

Mrs Pamela Chesters, Chair of Council, talked of Council business over the past months; the position had been so fast changing that Council had moved to a monthly meeting cycle. Although there were some decisions that Council itself had needed to take in signing off the new budget assumptions and revised budget and the voluntary exit scheme, it had also spent a considerable amount of time during this period receiving and considering the assurances from the Vice Chancellor and others that the University's responses and plans were robust and the right risks were being identified and mitigated. We were grateful for the comprehensive reports from Senate on academic matters and appreciated the huge amount of work that staff generally had undertaken during this very challenging period. This gave us confidence that if required, we would be able to demonstrate to the Office for Students (OfS) that effective governance had been maintained throughout and we had remained compliant with the terms of our registration.

The Chair of Council explained that in the early weeks, the financial forecast was of a significant deficit of £20m (on an annual income of c£300m). Council had worked with the Vice Chancellor, the Director of Finance and his team to agree how to deal with this and plan sustainably for both the short and long term, being mindful of the impact on both the staff and student community. Fortunately, the University had entered this phase in a better position than a number of other institutions, having consistently budgeted for and delivered a small operating surplus in previous years. Council had agreed a significant cost savings budget. The loss of commercial accommodation income from conferences and refunding students' third term of accommodation fees had created an immediate challenge but Council was also mindful that any reduction in student numbers or any change in the ratio of UK to overseas students would have a major impact on fee income, not just for 2020/21 but also feeding through to future years. It was therefore important that Council considered the financial position of the University over the longer term and not just the forthcoming session. The work begun earlier in the academic year in terms of financial scenario planning for what was already a challenging future for the HE sector, helped us gain a better understanding of the current situation.

Council had supported the stance taken by the Vice-Chancellor on the need to improve communication with staff, covering both what was known as fact but also where things were still uncertain or subject to change. The webinars and weekly notes had been well received. The Chair of Council was also pleased to report that there had been improved external relations with BaNES and other key stakeholders in the regional economy. A letter of thanks for the supply of personal protective equipment had been received from RUH, and BaNES had given access to additional space and facilitated transport changes.

The Chair of Council advised that work on the University Strategy had slowed due to the pandemic, recognising the limited bandwidth for anything other than addressing Covid19 issues, but that a further iteration of the high level strategy was now in preparation. This would then be followed by the development of the underpinning strategies which would have a greater degree of granularity. Council recognised the benefits of greater staff engagement together with increased understanding of the opportunities and challenges which the university faces. As a precursor to developing improved ways of working, council was spending time considering its delegation of authorities' schedule to ensure it was fit for purpose and could support timely decision making.

Council had, however, declared a Climate Emergency and adopted eleven CAF Principles which set out the clear ambitions in the University's contribution towards the development of a zero-carbon economy. It had also spent some considerable time discussing how the University should respond to EDI issues generally and Black Lives Matter specifically and was delighted that two key appointments to provide focussed leadership on these issues had been approved and the roles filled.

The Council awayday, run virtually, had been successful and new members of Council had been welcomed. (In addition to Marion Harney and Tim Ibell both of whom would be known to AA colleagues, there were three new lay members: David Hardy, Don McLaverty and Sujata McNab, whose biographies can be found on the University's website).

Council had been pleased to be consulted by Senate on relevant aspects of the Senate Effectiveness Review and had noted that some emerging good practice which had been identified could usefully be adopted by Council as well. It was agreed that a small group from both Council and Senate might consider how the two bodies, each with their distinctive responsibilities, could communicate more effectively, building increased understanding and trust for the benefit of the institution as whole. It had been helpful to see Senate's commitment to provide the necessary assurances to Council as now required by OfS and their consideration as to how this might best be delivered.

The Chair of Council concluded by stating that she was always happy to be invited to attend Academic Assembly and to explain why Council had taken a particular course of action and to be as transparent as possible.