



## **Minutes of the seventieth meeting of the Board of Directors, held as a virtual meeting on 23 June 2020**

- Present:** Dame Suzi Leather (Chair)  
Adesewa Adebisi, William Callaway, Andrew Chandler, Professor Geoffrey Elliott, Wendy Finlay, Professor Alistair Fitt, Gillian Fleming, Martin Kirke, Andy Mack, David Malcolm, Jonathan Rees, Sophie Williams
- Apologies:** Dave Hall, Claire Sosienski Smith, Dr Diana Walford
- Secretary:** Sarah Liddell (Company Secretary)
- In Attendance:** Ben Elger (Chief Executive)  
Felicity Mitchell (Independent Adjudicator)  
Tracey Allen (Head of Adjudication Team (maternity cover))  
Gemma Slade (Provider Liaison Officer)

### **20/14 Chair's business**

The Chair first expressed her sympathy for those affected by the terror attack in Reading.

She noted that she has been impressed by how the OIA has responded to the Covid-19 situation, and the many achievements of the last quarter despite the challenging context.

### **20/15 Membership**

The Board welcomed Tracey Allen, Head of Adjudication Team (maternity cover), and Gemma Slade, Provider Liaison Officer as a staff observer to the meeting.

The Chair noted that it was Geoffrey Elliott's last meeting and thanked him for his conscientious contribution over many years and the valuable perspective he has brought to the Board.

## **20/16 Declarations of interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **20/17 Minutes of the last meeting**

The minutes of the sixty-ninth meeting of the Board held on 31 March 2020 were **approved**.

## **20/18 Matters arising from the minutes and actions log update**

The Board received a record of the matters arising from the minutes and actions log update. There were no further matters arising.

## **20/19 Report from the Independent Adjudicator and the Chief Executive**

The Board received the quarterly report from the Independent Adjudicator and the Chief Executive.

Our meeting with the Minister had been cordial and constructive. We are having follow-up meetings with senior civil servants.

We have had extensive stakeholder engagement at senior level, including with NUS and Vice-Chancellors.

In Wales the legislation that would extend our role into FE has been paused until after the next election. There is hope that it will still go ahead as it has cross-party support.

Board members shared their experiences of the ongoing impact of Covid-19 in the sector.

The Senior Leadership Team had reviewed the Operating Plan for 2020 to assess the impact on it of Covid-19. Although some aspects are being delivered differently or are delayed, most of it is on track.

More innovation is being encouraged in casework. We are trialing giving case decisions by telephone in suitable cases. We are looking at how we can support students to provide more focused comments on the information we get from providers.

We have increased our webinar provision, with minimal impact on case-handling resource, to meet high demand. It is very positive that this has included providers that had not participated before.

The next section of the Good Practice Framework on requests for additional consideration is on track. We have decided after careful consideration to go ahead with the consultation, as the content of this section is relevant to current circumstances, but to allow extra time for people to respond.

Student feedback remains broadly consistent. We are not looking to develop it significantly at this time as it is largely providing the information we need and given other demands on limited resource. Feedback from providers is not routinely collected but surveys are done periodically. It was **agreed** that collecting feedback from providers and exploring comparison with other ombuds schemes should not be pursued at this time.

The series of webinars planned for July on supporting disabled students is the culmination of our work looking at complaints from disabled students. We are now moving on to look at our casework data by ethnicity. This has become all the more important in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. We are looking at what we can learn to improve our own practice and to enable us to provide good practice guidance for the sector. This work will take some time.

Looking after our people has been a key priority during the pandemic. We have maintained a high level of communication and opportunities for people to interact. In mental health awareness week we ran a topic-based or social session every day. We are starting to look at making office space available to those who are finding it very difficult to work from home. We are very conscious of the challenges people are facing, and of the additional impact of BLM issues, as well as the terror attack in Reading. Our response to BLM is focusing on supporting staff, and looking again at our recruitment practices alongside progressing the work on our complaints data. Staff are keen to be involved and to see concrete actions, especially in terms of recruitment. It was **agreed** that relevant senior managers would meet with Adesewa Adebisi and Martin Kirke for further discussion.

Board members were positive about how we have supported staff. It was noted that there will be ongoing challenges in relation to induction and performance management with ongoing home working, but that a return to the office needs to be carefully risk assessed.

We have launched our triennial staff survey.

## **20/20 Risk update**

The Board received an update on organisational risks in the context of coronavirus from the Chief Executive. Thanks were noted to Gillian Fleming for her help in contributing to this outside of the normal risk management cycle.

## **20/21 KPIs**

The Board received a report on KPIs from the Chief Executive.

It is positive that we have been able to continue meeting the KPIs and increase closures despite the challenges.

The Board gave initial consideration to KPIs for 2021. A formal proposal will be brought to the Board in September.

## **20/22 Financial matters**

The Board received the Finance Report to April 2020 and 2020 re-forecast from the Chief Executive.

The re-forecast reflects changes in expenditure resulting from the coronavirus situation and so gives a more accurate starting point for 2021.

Further work will be done on financial planning including consideration by Finance Committee ahead of a formal proposal to the Board in September.

## **20/23 Report from the Company Secretary**

The Board received the quarterly report from the Company Secretary.

The Board **approved** the proposal for leaving gifts for Board members up to a maximum value of £50 to be paid for by the OIA.

## **20/24 Any other business**

There was no other business.

## **20/25 Reflections on the meeting**

**20/26 Dates of future meetings**

- Thursday 24 September 2020 at 10.30am
- Wednesday 9 December 2020 at 10.30am

Sarah Liddell  
Company Secretary

29 June 2020