



University of Exeter

COUNCIL STRATEGIC BRIEFING MEETING

MINUTES AND ACTIONS – APPROVED BY COUNCIL

28 May 2025

10.00am-12.30pm

Council Chamber, Northcott House

NB text in BLACK for publication; text in BLUE redacted for publication

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- 24.80 Chair's Welcome, Introduction and Declarations of Interest
- 24.81 Scenario Modelling: Student Number Recruitment
- 24.82 Exeter Innovation: Corporate Partnerships Review Recommendations
- 24.83 Update on People & Culture Strategy: Context, Progress and Challenges
- 24.84 Freedom of Speech Update
- 24.85 Chair's Closing Remarks

MEMBERS PRESENT

Quentin Woodley	Pro-Chancellor and Chair of Council
Sir Richard Atkins	Pro-Chancellor and Deputy Chair of Council
Sally Cabrini	Pro-Chancellor and Senior Independent Governor
Professor Lisa Roberts	President and Vice-Chancellor
Professor Dan Charman	Senior Vice-President and Provost
Professor Tim Quine	Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience)
Dr Sarah Hodge	Senate Representative
Professor Karen Knapp	Senate Representative
Professor Sue Prince	Senate Representative
Damaris Anderson-Supple	Independent Member
Nicholas Cheffings	Independent Member
Andrew Greenway	Independent Member
Karime Hassan	Independent Member
Salam Katbi	Independent Member
Alison Reed	Independent Member
Malcolm Skingle	Independent Member
Tim Weller	Independent Member

Glenn Woodcock	Independent Member
Sarah Matthews-DeMers	Independent Member

Elaine Cordy	Professional Services Representative
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Alex Martin	Guild President, Exeter Students' Guild
Connie Chilcott	President Exeter, Falmouth and Exeter Students' Union

STANDING ATTENDEE

Professor Adrian Harris	Chief Medical Officer (Royal NHS Devon)
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SECRETARY

Mike Shore-Nye	Senior Vice-President and Registrar & Secretary
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STAFF IN ATTENDANCE

Dave Stacey	Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and Executive Divisional Director of Finance, Infrastructure and Commercial Services
Ali Chambers	Chief Executive Officer, Exeter Students' Guild
Dr Jeremy Diaper	Assistant Director, Governance (minutes)
Imelda Rogers	Deputy Registrar and Executive Divisional Director of Human Resources

APOLOGIES

Rebecca Boomer-Clark	Independent Member
Sarah Matthews-DeMers	Independent Member
Adrian Harris	Standing Attendee

IN ATTENDANCE FOR INDIVIDUAL AGENDA ITEMS**Minute Item 80 – Admissions Update Stage 2: Late Acquisition and Early Conversion**

Adam Martin	Senior Policy Advisor to the President and Vice-Chancellor
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Minute Item 81 – Exeter Innovation and Corporate Partnership Review Recommendation

Stuart Brocklehurst	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Business Engagement and Innovation)
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Minute Item 82 – Update on People & Culture Strategy: Context, Progress and Challenges

Professor Rajani Naidoo	Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (People and Culture)
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Minute Item 83 – Freedom of Speech Update

Professor Rajani Naidoo	Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (People and Culture)
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80. Chair's Welcome and Declarations of Interest

80.1 The Chair welcomed Council members to the meeting and noted that apologies had been received from Rebecca Boomer-Clark, Sarah Matthews-DeMers and Adrian Harris;

80.2 There were no new declarations of interests received in relation to items on the agenda.

81. Scenario Modelling: Student Number Recruitment (CNL/104/24-25 Strictly Confidential)

The Chair invited Adam Martin (Senior Policy Advisor to the President and Vice-Chancellor) to join the meeting.

81.1 Initial progress had been made in meeting the significant sector-wide financial challenge of continued long-term reduction in international student numbers, which had started to be addressed through education diversification, further growth of undergraduate home students (UGH), and continued focus on teaching and research efficiencies and cost reduction;

81.2 Council noted that the scenario modelling had been developed in response to a specific request to consider the potential implications of an increasingly unpredictable and volatile international student recruitment market and more radical approaches and scenarios that may need to be considered to achieve financial sustainability. The five potential recruitment scenarios outlined in the Scenario Modelling paper had been risk analysed and potential mitigations had been assessed for potential speed of implementation and institutional ability to deliver;

81.3 It was noted that the scenarios presented were more pessimistic than the 3% reduction in international student recruitment predicted by the OfS for higher tariff and more highly selective providers in their most recent report on the financial sustainability of higher education providers in England published on 8 May 2025;

81.4 The paper presented a broad range of potential outcomes including significantly pessimistic scenarios. Notwithstanding the considerable uncertainty in the external environment these were still currently considered unlikely to materialise;

81.5 Proactive actions to mitigate the risks associated with the continued decline in international student recruitment had been reflected in the draft 5-year financial plans, including: delivery of financial efficiencies via the Enabling 2030 workstreams, diversification of the education portfolio, growth of undergraduate home students, and reprofiling of the Capital plan.

Closed Minute – Commercial in Confidence and Strictly Confidential**82. Implementing the Recommendations from the Corporate Partnerships Review (CNL/105/24-25 Strictly Confidential)**

The Chair invited the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Business Engagement) to join the meeting and introduce the report.

82.1 The key recommendations from the review included: the development of a refined strategic partner portfolio; implementation of a tiered model for partnership; a consistent approach to Strategic Partnership Management and Guide; a formalized strategic partnership agreement, appointment and review process;

- 82.2 Business Engagement activity across the University remained focused on enhancing impact, influence, reputation and revenue;
- 82.3 There was a continued focus on increasing commercialisation of practical research to help income generation, enable wider influence across government policy, and a more strategic approach to unique research expertise at the University to influence strategic pricing of research to enhance scale of revenue and margin;
- 82.4 The Corporate Partner income portfolio had surpassed the 2023/24 target by 20% and leveraged a further £14.3m in collaborative research awards (where a partner contributed in-kind or direct support to a research funded project). However, it was recognised that whilst it would be important to maintain a sustained upward trajectory of increased income generation, it would not necessarily result in a consistent year-on-year increase in income generation and that there could be variation;
- 82.5 Approximately 1/3rd of income was generated from education (including CPD and Degree Apprenticeships), with an additional 2/3rds of income generated via consultancy, collaborative and contract research.
- 82.6 The University had historically had 17 'top tier' partners, but as part of a transition to a more strategic approach this had been streamlined to 7 core 'top tier' partners which was not just classified in terms of income contribution, but wider strategic and thematic alignment to the University's strategic ambition to create a greener, healthier and fairer future;
- 82.7 The University was continuing to raise awareness of the importance of aiming to exceed full economic cost recovery and to raise awareness of the cost implications of undertaking research below this. Termly meetings were providing an opportunity to draw upon academic and professional services expertise and to enhance opportunity for mutual support and cross-fertilisation of ideas and increasing professionalisation of approach;
- 82.8 The University's Metahub was being supported by £19.6m of public and private backing, including backing from businesses ranging from defence and security firms QinetiQ and Leonardo. The MetaHub was focused on nanoscale metamaterials – a new class of advanced materials, designed at the smallest molecular level to enable components to perform new functions;
- 82.9 The University's corporate partnerships continued to be hugely impactful in enabling the University to deliver its strategic objectives to create a sustainable, healthy and socially just future. Recent highlights included the official opening of the Centre for Resilience in Environment, Water and Waste (CREWW) with South West Water; continued academic partnership with the Met Office; the £10m RENEW project delivered with National Trust; and launch of the NIHR Biomedical Research Centre in October 2023 led by the University in partnership with Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

The Chair thanked the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Business Engagement) for their contribution and invited them to leave the meeting.

83. Update on People & Culture Strategy: Context, Progress and Challenges (CNL/106/24-25 Confidential)

The Chair invited Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (People and Culture) to attend the meeting and they briefly introduced the update on the People and Culture Strategy;

- 83.1 'Our People and Culture' Strategy was central to the University of Exeter's Strategy 2030 and this shared purpose and vision would enable the University to move forward in making a difference to people, communities and partners;
- 83.2 Council noted that significant progress had been made on key People Priorities through collaboration with Faculties, Divisions, and Students' Union, with oversight by the Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture Committee;
- 83.3 People and Culture initiatives had assumed even more important strategic significance in the context of evolving regulatory requirements in the UK and broader societal expectations. Success was measured through five institutional KPIs, including: targets for the Gender Pay gap; representation of women in the professoriate; Race Equality Charter status; Athena SWAN status, and University Mental Health Charter status;
- 83.4 An annual workplan, informed through Our Culture Conversations, demographic data and external best practice continued to drive progress against the University's KPIS. The action plan for 2024/25 was grouped into three themes including: i) facilitating a healthy and inclusive student and colleague community; ii) supporting personal and professional development and creating pipelines into leadership, iii) enabling freedom of speech, good campus relations, and a values-driven, speak out culture;
- 83.5 The University's new cross-institutional response had offered balanced and cohesive support for students impacted by the Middle East crisis whilst fulfilling our duties regarding Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech;

Closed Minute – Confidential

- 83.7 The following was noted in discussion:
 - 83.7.1 Whilst there had been a significant progress against the key measures of success, the level of progress in relation to enhancing representation of racially minoritised staff and improving ethnic diversity of colleagues was acknowledged as disappointing. The University had developed an understanding of the historical issues behind this and key actions were in hand to enable an improvement in this area and to promote positive stories and lived experiences to encourage greater diversity;
 - 83.7.2 Social mobility, classism and disabilities (including neurodiversity) were recognised as live and emerging issues amongst the student and staff community which needed to be addressed. It was recognised that whilst these were not included within current KPIs it

would be important to continue to think beyond these to identify opportunities to make progress in these area;

- 83.7.3 That there was a sustained focus on enhancing wider professional development and leadership opportunities across the Universities;
- 83.7.4 In order to help enhance inclusion and belonging at the University amongst prospective students from lower-economic backgrounds, further outreach and engagement activities were being undertaken with local schools to enhance their sense of membership and belonging in the University community. The University was working with the wider sector and engaging with f the UUK Conference to explore opportunities to improve equality in higher education, including practical strategies to advance equality of opportunity and network with peers to share best practice across different regions;
- 83.7.5 There remained further opportunities to enhance the inclusiveness of the University community which would also have a wider positive impact on delivery of teaching and drive equity in research culture;
- 83.7.6 Whilst the increased complexity of the regulatory environment was proving complex to navigate and comply with all legal requirements, it would be important for the University to maintain its strong commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and continue to enable equality of opportunity for all students irrespective of their background.

ACTION: To consider changing the University Mental Health Charter Measure to ‘achieve the University Mental Health Charter ‘Award with Merit’ by 2030.

84. Freedom of Speech Update (CNL/107/24-25 Confidential Commercial in Confidence)

The Chair invited Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (People and Culture) to briefly introduce the Freedom of Speech Update, including recent judgements and future implications.

- 84.1 The Office for Students had an enhanced role in promoting freedom of speech and academic freedom in the UK higher education sector, particularly following the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023;
- 84.2 The Office for Students had the power to investigate complaints about breaches of free speech duties and could impose fines or other penalties on Universities or Students’ Unions that failed to comply with their obligations;
- 84.3 On 26th March 2025, the Office for Students had released a judgement in relation to the investigation into the University of Sussex’s Trans and Non-binary Policy and intersections with the Governance Principles laid out in the Regulatory Framework, specifically in relation Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom;
- 84.4 OfS fined the University of Sussex £585,000 after it was found the University’s governing documents failed to uphold the freedom of speech and academic freedom, as well as failings in the University’s management and governance processes. The fine was almost 15 times larger than any other fine previously levied by the OfS. Sussex had published a pre-action protocol letter and sought a judicial review of the OfS ruling;

- 84.5 The OfS had written to 19 other Universities that had similarly worded policies. Exeter was not amongst the 19 of the institutions written to and scrutiny of the ruling has indicated that Exeter was compliant with condition E6, with our internal policies approved in alignment with delegated authority and with appropriate scrutiny and oversight from our Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture Committee and Executive Board;
- 84.6 On 16 April 2025, the UK Supreme Court had issued a ruling setting out the definition of the terms 'woman', 'man' and 'sex' for the purposes of the 2010 Equality Act and confirming the legal protections for transgender people in respect of discrimination and harassment. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) had also shared an interim update on the practical implications of the UK Supreme Court judgment;
- 84.7 We established a task and finish group to consider how best to implement the revised guidance and where we must follow the law. This included reviewing our approach to facilities and how we support our trans community.

Confidential – Close Minute

The Chair thanked the Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (People and Culture) for their contribution to the meeting and invited them to leave.

85. Chair's Closing Remarks

- 85.1 The Chair thanked members for their contribution to the meeting and indicated that the Joint Senate and Council meeting would commence in Holland Hall following a networking lunch and digital showcase.