dr Baylon explained that the market for international students was highly competitive. Australia was particularly effective in international recruitment, but New Zealand, France, Netherlands and Scandinavia were also increasingly successful. In the UK, many universities had succeeded in increasing the number of international students and their market share. [Withheld, Section 43].

In response to further questions, Dr Baylon:

- [Withheld – Section 43]
- Explained that the factors which attracted students to the University varied by market, but for Asian markets the QS ranking, proximity to London, and job prospects were the most significant;
- Confirmed the importance of central strategic direction of partnerships, while recognising the contribution of individual academics in building relationships and initiating partnerships. Some partnerships, though small, were strategically important for the School. She commented in broad terms on the financial viability

of partnerships and noted their vulnerability to changing parameters of national policy and economic environment;

- Noted that the UK government held conflicting positions on recruitment of international students, both valuing higher education as a major export industry and simultaneously seeking to restrict international student numbers under their immigration policy.

#### *IGE Strategic Framework*

Dr Baylon explained that the IGE Strategic Framework aligned to the University Strategy, set out overarching strategic priorities and targets, and focussed on international student growth and global brand profile-building. She emphasised the importance of staff engagement with its priorities and the need for a strong internationally oriented culture across the University.

The consultation paper on the IGE Strategic Framework was discussed in small groups. The groups welcomed the Strategic Framework and commented on:

- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
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- [Withheld, Section 43]

[Withheld, Section 43]

In response to questions, Dr Baylon:

- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]

Council members based in Schools and Directorates expressed broad support for the proposals. They noted that Schools had very different drivers and capacities for global engagement and suggested that expectations for global engagement take these differences into account. Equally, the different dynamics of PGR provision needed to be respected within the hub model.

The Council endorsed the direction of travel set out in the Internationalisation and Global Engagement Strategic Framework and encouraged further work on the proposals.

#### **Resolved:**

“That papers on:

- Internationalisation and Global Engagement: context and background information
- Developing an Internationalisation and Global Engagement Strategic Framework for the University of Reading

now submitted, be received.”

24/22 University of Reading Malaysia (Item 3.4)

The Council received the paper University of Reading Malaysia (UoRM): transformation business case.

[Withheld, Section 43]

[Withheld, Section 43]

[Withheld, Section 43]

[Withheld, Section 43].

[Withheld, Section 43]

- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]
- [Withheld, Section 43]

[Withheld, Section 43]

[Withheld, Section 43]

[Withheld, Section 43]

[Withheld, Section 43]

**Resolved:**

1. [Withheld, Section 43]
2. [Withheld, Section 43]

***Presentations/major discussion items***

24/23 Report of Scrutiny and Finance Committee (Item 4)

The Council received the Report of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, held on 26 February 2024.

As Chair of the Committee, Mr Corrigan introduced the Report from the Planning and Change Board on the 2023/24 planning cycle. He confirmed that the forecast from this year's planning round would meet the agreed position for 2024/25 with a projected deficit of -£20.9m. There had been a negative movement of -£5.9m for 2025/26 representing additional resource to support student growth and to cover any restructuring costs, but with an improvement amounting to £6.9m over the subsequent two years.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) (Professor Zaum) advised that the assumptions underpinning the planning had been conservative and should therefore

allow a high degree of confidence that Council's expectations would be met. He indicated that the plan provided investment for growth, providing resource to maintain the quality of the student experience even as student numbers increased and thereby ensuring that growth was sustainable. Insufficient investment in growth would have created a negative cycle of a poor student experience with consequent impacts on recruitment. Alongside this investment, the University was making progress in identifying savings.

Professor Zaum reported that the shortlist of proposals to be funded from the Investment Fund would be considered against the twin criteria of investment to save and investment to grow. Further detailed work needed to be undertaken to finalise the initiatives to be adopted.

In response to questions, Professor Zaum:

- Outlined the work being undertaken to ensure that the University had the capacity to accommodate the anticipated growth in the student population and to continue to deliver a high-quality student experience. He noted that pinch points varied from School to School, ranging from laboratory capacities to the number of academic tutors available;
- Advised that the RSU President was a member of the Planning Group and was fully involved in the Group's deliberations and decision-making. In consequence, the priorities outlined in the planning report had been informed by RSU's input.

The Vice-Chancellor spoke of the planning proposal's dependence on increased numbers of international students and advised that a delay in implementing international recruitment initiatives would challenge the achievement of international student numbers and, in consequence, the budget. [Withheld, Section 43]

In relation to other matters in the Committee's Report:

- The Council noted the financial analysis identifying the relative income and costs of the University's major activities, and confirmed that these data would usefully inform its understanding of, and decisions on, the University's finances;
- The Council welcomed the report on financial benchmarking against a set of peer universities. [Withheld, Section 43]. The Vice-Chancellor observed that several universities may be in breach of the sector advisory guidance on the ratio of debt to turnover and he was aware that some could have breached covenants with lenders. He cited two examples of universities in that position, where decision-making was constrained by their creditors and where major restructuring had damaged the student experience, causing a decline in student recruitment which compounded their financial problems and compromised their ability to recover. He noted that restructuring, unless carefully calibrated and sensitively managed, could generate a cycle of decline. The Council noted that the Annual Planning Report included some provision for local restructuring in case the situation arose;
- The Council welcomed the Strategic Foundations Programme Closure Report;
- In response to a question, the Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary outlined the funding position and progress of the two decarbonisation projects, and undertook to explore the possibility of Council visiting one or both projects.

**Resolved:**

- (a) "That the direction of travel set out in the Annual Planning Report (2024-29) be approved;

2. That the Report of the meeting of the Scrutiny and Finance Committee, held on 26 February 2024, and including the Quarter 2 report that forecasts that the University will stay within the -30.9m deficit budget envelope set by Council for 2023/24, now submitted, be received.”

24/24 A presentation from Professor Katja Strohfeldt: ‘Did Covid teach us anything?’ (Item 5)

Professor Strohfeldt gave a presentation on ‘Did Covid teach us anything?’.

Focussing on the first six months of the pandemic from its emergence in China at the end of 2019, Professor Strohfeldt outlined how the University, within a very short space of time, transformed its model of teaching, learning and assessment to meet students’ needs. She spoke of:

- the logistical challenges involved in supporting the University’s international operations, including the University of Reading Malaysia, NUIST-Reading Academy, BIT and South Africa, which emphasised the benefits of shared processes and systems integrations between the UK and international campuses/partners;
- the University’s sector-leading creative response to the discontinuation of field classes by developing virtual versions which enabled students to engage online with some of the observations and exercises which they would have undertaken in the field. Virtual field classes had continued post-pandemic to enable those students who were unable to go on field trips for various reasons (e.g. some disabilities, caring responsibilities) to share in aspects of the experience;
- With lockdown in late March, the rapid pivot to online teaching, virtual lab classes and online submission of coursework. The University established a highly standardised model for online teaching and submission to enable efficient, user-friendly processes which quickly became familiar to students and staff and could be supported at scale. Academic and professional staff across the undertook training in online delivery to ensure a high-quality student experience. Following the resumption of face-to-face teaching, elements of online learning had been integrated into modules in order to offer a richer learning environment;
- The successful transition to online exams, which students generally found a better experience than the traditional closed exams and which resulted in improved performance among disadvantaged demographic groups. In many cases, the University had retained online exams for reasons of access and inclusion and as an evolution towards more authentic forms of assessment, involving real-world problems and aligned with practices in the workplace.

Professor Strohfeldt noted that, with the onset of the pandemic, the University had demonstrated its agility, flexibility and resilience, had maintained high academic standards, and had developed a range of teaching and assessment practices which were more inclusive and accessible and which, due to their benefits, had been continued as part of improved provision.

In response to questions, Professor Strohfeldt indicated that, while the pace of change during the pandemic had been forced by circumstances, staff recognised the long-term benefits of many changed practices and had demonstrated through the Portfolio Review a continuing willingness to innovate and rethink their programmes and pedagogy. Changes were now introduced at a more measured pace and were more fully considered. The University was mindful that the patterns of students’ engagement with learning were continuing to evolve post-pandemic, and that the University had to be agile in adapting its practice and anticipating future students’ expectations.

## ***Items for approval***

### 24/25 Report of the Senate (Item 6)

The Council received the Report of a meeting of the Senate held on 28 February 2024.

In relation to the Annual Learning and Teaching Report to Council (Spring Term 2024), the Council noted that the University had met all the top-level thresholds set by the Office of Students under Condition of Registration B3 (Corporate Risk 7). The University was also performing satisfactorily in relation to other external quality standards, including the Teaching Excellence Framework, accreditation by Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Bodies, National Student Survey and the assurance of External Examiners. The Council was pleased to note that the attainment data did not suggest that there was grade inflation. The Report had been well-received by both the Senate and the Student Experience Committee. The Council expressed itself assured about quality and standards of education at the University.

In relation to the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, the Vice-Chancellor indicated that nationally across the sector there was scepticism about the demand for this provision and the logistics for its implementation. While a number of pilots for the scheme had been run, it seemed likely that implementation would be delayed.

The Council noted that the Academic Career Framework had been approved in principle by the Senate and consideration was now being given to its implementation.

The Council welcomed the report on the progress of the Portfolio Review.

#### **Resolved:**

1. "That the Annual Learning and Teaching Report for Council (Spring Term 2024), now submitted, be approved;
2. That the Report of the meeting of the Senate, held on 28 February 2024, now submitted, be received."

### 24/26 Report of the Student Experience Committee (Item7)

The Council received the Report of a meeting of the Student Experience Committee held on 23 February 2024.

As Chair of the Committee, Mr Alexander reported that the Committee had reviewed the RSU Constitution. The Committee had been advised that the Constitution had operated well over the past five years and that no legal or other changes were anticipated which would have implications for the Constitution. In the light of this and following careful consideration of the text and context, the Committee agreed to commend the Constitution to the Council for reapproval. The Committee identified a small number of issues related to (a) the Students' Union Code of Practice, which would be given further consideration by the Committee, and (b) the RSU Byelaws, which had been referred to RSU.

Mr Gregory and Miss Sujau gave a brief presentation on the theme 'What's it like to be a student in 2024?', as a taster for a fuller presentation next year. They reported that students generally enjoyed being a student at the University and commonly referred to the campus, the sense of community, the opportunities for sports and other interests, and their

programmes as positive features. Students were also affected by a range of negative factors which caused stress and might eventually cause them to leave university; these factors included: mental health issues, academic difficulties, the cost of living, family or other responsibilities, and loneliness. RSU sought through its clubs, societies, events and services to help to address these issues.

In response to questions, Miss Sujau referred to a major shift in student culture over recent years away from drinking and reported that RSU had adopted different models for events, many of which were alcohol-free.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) (Professor McCrum) advised that work was being done to gather better quantitative and qualitative information to support the University in understanding the factors which negatively affected students' experience and progress.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor suggested that the RSU officers, in their future work on this theme, might ask students to identify the one thing which they would most like improved about the University.

**Resolved:**

1. "That the Reading Students' Union Constitution be confirmed as fit for purpose and not in need of amendment;
2. That the Report of the meeting of the Student Experience Committee, held on 23 February 2024, now submitted, be received."

24/27 Report of the Appointments Committee (Item 8)

*Mrs Owen recused herself and withdrew from the meeting for the discussion of Resolution 1 only.*

The Council received a Report of the Appointments Committee.

**Resolved:**

1. "That Kate Owen be reappointed to Council as Vice-President for a further three years (up to 31 July 2027), and that her membership of and attendance at committees be extended to the same date;
2. That the approach to be taken in recruiting lay members of Council, as specified in the Report, be approved;
3. That the appointment process for the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), as specified in the Report, be approved;
4. That the Report of the Appointments Committee, now submitted, be received."

24/28 NIRD Trust and the governance of the Loddon Garden Village development (Item 9)

The Council received a paper on the NIRD Trust and the governance of the Loddon Garden Village development.



[Withheld, Section 43].

[Withheld, Section 43].

[Withheld, Section 43].

### **Resolution**

[Withheld, Section 43].

### **Resolved by the Council acting as Trustee of the National Institute for Research in Dairying Trust that:**

“(a) [Withheld, Section 43].

(b) [Withheld, Section 43].

(i) [Withheld, Section 43].

(ii) [Withheld, Section 43].

(iii) [Withheld, Section 43].

- [Withheld, Section 43].
- [Withheld, Section 43].
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- [Withheld, Section 43].
- [Withheld, Section 43].

(iv) [Withheld, Section 43].

(v) [Withheld, Section 43].

(c) [Withheld, Section 43].

(d) [Withheld, Section 43].

### **24/29 Report of Investments and Development Committee (Item 10)**

The Council received the Report of a meeting of the Investments and Development Committee.

Mr Corrigan, as the Committee’s Chair, explained that Cazenove had advised that, given the relatively conservative asset profile of the University’s portfolio, a 3% spend rate from the Investment Fund would be more appropriate than the previously agreed 4%. It was planned that, in due course, more assets would be moved into categories yielding a higher return.

In response to questions, Mr Corrigan advised that it would be imprudent to act against Cazxenove's professional advice and that the Committee, having considered the advice, believed that 3% was the maximum sustainable spend rate in current circumstances.

**Resolved:**

1. "That a sustainable spend rate of 3% be applied to the portfolio;
2. That the Report of the Investments and Development Committee, now submitted, be received."

***Items for report***

24/30 Report of the Vice-Chancellor (Item 11)

The Council received the Report of the Vice-Chancellor.

The Vice-Chancellor drew attention to the plans for celebrating the centenary of the University receiving its Royal Charter. He advised that a small group had been convened to help plan and deliver activities around the proposed theme of 'Making a better world, together--our community, our actions, our impact'. Activities and projects were likely to include: telling the story of the University, based on its archives; a series of celebratory events, including a centenary community festival; activities by which Schools, Departments and Directorates could celebrate their history and legacy; and the development of an outdoor classroom or other enduring physical commemoration. A centenary website would be launched on 17 March 2024, and initially would invite ideas on the celebrations. In response to a question, the Vice-Chancellor confirmed that the centenary, while celebrating the University's history and legacy, would also be forward-looking.

The Vice-Chancellor also reported that he had facilitated a meeting between [Withheld, Section 40] the Ziran Education Foundation, which had bought Reading Gaol, and Reading Borough Council and Matt Rodda, MP for Reading East. The Foundation was hoping to transform part of the prison [Withheld, Section 43], which could create opportunities for students and recent graduates [Withheld, Section 43].

The Vice-Chancellor noted that work had started on the ECMWF building.

In response to questions, the Vice-Chancellor reported that his speech on freedom of speech as part of an event at Parliament had been well-received. He advised that politicians from across the political spectrum had welcomed his active engagement with the question and his arguments for a culture of openness and promotion of a divergence of opinion on campuses. The Vice-Chancellor spoke of the risk that academics self-censored and were unwilling to engage in debate on topics deemed sensitive.

**Resolved:**

"That the Report of the Vice-Chancellor, now submitted, be received."

24/31 Report of the Audit Committee (Item 12)

The Council received the Report of the Audit Committee.

As Chair of the Committee, Mr Milhofer explained that the updates to the Whistleblowing, Fraud and Anti-Bribery and Corruption policies were designed to ensure that those acting on behalf of the University in other jurisdictions complied with UK law as required.

Mr Milhofer asked that, in future, the Minutes of the meetings of the Audit Committee be appended to the Report to Council.

**Resolved:**

“That the Report of the Audit Committee, now submitted, be received.”

24/32 Suggested items for future Council meetings (Item 13)

The Council received an update on topics for discussion at future Council meetings.

The President advised that, at the next meeting, the Council would receive a summary of themes identified in the annual appraisal discussions with members of Council. This would provide an opportunity to reflect on Council’s performance and ways of working.

The Council noted a suggestion that cybersecurity might be an appropriate topic for report and discussion at a future meeting, and also that it would be part of the report of the Audit Committee at the next meeting of the Council.

The President invited members to contact her or the Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary if they wished to suggest further topics.

**Resolved:**

“That a paper on suggested topics for discussion by Council, now submitted, be received.”

**Items for note**

24/33 Minutes (24/01-24/17) of the meeting held on 23 January 2024 (Item 14)

Minutes (24/01-24/17) of the meeting of the Council held on 23 January 2024 were confirmed.

24/34 Matter arising on Minutes of the meeting on 23 January 2024 (Item 15)

There were no matters arising.

24/35 Decisions taken by the President on behalf of the Council (Item 16)

The Council noted that the President had signed, on behalf of Council, the debt subordination agreement for the German subsidiary, as recommended by the Audit Committee.

24/36 Documents sealed and to be sealed (Item 17)

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."

24/37 Dates of meetings of the Council for the Session 2023/24 (Item 19)

The final meeting of the Council in the Session 2023/24 had been scheduled for:

Monday 1 July 2024, 12 noon-5.00 pm.

24/38 Reflections on the meeting

Members reflected in small groups on the business and the nature of the discussions at the meeting.