



CONFIRMED

Student Recruitment, Admissions and Funding Committee

9 June 2020

Minutes

Present:

Professor Anthony Smith (Chair), Ms Wendy Appleby, Dr Simon Banks, Ms Fernanda Bowler, Dr Julie Evans, Mr Kris Ilic, Mr Kevin King, Ms Collette Lux, Ms Bella Malins, Professor Mike Munday, Mr Jim Onyemenam, Ms Katy Redfern, Ms Lara Reichle, Ms Julie Rolls, Ms Ashley Slanina-Davies, Dr David Sim, Mr Dean Stokes and Professor Olga Thomas.

In attendance: Ms Samantha Fanning, Dr Arne Hofmann (for Professor Stella Bruzzi), Ms Katja Lamping, Dr Jo Pearce (for Mr Piers Saunders) and Mr Rob Traynor (Secretary).

Apologies: Professor David Bogle, Professor Stella Bruzzi, Professor Mark Emberton, Dr Elinor Jones, Professor Norbert Pachler, Mr Piers Saunders and Professor Nigel Titchener-Hooker.

Part I: Preliminary Business

10. StRAFC Membership

10.1. The Committee was informed that Ms Lara Reichle, Head of Major Gifts, Office of the Vice-Provost (Advancement - OVPA) had replaced Ms Angharad Milenkovic as the OVPA representative on the Committee.

11. Minutes of the Last Meeting

11.1. Approved – the Minutes of the previous meeting at StRAFC 2-01 (19-20), held on 9 December 2019 [StRAFC Minutes 1-9, 09.12.2019].

12. Chair's Action

12A Approval of Amendments to the Academic Manual, Chapter 1 Student Recruitment and Admissions

- 12A.1 Noted – in-session amendments to the Academic Manual, Chapter 1 (Student Recruitment and Admissions) approved by Chair's action in March 2020 and presented in the paper at: StRAFC 2-02 (19-20).
- 12A.2 The amendments mainly related to English language test requirements including the addition of a new test, Duolingo, which had been recommended after consideration by the Admissions Requirement Panel (ARP) and were formally noted by the Committee.

12B Approval of Karta Initiative Scholarship (India)

- 12B.1 Noted – a new scholarship approved by Chair's action in January 2020, following a recommendation and prior consideration by the Scholarships and Student Funding Strategy Group (SSFSG). The paper was at: StRAFC 2-03 (19-20).
- 12B.2 The Karta Initiative is a UK based charity that sponsors Indian students from low-income backgrounds to study at university. It had been agreed that UCL offer one award per year, funded by a combination of repurposed central scholarship funds and fee partnership funded from the recruiting faculty. The scholarship was formally noted by the Committee.

Part II: Matters for Discussion

13. Admissions Update

- 13.1. Received – an overview of the current admissions cycle at StRAFC 2-03 (19-20) presented by the Director of Access and Admissions, who reported:
- a) The Covid 19 pandemic had an impact on student recruitment across the sector and whilst there was a great deal of uncertainty, there was no evidence that students did not wish to come to UCL in the autumn. However, events beyond UCL's control could affect the numbers that eventually enrol.
 - b) Over 59,000 undergraduates (UG) applications had been received and 5,000 (+7%) more offers made than last year, around 30,000 in total. This was in order to compensate for an expected fall in the conversion rate from offer to enrolment. Over 13,000 acceptances had been received so far, but with many from overseas students and some made before the UK lock-down was announced, it was uncertain how many would come to the UK in to enrol. However, there was no sign yet that the numbers of UG deferrals had increased following the UCL announcement of mainly on-line teaching for the first term. This continued to be carefully monitored.
 - c) The Department for Education (DfE) had announced caps on UG home student recruitment for UK institutions and UCL had been given a limit of 3599. UCL had been modelling for 5,000 home students. The DfE had stated that institutions could be fined if they went over the limit, though the guidance was less clear around what would happen in the event of the limit being surpassed. UG Programmes were now closed for application.

- d) Over 70,000 postgraduate taught (PGT), applications were received so far, an increase of 28% on the previous session. As for UG, The numbers of offers (24,000), had been increased to make up for the expected drop in conversions, with 7,500 more made than the last session. There had been a 50% increase in acceptances. Most programmes remained open and the standard deadline extended to the end of August to maximise recruitment and to ensure that UCL benefited from the Communication and Marketing (CAM) recruitment campaign targeting UK PGT students. There had been a large increase in Chinese applications, with over 30,000 received this year (discussed further in Item 14 below).
- e) There was a concern for both UG and PGT recruitment that as the scope to make additional offers were concentrated in particular popular subject areas, there was a risk of over-recruitment for some departments that could create resourcing issues.
- f) Departments were asked to consider PGT deferral requests as usual, though there were signs that these had increased since last year. This was being closely monitored as for UG and the position on deferrals could be reconsidered if the number of requests increased exponentially.

13.2. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- a) The DfE guidance and announcements on UG home student numbers and suggestion for “super clearing” were problematic in the uncertainty engendered as well as the risk that institutions would be heavily fined should they exceed the limits. It also wasn’t clear whether the DfE could force institutions to rescind offers if they overshot, which would leave them wide open for legal challenge from students not allowed to enrol. There was speculation that some institutions might choose to deliberately break the limits, weighing up any penalty against the income from the student fees. Universities UK (UUK) and other higher education groups were lobbying the government to clarify the position.
- b) It was asked whether the uncertainties around recruitment could lead to changes in the way that applications from widening participation groups would be considered, but noted that these were being handled in the same way.
- c) It was queried how postgraduate research (PGR) application figures were holding up and noted that they were relatively stable and not a cause for concern. The PGR data is considered in detail by the Research Degrees Committee (RDC).
- d) Concerns were expressed about the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes as the Institute of Education (IoE), which could be severely affected should the lock-down, or severe restrictions, continue into next session. This was highly complex and concerned teaching placements as well as how teaching would be conducted at the IoE itself. Discussions on how teacher training would work were being held with the DfE, but it may be necessary for some concessions to be made to enable ITE programmes to go ahead.

- e) A request was made for departments to access deferral request data. This was noted by the Director of Access and Admissions.

13.3. The Director of Access and Admissions reminded members that the PG admissions data was available on the [UCL Tableau site](#).

14. Proposed Changes to the Graduate Admissions Process

14.1. Received – the paper at StRAFC 2-05 (19-20) presented by the Registrar and the Director of Access and Admissions, who reported the following:

- a) Although there had been a small increase in staffing in the PG Admissions team, this had not kept pace with the exponential rise in applications, which had doubled since 2013 to 60,000 received last year. Over 70,000 applications were already received for this session. The Team was under severe pressure to keep up with this demand and there was a risk that slower application processing could mean that the Team was unable to deliver on the student number targets, the tuition fee income or support the diversification desired for the cohort. This could affect UCL's overall recruitment competitiveness.
- b) The PG Admissions team had made a number of changes to deal with this including greater use of automation where possible (e.g. new uses of Artificial Intelligence (AI) being considered to calculate Chinese transcript grades), reducing complexity in the system (e.g. reducing the number of application processing steps by half) and removing duplication and unnecessary double-checking from the process. In spite of these improvements, Admissions was struggling to keep pace with the increased PG application demand and it was becoming clearer that greater resourcing would be required.
- c) The following proposals were outlined to address these issues:
 - (i) Reduce remaining unnecessary complexity, such as simplifying selection templates and work with academic departments to remove them from the process.
 - (ii) Centralise the selection of remaining local decision making that does not involve portfolio or interview to free up academic staff time, remove delays and reduce the need for passing applications to and from departments.
 - (iii) Centralise admissions staff located in departments and faculties. Cubane data showed that for PGT admissions, 38% of the professional services resource was in departments and faculties. Whilst this would necessitate an increase in workload for the central team, it would offer opportunities for operational efficiencies and provide additional resource for the central team.
 - (iv) Further investment in UCLSelect and continued work with IT colleagues on introducing more technical enhancements and solutions, such as AI and automating bots. Staff time saved could be redirected to more complex processing.

- (v) Change the PGT admissions process to three application rounds per cycle with offer targets split across the three rounds and a closure period between rounds one and two. It was suggested that Round 1 should be from October to December, Round 2 from March to May and Round 3 running from June to the end of July for programmes still open. A gathered field approach would be used to ensure selection of best students in each round. This would help to ensure sufficient space in the cohort to select students from a variety of nationalities and give the PG Team more time to process applications between rounds and improve the service to applicants and departments.
- (vi) Increase English language requirements to address departmental concerns regarding the standard of some students' English language skills and deter weaker students from applying. It was suggested that the Admission Requirements Panel (ARP) consider what the new language requirements should be.
- (vii) Increase entry requirements for China at PGT level, particularly for students entering with 2+2 degrees (where the first two years are studied in China and the latter two years in UK institutions). There were evident discrepancies of performance on UCL programmes from these students graduating. The ARP could also consider the new Chinese entry requirements.

14.2. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- a) Whilst StRAFC did not have the authority to grant requests for greater resources in admissions processes, it was able to consider and endorse proposals, which could be relayed to senior levels making the decisions.
- b) There was general agreement with the ARP considering PGT Chinese entry requirements, as many students enrolled through the 2 + 2 route later struggled on their UCL programme. However, the Chair, who also chaired ARP, noted that the Panel had not been well attended and suggested that new members should be recruited to help refresh it, with StRAFC members welcome to join.
- c) There was some concerns that using application rounds and gathered fields might risk losing good applications to other institutions, particularly those who applied earlier in the round. It was queried what keep warm provision would be available to mitigate for this. It was noted that top class applicants would still be made early offers when using the gathered field approach. Clear communication on when applicants could expect the outcomes of their applications would also be utilised for the other applicants.
- d) The suggestions to centralise faculty and departmental staff with Admissions also raised some concerns. Some faculties, such as Laws, required staff to work on admissions in situ due to more complex requirements from accreditation bodies. There was also a concern that it would not be the right time to introduce such changes as many departmental staff were struggling to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic.

- e) There was broad agreement to re-look at English language requirements and it was suggested that elements of the existing tests, could also be raised to provide more nuanced requirements to suit different disciplines. It was agreed that ARP should be given the task of exploring this further.

14.3. Agreed: that StRAFC broadly endorse the proposals in StRAFC paper 2-05 (19-20) and supports the need for further resourcing for the PG Admissions Team. However, further consultation with faculties would be required for the proposals around centralising faculty and departmental admissions staff.

Action: Bella Malins and Wendy Appleby

14.4. Agreed: that the ARP consider Chinese entry and English language level requirements as proposed in StRAFC paper 2-05 (19-20). The ARP should also recruit for new members, with StRAFC members welcome to join.

Action: StRAFC members to note and Ms Sophia Hussain (ARP Secretary)

15. What if – Options to Expand UCL’s Undergraduate Programme Portfolio

15.1. Received – the paper at StRAFC 2-06 (19-20) introduced by Ms Collette Lux, Executive Director of CAM who noted the following:

- a) Work on the paper had started before the Covid 19 pandemic, partly considering demographic changes with an increase in eighteen year olds. However, the lock-down had brought the issues raised by the paper into sharper focus. The paper proposed re-balancing UCL’s student population towards UG students. This would make UCL less vulnerable to market fluctuations or extreme events such as pandemics as more of the student population would be registered for longer, i.e. three to four years for UG programmes against one year for PGT programmes.
- b) It was proposed that UG numbers could be increased by using three different approaches:
 - (i) Expanding intake on existing UCL UG programmes – increasing capacity for greater numbers on programmes with already high applicant levels. This would be for programmes with low cost space and facilities requirements such as Political Science, Management, Law, Statistical Science and Mathematics, though consideration would be needed to increasing staff and resources.
 - (ii) Developing new programmes to respond to demand as indicated by Oxbridge and Russell Group applicants – UCL might be able to attract high quality applicants away from these rival institutions by offering more programmes with similar or identical titles, either through offering programmes in the same high demand subjects or re-packaging existing programmes. This could include creating specific combinations not currently available at UCL but popular at its rivals, such as: Economics and Management; Philosophy and Modern Languages; Physics and Philosophy; History and English; Computer Science and Philosophy.

- (iii) Using A-Level analysis as an indicator of addressable market potential – ensuring that UCL’s programme offer will appeal to applicants from the most widely studied A levels. In 2018/19, these were Mathematics, Biology, Psychology and Chemistry, which accounted for 36% of all A-levels taken. Trends in the A level participation levels should also be considered, e.g. Government and Politics had the largest recent growth (by 14% between 2017-18 and 2018-19) and was now more popular than English Language, Law, French and Spanish.
- c) Should the approaches be considered useful by StRAFC, CAM would be able to help faculties consider further options and provide market insight. Focus group insight from Sixth Form advisers could also be provided (contact: c.lux@ucl.ac.uk).

15.2. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- a) It was broadly agreed that the timing of the paper was useful given the implications arising from the Covid 19 pandemic and that it could help to outline and re-consider recruitment strategy for the incoming Provost.
- b) Re-balancing the UCL student population towards UG study also appeared to be a sensible strategy. With the large PGT population, this meant that over half of current students were new every year at UCL, which made it more vulnerable to external circumstances such as the current pandemic or economic crises. However, this shouldn’t necessarily mean increased student numbers, as it would be part of wider discussions on changes to government research funding, leaving the EU and considering ways to reduce reliance on international students.
- c) Faculties would need to give consideration to different programme combinations or even introducing new subjects, though ostensibly less likely subjects popular in the sector, could be feasible, even with the current limits on capacity. For example Mechanical Engineering could consider whether aerospace engineering, not seen as a likely programme for UCL in the paper, might in fact be possible through expansion, utilising other space and through collaborations outside the department.
- d) It was also important whilst considering changes to the UG offer to bear in mind UCL’s own distinctive offer and to note that many students applied here as a first choice, attracted by UCL’s reputation and traditions in creating innovative research-led programmes of study. They considered it to be more than an equal to its Russell Group peers.

15.3. The Chair thanked the Executive Director of CAM for the thought-provoking paper and it was agreed that StRAFC would be kept informed of subsequent developments and discussions arising from it.

16. Programme Summaries linking to CMA Compliance

16.1. Ms Samantha Fanning, Head of Digital for CAM and ISD, gave a short presentation on programme summaries and Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) compliance and reported:

- a) CAM was working on a new editorial model to improve the information available to prospective students and was reviewing the information from the programme summaries, module catalogue and departmental sites. This also involved working with the Academic Model Project (AMP) to improve SITS, the UCL student records system and to enable it to link programme summary information to the UCL prospectus.
- b) The two key aims were to improve the programme pages in the prospectus and to ensure that SITS was the single source of truth for programme information and able to provide content for the prospectus through accurate programme summaries.
- c) An external audit of departmental pages for prospective students showed that 50% were in breach of CMA guidelines. Work to address this had been delayed by the Covid 19 pandemic. CAM colleagues were now offering training to departments to address the issues in the prospectus and the departmental pages. The Head of Digital for CAM and ISD was available to visit departments.

16.2. The following points were noted in the discussion:

- a) It was suggested that departments placed programme information on their websites in addition to the prospectus as the template for prospectus entries was too limited and they felt a need to provide this information elsewhere. It was noted that this process was now changing so that the information should be able to be included in the prospectus itself, reducing the need to use departmental webpages.
- b) Concerns were raised that departments did not have the capacity to review and fix these issues as work-loads were currently very high with moving their programmes on-line and dealing with other issues from the Covid 19 pandemic. It was suggested that the burden of the work to improve the prospectus should not fall on academic staff.
- c) It was noted that MarComms (CAM) would coordinate most of the work, particularly on SITS, which would not need academic staff involvement. However, there may be a need for liaison with the departments in order to ensure the departmental webpages complied with the CMA.

16.3. The Chair thanked Ms Fanning for the presentation.

17. Mitigation for Covid 19

- 17.1. Ms Katja Lamping, Director of Student Recruitment (CAM) reported on the work undertaken with prospective students to mitigate for the Covid 19 pandemic. A letter had been sent to all offer holders reassuring them that UCL would be providing its programmes next session and also asking whether they intended to still enrol.
- 17.2. The feedback received so far had been mostly positive, with most students indicating that they had not been put off by the pandemic. However, there were some concerns raised between different groups of offer holders. Some Chinese students had been confused by the decision of Cambridge University to deliver all of its provision on-line next year (for most programmes) and were asking if this applied to UCL. Concerns were also raised with global tensions and a perceived rise of xenophobia against China around the world, though they appeared to be less fearful in relation to the UK. EU students appeared to be more concerned about Brexit and the possibility of paying international fees next year than they were about the pandemic. Some indicated that they may enrol this year to avoid higher fees later (note: this was before the recent announcement by the government that EU students would be paying the higher fees from 2020-21).

Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information

18. Dates of Next meetings

- 18.1. The dates of the StRAFC meetings for 2020-21 will be circulated to members soon.

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