



## BOARD OF TRUSTEES VIRTUAL MEETING MINUTES

**24 March 2020 13.30**  
*Conference Call*

**Present on Call:** Kate Ashley, Hugh Brady, Andrew Carr, Jessica Cecil, Linda Fletcher, Moira Hamlin (Acting Chair), Nick Joicey, Jane Khawaja, Geraldine MacDonald, Nicky McCabe, Jack McAlinden, Jason Palmer, Andy Poolman, Andreas Raffel, Judith Squires

**In Attendance:** Hannah Quinn (Head of Governance), Lucinda Parr (Registrar & University Secretary), Robert Kerse (Chief Operating Officer)

### **1. Student Rent**

#### **RECEIVED BT/19-20/059 & BT/19-20/060**

- 1.1 On 23<sup>rd</sup> March Trustees were provided with paper BT/19-20/059 which reviewed the options available in relation to student rent release for their remaining tenancy. Further to government advice issued at 8pm on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, a further proposal (BT/19-20/060) was circulated on Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> March, which reflected the change in government position.
- 1.2 Although a quorate position could be reached by email, given the debate among Trustees, the importance of the decision, and the rapidly changing external factors, a further Board call was scheduled. The quorum necessary for the transaction of business is ten members of the Board, of which at least five must not be members of staff or students of the University.
- 1.3 The Chair summarised the current position and NOTED the challenge of finding a solution acceptable to all. The two main issues under debate were in relation to the level of rent release and the use of a hardship fund. A majority of Trustees had been able to support a 50% rent rebate, but others were in clear disagreement and favoured a hardship fund approach.
- 1.4 The Chief Operating Officer NOTED the still evolving picture in relation to the Russell Group, particularly that many institutions had made their announcements before the most recent travel advice and may need to revise them. Significantly, it was NOTED that, as of today, Unite Students have announced that they will allow students out of their accommodation for the remainder of the academic year without additional rent or charges. This is an unanticipated position for a commercial operator to have taken and would have a significant impact on the Board's decision. A decision in relation to whether Unite would also release the University from agreements was anticipated imminently.
- 1.5 Trustees DISCUSSED the significant potential reputational impacts of being out of line with decisions made by other providers and of charging for a service that students are unable to access. The Executive confirmed the desire to be in the middle of the pack in relation to Russell Group peers and the particular need to avoid significant reputational hit. It was NOTED that any reputational impact, particularly in

relation to admissions and recruitment, would lead to a financial impact and could also have an impact on NSS scores in two years' time.

- 1.6 Trustees DISCUSSED the option of providing additional hardship funding instead of rent reduction, which would have the advantage of sharing some of the financial burden with students who can afford it, while providing additional support on the basis of need. Trustees sought further information as to the likely cost and criteria of any hardship fund and were referred to estimated figures with paper BT/19-20/059. The Executive confirmed that any accommodation specific hardship fund would provide financial assistance to students if they incur additional cost from being away from Bristol and/or have lost part-time work – i.e. they suffer increased net costs due to COVID-19 that they cannot afford.
- 1.7 Trustees DISCUSSED the potential unfairness to students who are not living in University accommodation and will be subject to the decisions of private landlords. Some Trustees expressed a desire to expand the hardship fund to all students (not just those in University accommodation) and reconsider the criteria to support unexpected costs incurred by the pandemic. Trustees NOTED that student maintenance loan payments will continue without students continuing to be physically in attendance and that some students who are moving back to the family home may incur no additional costs or reduce their costs.
- 1.8 Trustees DISCUSSED the financial implications, particularly if rent income continues to be affected into the next academic year. The Chief Operating Officer NOTED that a decision to release some or all of the term 3 rent payments would have a significant impact on the University's financial position in this challenging environment and would increase its financial and funding risk profile.
- 1.9 Trustees DISCUSSED the need to be able to respond to the rapidly changing environment and gather information in relation to the plans of other providers, not just Russell Group. Trustees NOTED the importance of continued lobbying of government in support of tenants, students and Universities. The Executive confirmed that lobbying was ongoing via the Russell Group and Universities Minister, however, the challenge was the level of variation of accommodation provision within Bristol and across the Russell Group.
- 1.10 Trustees DISCUSSED the situation in relation to Unite Students, particularly the significant impact of this decision on potential reputational damage to others who do not follow suit. The Executive noted that approximately 50% of first year students are in private halls, and that the contract with Unite Students accounts for approximately two thirds of these. Student Trustees confirmed the potential for reputational impact and shared plans of a proposed rent strike by students which has been further encouraged by Unite's position. They felt that the proposed 50% rent rebate would be in line with students demands, even if they were not fully met. Trustees DISCUSSED the impact of only returning 50% of student rent when a private provider was returning 100%.
- 1.11 Trustees NOTED the pressure on the Executive from students to make and communicate a decision swiftly and expressed their support.

## **2.0 Decision**

- 2.1 The Chair summarised the discussion, noting the difficult balance between reputational and financial impact, and the change in position for some Trustees in relation to the announcement from Unite Students. She also confirmed the Trustee desire for simple, clear communication to students which highlights sources of financial and pastoral support.
- 2.2 The Board APPROVED to
  1. Support the return of 50 – 100% of student rents, on the conditions set out in the paper and,
  2. Empower the Executive to reach a decision on this issue, taking into account anticipated updates from Russell Group and private providers by the end of the day.