

LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

Notes of a meeting of the Council awayday
held on 9 May 2014

PRESENT: Pro-Chancellor (in the Chair); Vice-Chancellor; Miss F. M. Aiken; Mr A. Baker; Mr D. Barron; Dr R. Boumphrey; Mr P. Boustead; Professor S. Bradley; Dr G. Brown; Professor A. G. Chetwynd; Professor S. J. Cox; Mr F. Fitzherbert-Brockholes; Mr S. Franklin; Professor J. Garside; Mr J. Hadfield; Mr L. King; Ms N. C. Owen; Mr J. Pullan; Professor C. Ram-Prasad; Mrs S. Randall-Paley; Professor A. Ruckenstein; Mr M. Swindlehurst; Dr B. Szerszynski; Dr J. Taylor; Professor H. Thomason; Mr J. Thornberry; Ms L. Willis.

IN ATTENDANCE: Dr H. Hardie

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Professor A. M. Atherton; Mr J. R. Carr; Mrs G. Gardner; Professor A. C. Gatrell; Professor A. M. McEnergy; Mr G. Parker; Professor E. Rose.

CO.14/31 Awayday

The Council was joined by members of UMAG for a review of the Council's role in implementing the University Strategy, and other issues of current importance to the University's senior management team.

31.1 Implementing the University Strategy – update on progress

The Chief Administrative Officer introduced the first session, and described how the University Strategy for 2020 was being used to inform the updated research, education and engagement strategies, and how it had been incorporated into the planning process.

It was noted that discussions had been held with Senate and Heads of Departments on the key areas of focus for strategy implementation, and departmental comparator sets.

Members were invited to consider the most beneficial ways of constructing comparator sets, and whether they should include aspirational or peer comparators, or a combination of the two.

31.2 Progress in implementing the University Strategy: what are the key questions on which the Council should focus?

The Pro-Chancellor gave an overview of various aspects of Lancaster's performance, including student feedback, finance and research standing.

Lord Liddle suggested that the Council should consider the following questions.

- (i) Should Council members have direct relationships with individual Colleges?
- (ii) To what extent is the lack of progress regarding research income due to a lack of business engagement, and is this something Council could assist with?
- (iii) Is the balance of responsibilities between the administrative centre and Faculties appropriate?
- (iv) Does the Council have a responsibility to look more closely at areas of the University that underperform financially compared with others?
- (v) What system of rigorous benchmarking and peer-review would be needed at institutional and departmental level to enable Lancaster to achieve its strategic ambitions?
- (vi) How can Lancaster use its unique strengths to respond to external threats such as BIS funding cuts and other financial pressures?
- (vii) How will the University react to strong competition for students in the future, without reducing the quality of the student experience?
- (viii) What strategies does the University have to counter the risks – especially in research and widening participation?

To summarise, the Pro-Chancellor noted that while there was no immediate crisis, it was important for the Council to look ahead and anticipate potential challenges.

The Vice-Chancellor added that the Council should aim to give clear guidance to University management on the top priorities for future strategic focus, and not become too operational in its approach.

31.3 Discussion of Council role in implementation/comparators

The group was divided into four different strands, and each considered different questions regarding the Council's role and the use of comparator sets. The major outcomes from the discussions were as follows.

1. *What are the key questions on which Council should focus?*

The questions raised by members included the following.

- (i) Does Council know enough about University business to be able to have informed discussions?
- (ii) Is the University agile enough to react to challenges and keep up with its changing market?
- (iii) What is the role of the Faculties?
- (iv) Is the University acting as a unified body or as individual parts?
- (v) Can the Council help to create alliances, and in which areas?
- (vi) Do Lancaster students get value for money?
- (vii) How can the University improve its conversion rate?
- (viii) Should league table targets be driving the strategy?
- (ix) Is the University making best use of its limited resources?
- (x) Is the Council focussed enough on strategic issues?
- (xi) Does Lancaster make the most of its geographical location?
- (xii) How would the University cope with flatter student recruitment figures?
- (xiii) Should the Council challenge the status quo more often?
- (xiv) Is the University as good as it considers itself to be?
- (xv) Does Lancaster have the required culture in place to deliver its strategic goals?
- (xvi) What is achievable (and not achievable) for this University?

2. *Is the proposed set of comparators the right set to provide Council with useful information to show how well the University is performing?*

Those present agreed that the proposed set of comparators was appropriate at this time. It was suggested that research should be undertaken in order to fully understand how other Universities had improved their performance or achieved their goals.

3. *How does Council want to use the proposed comparator set to inform strategic planning and decision making?*

It was noted that one of the most valuable uses of comparator sets was at departmental level, to determine which areas of the University were performing well. Members felt that it was also vital to analyse the changes made by successful institutions, in order to model their behaviour where necessary.

4. *What is the strategic imperative when we compare Lancaster to other universities? Is it to outperform them across the board, or help Lancaster understand its own strengths and weaknesses?*

There was general agreement that comparison with other institutions was important both in terms of driving performance and accountability, and to inform internal discussions regarding Lancaster's strengths and weaknesses.

5. *What should the role of individual Council members be?*

In response to this question, it was suggested that individual Council members should focus on a small number of key issues, relevant to their skill set and experience, and provide accountability in those areas. It was also noted that Council members could provide valuable assistance in publicising the University's achievements in those areas which were relevant to them.

The Vice-Chancellor thanked those present for their contribution to the discussion, and noted that Council would prefer to take a high level overview and provide accountability for the University management on a limited number of prioritised issues.

It was noted that some difficult strategic and tactical decisions would need to be made, in terms of priorities for the University to focus its resources on. The suggestion of a "buddy" system between Council members and senior management was welcomed, but it would need careful consideration to ensure that individuals' valuable time was being used in the most appropriate way.

It was suggested that the paperwork used in the induction process for new members should include details of where assurance on various aspects of university business (Finance, Human Resources, etc.) could be obtained, in order that members can focus on more strategic matters.

Action: University Secretary

It was further noted that the University could make better use of the wealth of experience and knowledge available to it through Council members.

In conclusion, it was agreed that the Pro-Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor would create a paper reflecting the away day discussions, and prioritising the key issues for Council to consider during the coming year.

This paper would be brought to the next Council meeting for discussion, and shared with all Committee Chairs. The Council forward schedule would then be updated to accommodate the outcome of these discussions.

Action: Pro-Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, University Secretary

31.4 The strategy for the international teaching partnerships and options in China

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) introduced a report on the strategy for international partnerships, as part of a broader strategy for the diversification of student markets and research collaborations. He gave details on the background to the international partnerships and associated financial projections, as set out in the report.

The Council also received a paper on the Guangwai-Lancaster University (GLU), and discussed the project in detail, alongside potential alternative partnerships. It was agreed that a background paper setting out the scale of the venture and a business plan on the resource implications for Lancaster would be brought to a future meeting of Council.

Action: Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International)

31.5 Developing Lancaster University as a UK Top 10/World Top 100 Brand – consultation

The Director of Communications and Marketing, Mr Stuart Franklin, gave a presentation on the ongoing round of consultations aimed at improving the University's marketing material, and creating a brand more representative of a UK Top 10/World Top 100 institution.

The following key points were noted in the discussion.

- (i) Comparator institutions tend to use shields rather than logos in their branding, which suggested that Lancaster should use its shield in its branding.
- (ii) Lancaster's marketing needed to be more confident and assertive.
- (iii) Prospective students tended to select their University primarily based on the course content and departmental league tables, with other criteria acting as secondary factors in their decisions.
- (iv) Lancaster's culture and personality was unique, and could be used as a selling point to increase student numbers.
- (v) The influence of parents on a student's University choice was generally overestimated.
- (vi) The University's independence from the Russell Group could be viewed as an advantage, if marketed properly.
- (vii) The Colleges appeared to be more important to alumni than to prospective students.
- (viii) Potential students would prefer the University's website to provide more details on individual module content and descriptions.
- (ix) Businesses in the North West were currently not as aware of Lancaster's offerings, such as research and economic contribution, as they could be.
- (x) The revised marketing strategy would need to align with the University Strategy 2020.
- (xi) The message from all aspects of Lancaster's branding and advertising, including the ambassadorial work of Council members, needed to be consistent and based on a clear set of USPs.

In response to questions, Mr Franklin noted that other institutions in the Top 10 had used the metrics contained in the league table as key measures of success in their strategy.

The Chair thanked Mr Franklin for his presentation, and commented that the University's marketing should be targeted to attract the brightest students with the highest potential, regardless of their school or geography.

It was agreed that the Council would have an opportunity to see the conclusions of the consultation project at a future meeting.

Action: Director of Communications and Marketing