



## COUNCIL (STRATEGY MEETING)

### Open minutes

Of the meeting held on Tuesday, 08 February 2022 and Wednesday, 09 February 2022 at Missenden Abbey.

**Present:** Maggie Galliers (Independent [Chair]); Irene Kirkman (Independent [Deputy Chair]); Professor Nick Braisby (Vice-Chancellor); Emma Binnie (PSE Representative); Anna Crabtree (Independent); Honor Fletcher (Students' Union President); Annet Gamell (Independent); Sadie Groom (Independent); Anthony Murphy (Independent); Ze'ev Portner (Academic Representative); Hilary Mullen (Senate Representative) Dr Susan Rosser (Independent); Karen Satterford (Independent); John Smith (Independent); Supriya Sobti (Independent); Jackie Westaway (Independent); Andy Cole (Independent); Professor Florin Ioras (Senate Representative); Steve Kennett (Independent)

**In attendance:** Professor Gavin Brooks (Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor); Professor Rachel Cragg (Pro Vice-Chancellor: Education and Digital); Ian Harper (Director of Commercial and Business Development); Ellie Smith (University Secretary and Clerk to the Council); Trevor Gabriele (Director of Finance); Dr Emma Tomsett (Minute Secretary); Matt Hiely-Rayner (Director of Strategic Planning and Change); Anna Buckett (Policy and Evaluation Manager, Tuesday only); Nick Hillman (Director, Higher Education Policy Institute, Tuesday only); Laura Brassington (Policy Director, Higher Education Policy Institute, Tuesday only); Dana Cameron (Director of Marketing, Student Recruitment and Communications, Wednesday only); Nicholas Roussel-Milner (Director of Information Systems and Technology, Wednesday only)

**Apologies:** Emily Crawshaw (Student); Dr Marcus Wood (Head of Quality and Standards)

### Welcome and Chair's Introduction

- 22.01 The Chair, Ms Maggie Galliers, welcomed members to the meeting and noted two apologies. Warm welcomes were extended to Hilary Mullen and Steve Kennett who were attending their first Council meeting.
- 22.02 The Chair congratulated Dr Marcus Wood on his new appointment as Head of Quality and Standards and welcomed Dr Emma Tomsett as the incoming Minutes Secretary.
- 22.03 The Chair thanked outgoing Council member Bob Shennan for his invaluable contributions to Council and Audit and Honorary Awards Committees.

22.04 The Chair drew attention to the exciting opportunity to accelerate the University's development offered by the setting of a new University strategy, and highly positive indicators on the University's growth, progression and graduate employment rates and financial position.

### **Higher Education / Government Context**

22.05 Council received a presentation from Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, Mr Nick Hillman, outlining current and future challenges and opportunities for the sector. Council's attention was drawn to the high degree of change faced by the sector, the changing demographics of future students, the possible introduction of minimum entry standards, changes to Higher Education funding, students' views on the value for money they receive from their programmes, the 'levelling up' agenda and government targets for research funding.

22.06 Discussion after the presentation focused on the following points:

- Whether the sector should focus on international student recruitment
- How the sector should respond when the population of 18-year-olds begins to decline from 2030 onwards
- The impact of Brexit on recruitment from the European Union
- The future success of Apprenticeship degree provision
- Whether the sector should embed employability skills across its programmes
- The impact of the new Chair of the Office for Students (OfS)
- The value placed by government on TRAC
- Whether the number of higher education providers in the UK will decline
- Current government thinking on minimum entry standards and funding BTECs
- The benefits of demonstrating to students where funding is spent
- Support for women in higher education
- Potential growth in different subject areas.

22.07 The Chair thanked Mr Hillman for an extremely stimulating presentation.

### **BNU Strategic Plan: Thrive 2028 (draft)**

22.08 Council received a presentation from Vice-Chancellor Professor Nick Braisby outlining the key pillars and themes that underpin the draft strategy, and the rationale for the name 'Thrive 2028'.

22.09 Council indicated that it is broadly supportive of the emerging strategy, but suggested the University should:

- Outline key measures of success (KPIs) and clear indications of how that success will be achieved within the strategy
- Consider whether it would be more effective to call one pillar 'Products and Services' and replace the 'Environment' pillar with 'Process'

- Reflect upon how the University can expand, increase its competitiveness and possibly its entry tariff to attract aspirational students while remaining an institution that picks up those 'left behind'
- Whether the core mission of BNU needs revisiting
- Include University branding and marketing in the strategy, with a focus on greater visibility and impact, at county and national level, for BNU
- Consider the investment needed for the new strategy
- Address the importance of engagement with research activities to build reputation and give staff an attractive career trajectory at BNU in order to retain them.

22.10 Council also answered six particular questions regarding Thrive 2028:

1. What should BNU's core student number target be for 2028?
  - Council agreed a target of 10,000 total core students, across all years, was a reasonable target for 2028
  - The 'BNU' brand must not be diluted and expansion must be based on market research and consideration of the cost of delivery per student
  - The impact of expansion on the estate must be considered
  - The University should not move away from a focus on the domestic market as a vibrant community of Home students helps to attract International students and the University has inclusivity and opportunities for all at the heart of its mission
  - Student experience must not be sacrificed; reflection is required on current processes and growth must be scaled up on the ground, for example on staffing and resources, to ensure student expectations are met.
2. How extensive should the University's sub-degree offer?
  - Council strongly recommended that the term 'sub-degree' should be replaced with promoting 'opportunities for lifelong learning', 'pathways' or 'progression'
  - Such an offer must again not dilute the BNU brand
  - Marketing strategies would have to be carefully designed as there is a dissonance between trying to increase the entry tariff and admitting students to undertake only Level 4 and Level 5 programmes
  - Any such offer needs to be complimentary to that of the Buckinghamshire College Group and other local colleges that might provide students who join the University for Level 6 studies.
3. How ambitious should the University be in respect of establishing a TNE presence?
  - Council acknowledged the challenges of establishing a TNE presence, such as how competitive the University could be and how to manage quality and standards

- However, discussions also focused on whether, if the University undertakes TNE, it should utilise its niche areas (Nursing, the Pinewood brand) most
  - TNE should offer Level 4 and 5 studies and encourage students to transition to the UK to study at Level 6.
4. Should the University take more risk?
- Council agreed that the University should take more risk when expanding into provision of new subjects, but that it should be underpinned by market research to identify where such expansion is most likely to succeed and strong business cases
  - Council's risk appetite was lower regarding partners
  - Council requested more information about the risks in increasing the entry tariff
  - Council advised the University to consider the risk of acquiring other providers.
5. Should the University be more ambitious in expanding its academic footprint?
- Council agreed the University should expand its academic offering in two to three areas, possibly including civil engineering and forensic science, but the portfolio must be relevant for employers as well as students
  - Costings and sustainability must be considered when expanding the academic offering.
6. What are Council's views on how high the University should set its quality standards to be?
- Council agreed that a clear safety margin above the OfS minimum thresholds must be maintained.
  - Council advised that the University must define what it believes 'quality' to mean and establish key quality measures.
  - Thrive 2028 must contain key milestones between 2022 and 2028 against which progress can be measured.
- 22.11 The Chair reflected upon the first day's lively and stimulating discussions, with particularly striking points raised by Mr Hillman regarding current political uncertainty, the volatile Higher Education landscape and future demography. There is a need to be selective about what BNU will focus on in the future but also to be even more confident and proud of what BNU delivers.
- 22.12 The Vice-Chancellor also thanked Council for the illuminating discussion and summarised the main points that needed further consideration by the University with regard to the new strategy:
- Council and the University support the emerging strategy and are moving forward cohesively
  - The strategy structure needs to be reconsidered to create a 'living, breathing' strategy
  - The University's entry tariff had emerged as a dominant question; the challenge is now how to change this and cement BNU's credentials as an

aspirational institution while continuing to support what the University has already achieved and delivers well

- Further reflection is required about how to increase the University's visibility
- Expansion needs to be balanced with not diluting the BNU brand.
- It is now time to start considering how the University may be able to acquire other appropriate organisations.

## **OfS Consultations**

### New approach to regulating student outcomes (B3)

22.13 Council received a presentation on the B3 Consultation from the Vice-Chancellor and the Director of Strategic Planning and Change, Mr Matt Hiely-Rayner. Council's attention was drawn to the following key points:

- A change in government focus onto poorer quality providers
- The OfS intention to set minimum thresholds on continuation (how many Year 1 students continue their studies), completion (how many students complete their registered programme) and progression (of graduates into highly skilled/graduate employment) for all provider provision
- The OfS will consider a provider's context if a provider falls below the thresholds
- The removal of consideration of the age of students when assessing student outcomes; the expectation is now that all students will continue regardless of their age, which can be challenging for providers with a significant mature student population
- All providers may have subject areas that do not meet the thresholds, but the OfS may not be able to assure compliance across the sector as they do not have the resources to investigate every such area.

22.14 Council was assured that BNU meets all high-level thresholds but may not meet some sub-metrics. Discussion after the presentation focused upon how BNU could identify any areas that do not meet the thresholds. Council was advised that the University will integrate the OfS metrics into its quality processes where appropriate to identify areas where students are not achieving as their peers are doing.

22.15 It was also noted that the OfS will look at all provider data, but only contact providers if there is a breach. Some top-level data may also be published to encourage media scrutiny.

22.16 Council expressed concern that providers may be dissuaded from recruiting mature students. It was noted that this would lead to providers breaching the OfS's access and participation thresholds.

### Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

22.17 Council received a presentation outlining the second phase TEF consultation from Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Digital Professor Rachel Cragg. Professor Cragg highlighted:

- The TEF will be at provider rather than subject level, and feature assessment of both student outcomes and student experience, with measured indicators constructed from the National Student Survey (NSS)

- The introduction of an independent student submission as well as the provider submission
- The TEF will now be run on a four-year cycle, with no interim applications allowed, meaning universities will be unable to change their TEF rating if they are dissatisfied with it
- The short timeframe in which to make the submissions, which are due by November 2022.

22.18 Council recognised the high importance of the TEF application to the University and agreed that it must itself view the data showing the University's performance against the metrics rather than only taking assurance from Senate.

### **BNU Marketing**

22.19 Council received a presentation from the Director of Marketing, Student Recruitment and Communications (MSRC) Ms Dana Cameron on the impact of the new University brand launched in 2021. Council was advised of the extremely successful impact the change, alongside the launch of a new website and other marketing campaigns, had had on recruitment for the 2021-22 academic year and on the University's visibility and reputation locally, nationally and in the international student market.

22.20 The marketing strategy now includes greater use of social media, including TikTok and influencers, and the use of both course-led and awareness campaigns. All Schools will be given their own distinctive 'tone of voice' in future campaigns.

22.21 Focus has also been upon application to enrolment conversion and transition from Undergraduate to Postgraduate study at the University.

22.22 Council praised the success of the rebranding. Subsequent discussions centered upon the following themes:

- The resources the MSRC Directorate will need to fully support the ambitions of Thrive 2028
- Opportunities and challenges in utilising University alumni as a recruitment tool
- The challenge of ensuring the University is consistently referred to as 'BNU' and never confused with the University of Buckingham.

### **BNU International Strategy – update on progress**

22.23 Council received a presentation from Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Gavin Brooks and Ms Cameron on recent international recruitment activity.

22.24 Council's attention was drawn to the extremely high growth in international student recruitment in the early part of the 2021-2022 year, due to the agreement to work with a 'super-agent', EdSkills, in India.

22.25 Council was advised that the University's aspiration is that its steady state student population should be at least 20% international by the end of the next University strategy period (2027/28).

22.26 Subsequent discussion focused upon:

- The importance of supporting International students with their English language skills before and after teaching begins, and their understanding of academic integrity

- How to tailor support to meet International students' particular needs and ensure they feel part of the University community. Council praised the efforts made by the Students' Union (SU) to welcome and support these students in recent weeks, which were outlined by SU President Ms Honor Fletcher. These included asking all University societies and clubs to consider how they could include these students and ensuring that the SU Advice Centre responded quickly to student queries.
- That Council must be aware of the impact increased International recruitment may have on the UK domestic market and how to ensure our staff are as diverse as our student body
- The importance of ensuring that BNU remains compliant with all UKVI requirements so there is no risk of again losing the University's Tier 4 license. Council was assured that the University had carried out full due diligence before agreeing to work with EdSkills and that it was confident, following an internal audit of international recruitment, that working with a super-agent was best practice.
- The importance of ensuring that the University has the appropriate structural solutions to support the growth in international student numbers, for example an International Office.

22.27 Council praised the University and Students' Union for working as one to support international students. It was agreed that the benefits of increased international recruitment will be a more culturally diverse and rich student body.

#### **Update on University Estates Programme**

22.28 Council received a presentation from Chief Finance Officer Mr Trevor Gabriele about the development plans for the High Wycombe and Aylesbury campuses and Missenden Abbey. Construction work will begin in High Wycombe imminently and has already started in Aylesbury. Refurbishment of Missenden Abbey has also begun.

22.29 Council was assured that private and confidential meeting spaces have now been included in the Student Hub at High Wycombe as requested; that all areas are Wi-Fi-enabled; and that while the current focus is on the development of a social space at the heart of the High Wycombe campus, the next phase of development will focus on developing academic space that is as vibrant as the new social space.

22.30 Council was assured that all financial costs of the programme will be fully transparent. An independent cost comparison of General Arrangements is currently being performed.

#### **Council Development Session: Cyber Security and Institutional Risk**

22.31 Council received a presentation on cyber security from Director of Information Systems and Technology Mr Nicholas Roussel-Milner.

22.32 A wide-ranging discussion was held on

- What cyber security is and why it is important
- The severe risk posed by cybercrime to higher education institutions and why universities are targeted
- The diverse nature of cyber security threats, which range from ransomware to disgruntled employees maliciously targeting and damaging systems

- The immediate and longer-term impacts of cyber-attacks on universities, which range from service outage to complete data loss, financial losses and ongoing reputational damage.
- 22.33 Council was advised that the University had reflected upon [JISC's 16 questions to consider about your cyber security posture](#) when devising its cyber security strategy.
- 22.34 Council was also assured that the University has made very significant progress in improving its cyber security posture. Actions have included the introduction of Multi-Factor Authentication and a new, fully secure Virtual Private Network, an upgraded firewall and network security, and a threat monitoring system.
- 22.35 Council praised the actions being taken so far to strengthen University systems and offered to provide further guidance about additional measures that can be implemented.

### **Reflections on Day 1 and Day 2**

- 22.36 The Chair thanked UET for the planning and effort put into the delivery of the meeting.
- 22.37 Council was asked to evaluate whether the content of the meeting had been appropriate and whether there was any other area they would have liked to have heard about.
- 22.38 Council agreed the content of the meeting had been very relevant and stimulating, although it would have liked to have heard something on competitor analysis.
- 22.39 Council also agreed on the following:
- Working in small groups had worked well and Council felt it had enabled them to input effectively into the University's strategic direction
  - It would be worth including more 'café style' working in future strategic sessions
  - The pre-meeting preparatory materials had been excellent, stimulating thinking and pertinent questions.
- 22.40 The Vice-Chancellor thanked UET members and other members of the University for their presentations.
- 22.41 Professor Braisby particularly thanked Council for its huge contribution in guiding and supporting the University.
- 22.42 Council was advised that the next iterations of Thrive 2028 will be brought to its April and May meetings with the intention that Council will give final approval at its July meeting.