

AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE
Tuesday 12 March 2024

CONFIRMED MINUTES

Present:

Peter Thompson (Chair)
James Hedges

Patricia Gallan
Indy Hothi

Celia Gough

In attendance:

For the entire meeting:

Dr Sharon Ellis
Dr Nadine Lewycky
Amy Taylor [internal audit]

Karen Kröger
Jonathan Morgan
Neil Thomas [internal audit]

For mm. 2023.035–039 only:

Professor Colin Bailey CBE

For m. 2023.036 only:

Dr Rachel Bence
Professor Mike Noon

Louise Lester

For m. 2023.038 only:

Thomas Shaw

For m. 2023.039 only:

Dr Rachel Bence

Richard Holland

Apologies:

James Aston [external audit]

Sarah Durrant [external audit]

Welcome, apologies and declaration of interests

2023.035 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted the apologies. There were no declarations of interests.

Deep dive presentation on staff survey action planning [Presentation]

2023.036 The Committee **considered** a deep dive on staff survey action planning. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- [a] Since the reintroduction of staff surveys in 2022, the survey had been run annually with the next survey due to launch in April 2024. The Staff Survey Steering Group provided strategic oversight of the outcomes and actions arising from the results. The institutional action plan had been updated in response to the 2023 survey results to include a new focus area on positive and inclusive working environments. To encourage community ownership of actions, Faculties, Schools and Directorates were asked to co-create plans in response to their local level results. We had conducted external benchmarking with the Higher Education sector using published data.

- [b] The School of Business and Management was looking to improve its participation rate, which was lower than the institutional average. The responses showed clear distinctions between demographic groups, with women and staff with longer tenure more likely to respond unfavourably. Action had been taken to engage with staff at earlier career stages and this had seen a positive shift in their responses. The responses to questions around the Queen Mary values were positive overall.
- [c] Steps taken by the Chief Information Officer had encouraged a high participation rate in IT Services last year. The lower scores on support for gender equality had been unexpected, and we had responded by launching a Women in Tech network. This was highlighted in our recruitment materials and we had subsequently recruited more women into the directorate. There was more work to do on learning and development and on feedback.
- [d] The Committee discussed the communications plan for the next survey. The plan would highlight successful action taken in response to last year's survey and included references to meetings with Heads of Schools and Directorates and a Town Hall event for all staff.
- [e] There was a good response rate across the University compared to the public sector, which indicated a good level of engagement. Scores were positive in response to questions about how people felt about working at Queen Mary. A dip in these scores would indicate a cause for concern. Some of the negative responses by longer serving staff were in response to recent trends in Higher Education and industrial relations at the University.
- [f] The Committee said that the process issues with previous staff surveys had been resolved and the focus was now on the survey results, which was a positive step forward.

Strategic Risk Register [ARC23/27]

2023.037 *Minute 2023.037 is confidential.*

Update on the legal compliance review [ARC23/28]

2023.038 The Committee **considered** an update on the proposed approach to legal compliance reviews going forward. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- [a] The proposed update to the legal compliance reporting framework would provide additional oversight processes and procedures in place to identify, manage and mitigate legal compliance risk on the basis of ongoing engagement between the University's legal counsel and risk owners. The Committee would receive the first report under this new process in June.
- [b] The annex highlighted some key compliance risk areas. A risk in relation to the University's tax status in India had been identified and mitigating actions taken. There were lessons learned for our due diligence about deepening engagement and building a presence in new regions to learn about the legal context and risk.

- [c] The Committee was given an update on a group litigation claim against a number of universities in relation to missed teaching arising from industrial action and the pandemic dating back to 2017/18. The claim had drawn attention to how the sector was responding to consumer protection issues.

Deep dive on information security [ARC23/29]

2023.039 *Minute 2023.039 is confidential.*

Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) return [ARC23/30]

2023.040 The Committee **noted** a report on the preparation of the TRAC return. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- [a] The paper provided the Committee with assurance that the TRAC return process had been completed and the return made to the Office for Students by the deadline. The outcomes of the TRAC return had been reviewed by Finance and Investment Committee the previous week. The results showed a reduction in the amount we recovered from tuition fees and that action was needed to reduce our cost base.

Planned internal audit reports [ARC23/31]

2023.041 The Committee **considered** the planned internal audit reports. The following points were noted in the discussion:

Degree apprenticeships

- [a] The report had been completed on an advisory basis and did not have an overall rating. The rules for the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) were very prescriptive and all universities were receiving a high number of necessary actions. Activity was underway in all of the areas identified. We were anticipating an ESFA inspection in the next 12 months.

Research overhead recovery

- [b] The report had a rating of 'significant assurance with minor improvement opportunities' (amber-green) which was in line with forecast. Consistent costing and bid approval processes were in place, however, there were opportunities to increase the monitoring of overhead recovery rates at faculty level. Instances of retrospective costing approval were also identified in sample testing.

Student experience

- [a] The rating of 'partial assurance with improvement required' (amber-red) was in line with forecast. There was a lack of controls to support the monitoring and oversight of assessment turnaround times in a robust and consistent manner. Improvements could be made in relation to student communications.
- [b] The diversity of assessment methods, as well as the volume and frequency of assessment, were some of the underlying challenges. Approaches to assessment turnaround times varied across the sector with primarily teaching universities having better turnaround times. IT Services and the

Queen Mary Academy were looking at the role of AI in marking and feedback.

An update on internal audit recommendations [ARC23/32]

2023.042 The Committee **considered** an update on internal audit recommendations.

Whistle blowing cases since the last meeting [Oral report]

2023.043 *Minute 2023.043 is confidential.*

Fraud/financial irregularities occurring since the last meeting [Oral report]

2023.044 *Minute 2023.044 is confidential.*

Minutes of the previous meeting [ARC23/33]

2023.045 The Committee **confirmed** the minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2023.

Matters arising [ARC23/34]

2023.046 *Minute 2023.046 is confidential.*

Draft agenda for the next meeting [ARC23/35]

2023.047 The Committee **noted** the draft agenda for the next meeting on 18 June 2024. An oral update on the staff survey results would be added to the agenda.

Dates of meetings in 2023–24:

➤ Tuesday 18 June 2024 at 1500 hours.