

COUNCIL – SPECIAL MEETING

Minutes of the meeting held at 16:00 on 12 JANUARY 2021, via Zoom.

Present: Dr Emyr Roberts, Chair of Council (Chair); the Rt Hon Elfyn Llwyd, Deputy Chair of Council; Professor Elizabeth Treasure, Vice-Chancellor; Professor Tim Woods, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience); Mr George Ashworth; Ms Samantha Blackie (from minute 34); Ms Kate Eden; Ms Meri Huws; Mr Morgan Lewis, UMCA President; Dr Louise Marshall; Mr Nathaniel Pidcock, AberSU President; Ms Rhuanedd Richards; Ms Fiona Sharp; Dr William Williams; Professor Sir Robin Williams; and Professor Reyer Zwiggelaar.

In attendance: Mr Stephen Forster, Director of Finance and Corporate Services; Ms Jean Jones, Head of the Vice-Chancellor’s Office; Mr Geraint Pugh, University Secretary; Mr Nicholas Rogers, Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development; and Mr Steve Thomas, Head of Communications and Public Affairs.

Apologies for absence had been received from Ms Kath Williams.

32. MATTERS RAISED BY THE CHAIR

1. Special Meeting

Members were thanked for attending this Special Meeting of Council, which had been convened at very short notice to discuss the most recent developments relating to the return of students to the University campus following the Christmas break.

2. Condolences

Members expressed their sympathies to Kath Williams and family following their recent bereavement, and requested that a letter be sent by the University Secretary to formally convey the Council’s condolences (**ACTION:** University Secretary).

33. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

NOTED

No conflicts of interest were declared in relation to the business to be transacted during the remainder of the meeting.

34. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS ON THE RETURN OF STUDENTS

RECEIVED

Report by Director of Finance and Corporate Services (COU2021-084).

NOTED

1. The University had been preparing for the phased return of students to the campus from 11 January 2021, in accordance with guidance issued by the Welsh Government. (WG). However, revised guidance had been issued late on Friday, 08 January 2021 by

WG which specified that students should remain at home for the time being. The University therefore immediately communicated this revised guidance to students and advised that they stay at home except in certain circumstances.

2. Teaching for the new semester would still begin on 25 January 2021, but with all teaching provided online until 05 February. This would be further reviewed by the University Executive at the same time as the WG undertakes the next review of national restrictions in Wales in late January.
3. As part of original preparations to enable the safe return of students to campus from 11 January 2021, the University had reviewed the institution's existing risk assessments in light of the new Covid-19 strains. Only minor tweaks were deemed necessary, and the existing arrangements remained appropriate overall. The University was therefore confident that it could safely reintroduce in person teaching when the WG issues revised guidance.
4. In response to the current situation, the University Executive was proposing that 100 per cent of University accommodation fees be refunded to students for the weeks they cannot return to Aberystwyth because of WG guidance.
5. It was believed that around 800 students had already returned to their University accommodation, and steps were being taken to get a clearer indication of the numbers already back on campus. Some more students were expected to return over coming days – these primarily being those whose personal situations left them with no option but to return to their University accommodation.
6. While students who had or would soon return would be liable for their University accommodation fees in full, those in financial difficulty would be encouraged to access support via the student hardship fund. Members were also assured that some essential services – including take-away catering, study space and the library – were available to those who had returned.
7. Members were advised that the refund of rent to those in private accommodation was a matter for students to raise with their landlords. The Students' Union was working to encourage private landlords to refund rents for the period when students cannot return to Aberystwyth. Again, any students in private accommodation in financial difficulty would be encouraged to access the student hardship fund.
8. The broad financial implications of refunding University accommodation fees were set out in the Director of Finance and Corporate Services' paper. Since this was a rapidly changing situation, full modelling of the financial implications had not yet been undertaken. However, the Director of Finance and Corporate Services was not expecting a significant effect on the institution's cashflow, nor the forecast budgetary outturn for the year. The hard covenant agreed with the University's lender would not be breached.
9. Members were reminded that the University continued to provide education and outcomes as originally promised to students. The proposed refund therefore only related to University accommodation fees, and not to tuition fees.
10. Unfortunately, the instalment for this term's University accommodation fees had been taken on Thursday, 07 January 2021 – the day before WG had issued its revised guidance. An appropriate mechanism would therefore be developed to enable students

who had not returned to their University accommodation to request refunds in appropriate tranches.

RESOLVED

11. That a student in University accommodation can apply for a refund of 100 per cent for every week they are not using that accommodation if the WG advises them not to return, until the end of the current term, subject to the University Executive agreeing the mechanism to enable the refunds with the Students' Union (**ACTION:** Director of Finance and Corporate Services).
12. That full modelling on the implications of this decision be reported to the next Resources and Performance Committee meeting (**ACTION:** Director of Finance and Corporate Services).
13. That a copy of the communications issued to students in light of this decision be shared with Council members (**ACTION:** Head of Communications and Public Affairs).

35. ANNUAL REPORT AND ACCOUNTS FOR YEAR ENDED 31 JULY 2020

NOTED

1. At Council on 26 November 2020, members had been advised that KPMG, the University's external auditors, had sought assurances that the institution would not breach the covenants agreed with its lender, NatWest Bank Plc, during the twelve-month period over which KPMG would be assessing 'going concern'. Council had therefore not been able to approve the Annual Report and Accounts for 2019–20 pending the conclusion of the external audit process.
2. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services advised that he had since been negotiating with NatWest. While the University had originally sought a bespoke letter of forgiveness which would cover the twelve-month period from when the Financial Statements are formally approved, NatWest was now proposing a revised lending agreement. This would be acceptable to the University, and the proposed agreement was currently being reviewed by the institution's legal advisors.
3. Council would be required to agree a formal resolution on the revised lending agreement. It was expected that this could be undertaken by correspondence. The final agreement would then be reviewed by KPMG with a view to concluding the external audit process.

RESOLVED

4. That the Special Meeting of Council to formally approve the Annual Report and Accounts for 2019–20 be rescheduled for late February 2021, by which point the relevant assessment of 'going concern' should be concluded (**ACTION:** University Secretary).