MINUTES of the Court Strategy Discussion held on Monday, 4th November, 2013 in the Edinburgh Room, Queen Anne Court, Greenwich Campus, Park Row, Greenwich, SE10 9LS, commencing at 2.00 pm

Present: Mr S Howlett (in the Chair)

Mr A Albert
Mr J Barnes
Mr A Brooks
Dr J Cullinane
Mr S H Davie
Mr L Devlin
Mr N Eastwell
Ms M Hay

Mr P F Hazell
Mr A L Holmes
Mr W Leech
Prof D Maguire
Prof P Maras
Prof M Snowden
Mr J Stoker

In attendance:

Prof T Barnes (Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research & Enterprise))
Mrs T A Brighton (Minutes Clerk)
Dr L Burke (Pro Vice-Chancellor: Education & Health Faculty)
Prof J Burnett (Pro Vice-Chancellor: Architecture, Computing & Humanities Faculty)
Mr R V T Daly (Director of Finance)
Mr C Hallas (Interim University Secretary)
Prof S Jarvis (Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic Development))
Mr M Norris (Chief Operating Officer Designate)
Mr J Sibson (Pro Vice-Chancellor: Business Faculty)

Apologies for Absence: Mrs D Khanna, Mrs H Wyatt

1. WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed everyone to Court’s first half-day strategy discussion. He recalled that the April Court Strategy Day had been held at a time when there was considerable concern about recruitment and future student numbers. He was pleased to note the recent successful recruitment outcome and commended staff on their efforts. However, the University could not afford to become complacent and it was important to start focussing on recruitment for 2014/15. Nevertheless, he believed that the University now had a strong base on which to plan for the future.
2. STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY : PROFESSOR DAVID MAGUIRE, VICE-CHANCELLOR

The Vice-Chancellor presented an overview on the current state of the University.

2.1 External Context

There was evidence to suggest that the higher education sector was recovering from the introduction of the new fee regime. In the long term the government anticipated considerable growth within the sector and the affordability of the student loan system was now under question. The political landscape was unlikely to change in the run up to the next election although the immigration policy would continue to be a controversial agenda item. Competition from alternative providers of higher education had so far proved to be less of an issue than expected.

2.2 Current Status of the University

The Vice-Chancellor reported on progress with implementation of the Strategic Plan at the start of the second year:

- The University was broadly on target. Key areas of focus continued to be the raising of academic standards and outcomes; strengthening of the staff and student bases; enhancement of the estate and improved operational efficiency.

- The Faculty structure was now operational. The senior management teams were in place and the other tiers of management were now being populated. This process of change was pivotal to improving academic performance.

- Good progress had been made with developing the University’s academic endeavours and the momentum would be carried forward into the next year.

- Research and Enterprise was proceeding in accordance to plan and the REF submission, due later in the month, aimed to significantly enhance the University’s research profile.

- A programme of projects designed to modernise and enhance the University’s estate was under way. The University’s presence at Greenwich would become more prominent once development of the Stockwell Street Site and the new Daniel Defoe Hall of Residence were completed. Relocation of the Architecture, Construction and Design disciplines and the Dreadnought Library to the new facilities at Stockwell Street would enable further redevelopment and rationalisation of the estate.

- The University's finances were reasonably buoyant following a healthy surplus for 2012/2013 consolidated by a successful recruitment cycle for 2013/2014.

2.3 Open Discussion
The following points were raised during open discussion of the issues raised in the Vice-Chancellor’s presentation:

i) The forecast year-end surplus had exceeded projections and the Court was interested in knowing whether there would be any additional investment. It was reported that some additional resource would be set aside for development of the Faculties. Further investment in the capital commitments and projects associated with the strategic plan was also likely.

ii) An efficient HR framework was fundamental to the delivery of the strategic plan. The University needed a staff base which comprised motivated and qualified personnel. Training and development and an equitable rewards system were important components in retaining staff. The need to improve staff:student ratios was noted.

iii) The Court recalled that it had raised concerns about the capability of the human resources function to oversee the change management for some time and questioned whether extra staff were being recruited. It was reported that major restructuring of the HR Office was currently under way. The new structure was being implemented within the existing budget. The emphasis was on upgrading the capability of the staff together with a renewed focus on basic HR functions. The Court registered some concern at the pace of developments and encouraged early completion of the reorganisation. In order to keep abreast of developments, it was agreed that a report would be made to each meeting of Court.

3. IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES: PROFESSOR TOM BARNES, DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR (RESEARCH & ENTERPRISE)

The DVC (Research & Enterprise) stated that improving employment outcomes was a major project for the coming session. The University had set itself some challenging targets for graduate employability and placements and the results and trends of recent years suggested that there was much work to be done. The University had a responsibility to equip its students with the skills and attributes necessary for securing good quality jobs. There was a strong correlation between good degree outcomes and employment prospects but employers also sought graduates who could demonstrate a range of life skills. The Greenwich Graduate Initiative was testament to the University’s commitment in this area. The initiative aimed to instil a set of explicit behaviours, values and skills attractive to prospective employers.

A University-wide plan of action was in place to ensure that employability enhancement was central to its work. An employment outcomes working group had been established. Employability components were being integrated into many courses and work experience was becoming a natural part of course curricula. Alongside its traditional Careers Advice Service, the University was working with Reed Placement and Recruitment Service to help students secure graduate level positions. An Employability SHIFT Conference scheduled for January 2014 would formally launch the employment outcomes agenda.
The Court recognised that a shift in culture was needed. More engagement by staff was necessary and programme leaders needed to be more pro-active in fostering relationships with external businesses. Some areas had developed Business Advisory Forums to help build relationships with prospective employers. It was recognised that some areas struggled with identifying suitable employers. It was suggested that engagement should become a feature of staff performance.

The Court discussed the allocation of resources behind the initiative. It was reported that additional investment would be made once areas likely to benefit from extra resourcing could be identified. Students should be encouraged to be involved in Students’ Union activities designed to improve employability outcomes. The benefits from participation in sport and other extra-curricular activities were emphasised.

As the Court was keen to understand which components of the various employability initiatives were proving successful, it was agreed that a report evaluating these would be presented to a future meeting.

4. IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION : PROFESSOR SIMON JARVIS (DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR (ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT))

The DVC (Academic Development) stated that improving student retention remained an institutional priority. The University had made positive progress in this area. Student continuation rates had improved during the past four years but were still below the national average and the University’s own benchmark targets. In-year progression in all Schools had improved.

Retention was a complex issue and even programmes with high entry requirements were affected. The varied nature of the University’s intake created difficulties. Students entering higher education arrived with different expectations and backgrounds. Research had indicated that creating a sense of belonging made a difference and good engagement at all stages of the student journey was important to student success. Initiatives such as “Flying Start” – pre-arrival engagement - and the personal tutoring scheme helped students have more meaningful interaction with staff. Mentoring schemes in place whereby first year students were mentored by 2nd and 3rd year students. The Students’ Union had a key role to play in engagement through its series of coordinated activities. Curricula setting was key to retention; the content and mode of delivery all played a part in ensuring students remained engaged and stimulated. The methodologies for student assessment and feedback needed regular review to ensure appropriateness. The transformation of curricula, enhanced personal tutoring, and increased support through academic study skills would be the focus of work in the year ahead.

The Court noted that many academic areas used literacy and numeracy testing as part of their selection process. Maths and English were essential skills required by employers but many students required increased support in these subjects. Mandatory English testing for international postgraduate students had been introduced about three years ago and the test was now being rolled out across the university for international undergraduate students.
There were many different approaches to skills development across the disciplines in the Faculties. Some areas favoured voluntary personal development classes whilst others embedded personal and professional development within credit-bearing programmes. The Court recognised that there were pockets of good work across the institution but local practices were not being used to inform any centrally driven activity. The Court believed that staff needed to have clear targets for employability and retention.

4. PLANS FOR STUDENT RECRUITMENT 2014/2015: PROFESSOR DAVID MAGUIRE, VICE-CHANCELLOR

The Vice-Chancellor reported that the University had successfully recruited 18% more new home undergraduate students for 2013/14 than for the previous year, whilst managing to maintain the quality of its entry criteria and increase its ABB student numbers. Notwithstanding these improvements, the University was likely to fall below the flexibility range of its student number control.

He attributed the successful recruitment cycle to a variety of factors. He believed that staff had stepped up to the challenge. A number of operational improvements had been initiated at all stages of the recruitment cycle, the quality and frequency of monitoring reports had improved and the Clearing operation had been well organised. He believed that many lessons had been learnt for the future.

There were ambitious goals for 2014/15 recruitment. The University would be recruiting in a more competitive environment and all universities would need to work harder to attract students as alternative providers entered the marketplace. The challenges of global competition and the UKVI immigration policy remained for international recruitment.

It was reported that the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Faculty of Business) was leading the University’s 2014/2015 recruitment campaign. Task and finish groups aimed at sustaining this year’s performance had been established. Some new enhancements would be implemented. Marketing was an important recruitment tool; plans to modernise and enhance operations in this area needed to make better progress. Increased focus on profile building through engagement with Schools and prospective students was an important strand of the recruitment strategy. The need to improve the conversion rate of applications to acceptances continued to be a specific challenge, as was the tension between qualitative and quantitative targets.

5. FINALE

The Chair of Court thanked presenters and contributors for a useful and rewarding session.