Following a presentation by the Vice-Chancellor, Pro Vice-Chancellor (International and Strategy) and the Finance Director regarding the development of the new University Vision and Strategy, members of Court were invited to attend a thematic discussion group. The purpose of each group was to allow members of Court to provide feedback on issues of key importance to the University.

**Group: Education and Students**

Members of Court made the following observations:

**How can we further encourage the pursuit of excellence in teaching?**

- The University could and should be proud of the existing student experience but needed to make improvements. The University should work with students and staff to understand their expectations and make those improvements accordingly.
- It would be important to continue to recruit excellent students, but we need to maintain that in an increasingly competitive market. In doing so, the University should be mindful of the needs of part-time students and students from the local community.
- The number of professorial teaching fellows was queried, and there was support for the use of appropriate rewards in respect of excellent teaching. Some felt that there was insufficient reward for good teaching in comparison to research. Students would like more one-to-one contact time with their tutors.
- Reflecting on teaching styles: more mentoring-style teaching might be helpful. There was scope to improve the teaching style of some tutors, for example through the use of more visual aids and by fully exploiting lecture-recording technology.
- Many comments had been heard over the years regarding the availability of seating and resources in the Arts and Social Sciences Library on Tyndall Avenue.
- A focus on sustainability might help to make Bristol ‘cooler’.
- It would be sensible to reflect on students’ expectations – for example, students from very well endowed public schools might be used to a low student/staff ratio (which the University may not be able to match).
- A truly international curriculum would take into account language skills – for example, ensuring that students studying text-based subjects had exposure to texts not in the English language.
- There was support for going ‘back to basics’ and considering the purpose of University education. It was suggested that students are educated for the benefit of society as a whole.

**How best can we best provide the skills and experience sought by students and employers?**

- It would be important to ascertain what knowledge and skills employers expected of modern graduates. In particular, there was scope to reinforce that (for many careers) a
University education was the beginning of an ongoing professional education – many professions require/off er chartered status.

- However, employability was not as straightforward as just asking employers what they want. Students’ detailed knowledge becomes obsolete quickly, and so the University should be careful to teach students to learn how to learn, and how to be flexible (as well as other ‘soft’ skills).
- It was suggested that what students expect/want is often different to what employers expect/need. For example, the University often teaches and assesses individuals, whereas employers expect people to work in teams.

**What changes might we need to make to develop a more student friendly and inclusive campus?**

- There was strong support for involving the University’s community of alumni in supporting students, for example through mentoring and in building links between students and the local community.
- This University needs to be more incorporated into the city, and needs to recruit more locally. It was noted that student volunteers within the city had the potential to transform local charities and communities, and the University should facilitate this.
- It would be important to strike a balance between a friendly campus, and a place for the difference of opinions where freedom of speech was respected.
- The city of Bristol is one of the most challenging cities in terms of the variety of experience for young people from different parts of the city. The University could play a lead, in partnership with others, to change this. It was suggested that the University’s Vision should include the moral purpose of serving the city of Bristol.

**Group: the future size and shape of the University**

Members of Court made the following observations:

**Should financial headroom be created so that we can invest in research and teaching?**

- There was discussion as to why/whether the University needed to expand. Our funding model does not compete with the likes of Harvard and Yale. It was suggested that the University would need a clear strategic rationale for expansion, and we would need to be wary of negative consequences.
- It was generally accepted that there was a need to create headroom. To create this, it would be necessary to consider what the University might grow, and conversely what it might contract/reduce. There was recognition that some disciplines cost a lot more to deliver than others. However, it was strongly felt that this should not be the only consideration - we are a University and should be broad-based with a ‘balanced scorecard’.
- It was queried whether (possible) future de-regulation of tuition fees meant that the University would be able to create its own headroom in the short to medium term.
- If student numbers did grow, it would be important to grow without diluting quality. In terms of growing the number of international students, the opportunity for growth was noted but so too were the risks of disproportionate or opportunistic growth.

**Is there potential to expand within our current campuses, and what are the options for expanding beyond them?**

- The importance of collaborating with regional universities in appropriate ways (for example in order to achieve economies of scale), without diluting our brand, was noted.
• ‘Expansion’ could/should be considered in a more creative way than just the number of students physically attending the University. Distance/virtual learning should also be considered.
• The University should be mindful of its role/presence in the city and wary of any negative consequences of expansion. A question was posed about ‘how big is too big?’. Bristol City Council would be a key partner in any physical expansion.
• The University should consider expansion and opportunities beyond just student numbers/education. The achievements of the Bristol SETsquared Centre, based at Temple Meads, was noted.

**Group: research and innovation**

Members of Court made the following observations:

**How do we sustain and grow our research performance in the climate of reduced research funding?**
• There was support for raising teaching excellence, but it was noted that the University must keep its research activities at the current high level, or it would drop behind its competitors.
• Reassurance was sought that the University’s nuclear activity would continue.
• There was strong support for the University’s research offering being more focused, noting that in other sectors it was acknowledged that an institution should focus on what it was best at. However, it was noted that this approach presented a number of challenges:
  o There was a risk that the University then became limited. It would need to be flexible/versatile enough to move to new areas as funding and other priorities emerged.
  o The question arose as to what would we disinvest in?
  o It would be important to survey the landscape to identify gaps and opportunities.
  o Multidisciplinary research was essential, and it was important to bear in mind that it was not just undertaken in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects.

**How do we build scale and strength in selected key research areas to be able to compete at the highest level?**
• The way and extent to which the University attracts business could be improved. Business. There were a number of suggestions as to how this might be achieved:
  o The University should build links with high-profile businesses in the City/region, as well as nationally and internationally.
  o The University could proactively engage with Chief Executives/Managing Directors of top local companies.
  o The University could provide more support for start-up companies, particularly in the local community.
  o Staff should take students with them when visiting potential partners – they were excellent ambassadors for the University.
  o The University should avoid seeing industry as ‘pots of cash’ – they had a wealth of other resources, such as staff with excellent skills and experience that might support students/staff. The University should seek to build longer-term relationships with companies and their staff.

**How can we support and strengthen interdisciplinary activity?**
• The University should seek to improve its links to key stakeholders in the city of Bristol, including the Hospitals, Science Park and Innovation Centre.
• The University should look to ‘the London model’ – and could work more closely with the universities of Bath and the West of England to pool resources, create national facilities, and work more across disciplines.
• The University should further explore how Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) could be used to enhance research and enterprise.

How can we grow and nurture our cohort of postgraduate research students?
• It was noted that the University’s students were part of its research brand: how does this feed into the strategy for promoting research and enterprise?
• The University should continually inform its students of what research is being conducted, and keep reinforcing the importance of its research.

How do we become a ‘destination of choice’ for early career researchers (ECRs)?
• Research excellence is about having excellent people – the University should pick good leaders if it was continue to attract young people.
• It was suggested that the University was ‘behind the curve’ in terms of its support for ECRs. This should be reviewed if the University was to become the destination of choice for bright ECRs.
• The University should support its academic staff. Some are at breaking point: balancing research, administration and teaching - and working very long hours