Minutes — Meeting of the Senate

Date:	19 March 2025
Present:	The President & Vice-Chancellor in the Chair

Dr A Akram, Professor T Baldwin, Professor S Beck, Professor A Beckerman, Professor A Bingham, Professor B Birdi, Professor R Blakeley, Professor S Brown, Dr J Burr, Professor M Carre, Professor H Christensen, Dr C Codina, J Coley, Dr SJ Cooper-Knock, Professor L Cross, Professor K Dommett, J Ekogiawe, Professor S Fitzmaurice, Professor A Fleming, Professor J Flint, Professor R Freckleton, Professor G Gee, L Glover, Dr L Gray, Dr V Halliday, Professor R Hand, Professor S Hartley, Professor P Hatton, Dr F Henshaw, Professor S Hincks, T Hodgson, Professor J Hodson, Professor G Jewell, Professor V Kadirkamanathan, Dr I Kersbergen, Professor S A Khurram, Professor J Kirby, Professor R Kirkham, Professor R Lawthom, M J Lourido Moreno, Dr S Marsh, Professor M Marshall, Dr C Martin, Professor F Matthews, Professor M Mayfield, Professor F McLeay, Professor C Miller, Professor R Mokaya, Professor T Moore, Professor B Morgan, Professor N Morley, Professor D Mowbray, Dr S D North, Professor C Ó Brádaigh, Professor J Oakley, Dr R Orfitelli, Professor G Panoutsos, Dr L Preston, Professor S Renshaw, T Rocha Lawrence, Professor S Rushton, Professor M Strong, Dr N Stubbs, R Sykes, Professor M T Vincent, Dr N Walkinshaw, Professor L Wilson, Professor H Woolley.

Secretary:	D Swinn
In attendance:	E Allan, M Borland, S Callan, K Clements, E Smith, K Sullivan, S Taylor.
Apologies:	The Senate received apologies from 12 members.

Welcome

The President & Vice-Chancellor (P&VC) welcomed members to the meeting. Four new members had joined Senate since the last meeting. It was noted that following the departure of the previous University Secretary, David Swinn had been appointed as Interim University Secretary, until 31 July 2025.

1. Declaration of Conflicts of Interest
1.1 No conflicts were declared.

1.2 <u>Pre-Submitted Questions</u>
1.2.1 Three questions had been submitted in advance of the meeting, which were covered under the relevant items.

1.2.2 There were several matters arising to respond to from the previous meeting; time was allowed to provide updates at the end of the meeting.

2. President & Vice-Chancellor's Report to Senate

2.1 The President & Vice-Chancellor (P&VC) presented the report, which provided information on key current and forthcoming developments in the policy environment and against each of the themes in the University's Strategic Plan. The report was taken as read and attention was drawn to the following updates and developments since the written report was prepared:

2.1.1 <u>Regulator sets out strategy up to 2030 but sector urges alignment with government's plans for regulator expected in summer:</u> The Office for Students (OfS) had published a strategy for 2025-30 for consultation which it suggested "sets out a sharper purpose for the regulator". The University had worked to influence both the Universities UK and Russell Group responses to the consultation. The timing of the draft strategy had been met with challenge from the sector, with Universities UK urging the strategy to be an interim one. This was because fundamental changes to the regulator and its work were expected in the coming months, for example, when the Government set out its 'far-reaching' reform of higher education. This could include legislative changes to the regulator's role.

2.1.2 <u>Institutional leadership role: Research Practice Lead</u>: An invitation had recently been extended to all academic staff to apply for the role of Research Practice Lead. This was an institutional leadership role and was part of the University's commitment as founding members of the UK Reproducibility Network. It was highlighted that funding would be provided to the home school. This was an important role, which would provide support for cross-disciplinary interactions through engagement with school structures and new and continuing networks and roles such as the SDRI network, school clusters, interdisciplinary networks and University research centres; and contributing to policy and best practice guidance development, particularly as related to new developments nationally, such as REF, and institutionally, such as AI and CMI.

2.1.3 <u>Race Equality Charter: Bronze Award</u>: The University had received the Race Equality Charter (REC) Bronze Award from AdvanceHE. This recognised the efforts the University had made to identify race-related issues at the University and demonstrated the University's commitment to address them as outlined in its AdvanceHE-approved Action Plan. In response to a question about how the University planned to ensure the REC was recognised institutionally, it was noted that ultimately the REC should be part of daily embedded practice and work was ongoing to align this across the organisation down to school level.

2.1.4 A question led to a detailed discussion about the impact of the financial pressures on the University and concerns amongst some staff about the potential impact on teaching quality. During discussion, the following was noted:

    i. While it was recognised that the reduction in overseas students, particularly Chinese students, was a pressure across the sector, colleagues sought assurance that the University had undertaken a critical reflection of the internal decisions that had led to its reliance on this market, so it did not find itself in a similar position in the future.

    ii. This was a complex issue. It was highlighted that there was a time when the Chinese student recruitment market was relatively stable and it had made strategic sense to maximise the resulting opportunities. This had become (and remained) a structural part of the UK HE Model and there was no alternative viable revenue source to

replace such overseas tuition fee income at the requisite scale. Management had recognised the inherent risks relating to the dependency on the Chinese student market and had made a decision to use that income to overcome the funding gap in other areas and build cash reserves to help withstand future pressures, whilst investing in diversifying the international student population and reducing reliance on Chinese students. That work had been ongoing for around 6 years. During that time the University had worked hard to diversify its international student population, and grow its Home UG population at quality, and the cash reserves the University had built up over that time had given the University headroom and time to respond in the best way possible.

    iii.   Concern was raised that some of the financial decisions being taken to address this challenge, for example in relation to the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC), could lead to language barriers which could impact on the ability of colleagues to deliver a high quality teaching experience for foreign language and home students. There was also a concern that changes to assessment methods (moving to exams rather than traditional assessments) were impacting on the performance of foreign language students, who had typically performed well on assessments. It was recognised that, particularly at PGT level, the qualifications, educational experiences, and attainment levels of students entering a programme could vary widely. This made programme design even more crucial, with structured programmes that offered clear opportunities to recap and progress through the year, moving from initial modules in the first semester to more independent learning later in the year.

2.1.5   A question was raised about whether the University had considered lowering international student fees as a means to increase recruitment and grow market share, a step taken by some other universities. It was noted that all fees were reviewed annually, including international student fees. Fee level was seen as a key indicator of quality in this market and it was not the only driver in international recruitment. While fee reductions may be the appropriate approach for some organisations, at this stage the University did not plan to take this approach.

2.1.6   During discussion, some concerns were raised about English language speaking support for international students and members from the Students' Union (SU) asked for assurance that the University planned to continue this support, noting that some international students had expressed concern about not feeling supported to succeed. It was highlighted that the University continued to invest in English language teaching and continually reflected on the quality of teaching it provided, noting that the ELTC had recently secured re-accreditation by the British Council so it could be assured of high standards. Since the Covid pandemic, there had been a decline in enrolment on pre-sessional English programmes in the ELTC, and the previous high demand had not returned, and was highly unlikely to return in the future. The University had recently reviewed the ELTC offer, which was now a more focussed service.

2.1.7   In response to a follow-up question from the SU about additional English support for home students, it was noted that the University regularly reviewed staffing levels for support with English and Maths and proposals had recently been approved to provide appropriate levels of this support.

3.   Matters Requiring Approval

3.1   Senate received and noted a summary of the matters for which Senate's formal approval was sought.

4.   Education Initiatives

4.1   Senate received and noted a report from the Senate Education Committee on Education Initiatives, which invited Senate to adopt the Framework for Undergraduate Programme Design. Alongside the report, Senate received a presentation on Portfolio Review, Low Recruiting Programmes and Programme Simplification.

4.2   Senate noted that the report included the Consultation Outcomes from the Programme Simplification Consultation and an update from an extra meeting of the Senate Education Committee (SEC), convened to review those outcomes. The report included feedback from SEC members, including from the Faculty Directors of Education (FDEs) on common themes from their areas and feedback from the SU. Ultimately, the SEC had agreed to recommend the proposal to adopt the Framework for Undergraduate Programme Design to Senate.

4.3   The presentation, which was given in detail and was shared after the meeting, covered the following key areas: enabling a dynamic and agile portfolio; student experience at Sheffield; key challenges around programme design and modules; low recruiting programmes; programme simplification; programme simplification consultation principles, process and feedback; next steps.

4.4   The following was highlighted:

    i.   The Sector was facing significant challenges and the University needed a dynamic and agile portfolio of programmes which kept pace with advances in disciplinary areas, remained competitive in an ever-changing student market, and was financially sustainable.

    ii.   The key common experience for all students was that they were on a programme of study and programme design could work as a barrier or as an enabler to delivery of the wider student experience.

    iii.   It was important for the University to direct its energies and funds at the areas that most impacted students and it was felt that greater harmonisation, consistency of practice, and coherence would help the University to meet the changing needs of students as effectively and sustainably as possible.

    iv.   The University had been working to address this for some time through various measures, including by looking at low recruiting programmes. Recognising that every "recruit to" programme incurred significant costs, including applicant-facing materials, programme information for current students, programme regulations, and the HESA data return, UEB had agreed a new Minimum Viable Cohort. Details of the impact of this were shared as part of the presentation and again later in the meeting in response to a pre-submitted question (see minute 8.4.1).

    v.   The proposal for Senate at this meeting was to add Programme Simplification and the implementation of a new Framework for Undergraduate Programme Design to this work.

    vi.   It was noted that an analysis of programmes and modules was discussed at UEB in June 2024. In the changing and challenging sector, UEB agreed that the University's

academic portfolio was not sustainable. Senate was notified of this in December 2024 and the consultation took place in early 2025.

    vii.   The consultation had highlighted some concern over timescales and the pace of implementation, which were reflected in the report from the SEC, but, overall, there had been broad support for the proposed changes and their aims, and a recognition of opportunities to improve the student experience and workload.

4.5.1   A pre-submitted question highlighted concerns about the accuracy of information that Senate had received on the Programme Simplification proposals. In particular, it was felt that the summary of feedback from the consultation, which indicated broadly positive support for the proposals and the direction of travel, was inaccurate. This was based on feedback the author had received having discussed the matter with staff in some Schools, including with those in education leadership roles. It was noted that this feedback indicated that while some had found ways to make aspects of the proposals work, there was concern that risks remained, including in terms of pedagogy, recruitment and workloads.

4.5.2   In response, it was highlighted that the purpose of the consultation had been to seek input from education leaders regarding the timelines, processes and potential barriers to implementation of Programme Simplification through the use of a clear Framework for Undergraduate Programme Design. School Directors of Education (SDEs) had been in dialogue with their School Education Committees (SECs) and their FDEs to provide feedback on barriers and challenges to implementing the undergraduate programme framework and to raise points for clarification. This had taken place through formal committee meetings and had been supplemented by additional discussion between SDEs and FDEs. FDEs had brought together this feedback and discussed this collectively to identify common themes and to determine appropriate adjustments to the proposed Framework. Over the course of the consultation, and as common themes and areas under consideration had been shared with SDEs, feedback from senior leaders in schools and faculties had become increasingly positive as acceptance had grown that there was a need to provide a simpler programme structure and to act quickly to protect the financial sustainability of the University's education provision. As with any consultation there had been a range of views expressed within schools but the report and recommendations from SEC represented its collective view at the end of that process, taking into account and responding to the issues raised.

4.5.3   It was noted that the purpose of the consultation was not to invite comments on the need for change or the rationale for delivering a more consistent and efficient approach to designing programmes. That had already been established by UEB, noting that the current academic portfolio was no longer sustainable in the context of financial pressures, the recent and significant decline in international student numbers and wider challenges facing the sector.

4.6.1   A pre-submitted question drew attention to a sense that some staff responsible for implementing the changes did not feel consulted and/or that decisions had already been made/decision making had become more remote. It was noted that the implementation would largely be implemented by teaching and professional services staff not included in the consultation process, which had been conducted over a relatively short timeframe, and it was felt that, given the impact of the proposals, concerns raised by some staff and the

potential risks, a longer and broader consultation process would have been more appropriate.

4.6.2 It was noted that the consultation timeframe was determined by pressing external pressures, notably financial constraints, a significant reduction in international student numbers, and broader sector challenges. Maintaining the current academic portfolio was no longer viable and this required immediate adjustments to safeguard a high-quality, competitive, and financially sustainable student experience. The consultation process used established education governance structures and processes and while a longer consultation might have yielded more comments, the feedback swiftly identified common themes, suggesting that additional time would not have fundamentally changed the core findings. It was also recognised that many School Directors of Education had extended engagement beyond formal committees. Furthermore, extending the consultation would have risked delaying essential strategic adjustments in time for 2025/26, potentially placing the University at a disadvantage compared to institutions already enacting similar changes. Ultimately, a timely implementation would enable the University to offer a more streamlined, compelling, and student-focused academic experience to prospective students.

4.7 There was a detailed discussion about the need for change, the proposals, the timeline for implementation and the consultation process, during which several concerns were raised. The following was noted:

    i.   Three FDEs (who chaired the respective Faculty Education Committees) spoke directly to the concerns raised and assured Senate that, in their experience, while there had been a diversity of views, broadly colleagues had been supportive of the drivers for change and the proposals and that the concerns raised were detailed in the report presented to Senate.

    ii.   The SU raised concern that the proposals could result in the loss of important and/or unique modules, with specific concern being raised about those closely aligned with the University's values, for example in relation to principles of decolonisation, sustainability, and EDI. Colleagues recognised these concerns but highlighted that the Programme Simplification proposals related to the building blocks of the curriculum, not module content.

    iii.   Management recognised the need to reassure and demonstrate to students that it would retain valuable and important content. The University was committed to the One University pillar of its Vision and Strategy, which clearly set out the University's commitment to diversity and inclusion & sustainability. The programme simplification implementation process was an opportunity to ensure that those principles, and this type of progressive content, was threaded throughout entire programmes, particularly core modules, rather than within standalone/optional modules. Other members contributed to confirm that this approach had already been taken in some schools.

    iv.   Several members raised strong concern that the timeframe for implementation was rushed and introduced risk.

    v.   Others acknowledged that the timeframe was challenging but felt it could be achieved and welcomed the proposals as an opportunity to address long term

structural challenges and issues that students themselves had raised in the past.

vi. Several other members contributed positive feedback on the need for change and/or the consultation process and also highlighted that the proposals provided opportunities to address the concerns raised and reframe the curriculum to deliver on priorities that would enhance the student experience, while retaining valuable and valued content.

vii. One member challenged the link between reducing the number of core and optional modules and ensuring a consistent experience for students.

viii. One member expressed a strong belief, based on feedback they had received from staff personally, and noting feedback from students that a key selling point of the University was the variety of modules, that the proposals were not widely supported. While the member did not disagree with Programme Simplification in principle, they felt there was much more work to do and advised Senate against adopting the Framework for Undergraduate Programme Design.

ix. Other members echoed concern about the reach of the consultation process and expressed the view that more staff with appropriate expertise should have been included in the consultation

x. Members highlighted other key challenges the proposals sought to address including the significant university resource needed to support the current level of complexity and challenges around timetabling.

4.8 Recognising the time already taken to debate the matter, the diversity and strength of views expressed and that, as a collegial body, Senate should proceed by consensus wherever possible, the Chair proposed that Senate take a vote. It was noted that one member objected to this on the basis that Senate had not exhausted all possible approaches to reaching a consensus; others highlighted the risk of delaying the proposals.

4.9 In the event, the Chair decided that it was appropriate to move the proposals to a vote and a vote was undertaken:

i. 69 members of Senate attended the meeting and were invited to vote. This included the Chair, who opted out of the voting process and waived their right to a casting vote, so 68 votes were cast out of 69 eligible voters. The vote was agreed and undertaken as follows:

ii. Senate agreed to vote on the following motion: *Does Senate agree to adopt the Framework for Undergraduate Programme Design? (Members could answer 'Yes', 'No' or 'Abstain')*

iii. The votes were carried out anonymously during the meeting using OpaVote and only Senate members in attendance at the meeting were invited to vote. 68 votes were cast.

iv. The Result was: 50 voted Yes; 16 voted No; and 2 abstained.

v. The result and the feedback from the meeting would be shared with Council.

5. Semester Dates

5.1 Senate received and noted a report from the Senate Semester Dates Task and Finish Group and approved the following recommendations:

a)   To recommend to Council for approval the semester dates covering 2028/2029 through to 2031/2032.

b)   Recognising the work undertaken by this group and by the previous Task and Finish Group, agree that the principles be published and that in future the proposed dates be subject to a light touch review by the Senate Education Committee, rather than convening a Task and Finish Group to review this work.

REPORTS FROM STATUTORY BODIES

6.   Report on the Proceedings of the Council
(Meeting held on 28 November 2024)

6.1   Senate received and noted the Report on the Proceedings of the Council.

REPORTS FROM COMMITTEES OF THE SENATE

7.   Report of the Senate Academic Assurance Committee
(Meeting held on 4 February 2025)

7.1   Senate received and noted the Report of the Senate Academic Assurance Committee (SAAC), noting that there were specific matters requiring approval.

8.   Report of the Senate Education Committee
(Meeting held on 23 January 2025)

8.1   Senate received the Senate Education Committee (SEC) report, noting that there were specific matters requiring approval. The following was highlighted:

8.2   <u>Use of Special Regulations</u> - it was noted that the report included an overview of Special Regulations Cases, 2023-24; this included an analysis by faculty and by the categories in which special regulations had been used compared to the previous 9 years.

8.3   <u>Revised Policy on Partnership Provision</u> - Further to having made an in principle decision on this matter, Senate considered and approved the revised Policy on Partnership Provision.

8.4   <u>New and Significantly Amended Programmes</u> – Senate considered the new, significantly amended, and closed programmes and title changes approved by Faculties between 31 October 2024 and 16 January 2025 and the new, significantly amended, and closed programmes and title changes approved by Faculties between 17 January and 21 February 2025 under Chair's Action. Programmes where recruitment has been suspended were reported for information.

8.4.1   A pre-submitted question raised concern about the level of programme closures and suspensions and the potential impact this would have on recruitment at a time of financial stress for the institution. The question asked for quantitative data on the projected impact of the closures on Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) recruitment and the extent to which this was expected to be offset by savings elsewhere. A detailed update was provided, including the numbers of students on UG and PGT programmes identified as low

recruiting. The impact of programme suspensions for this recruitment cycle had been minimal with the majority of these applicants (75% of UG and 95% of PGT) retained and now holding offers for similar programmes ahead of September 2025 entry. In terms of how much money this had saved, this was difficult to answer at this stage but it was management's position that reducing complexity and addressing areas of very low recruitment would reduce costs across a wide variety of administrative activities to a far greater extent than the relatively small amount of foregone tuition fee income that may result.

*[**Post meeting note:** Following the meeting, details of the numbers of students on those programmes, as reported at the meeting, was shared with members by email]*

8.4.2   During discussion about Senate approval not being required for programmes where recruitment had been suspended, some concern was raised that this was an example of Senate's powers being diluted. It was clarified that the Senate did not have a specific power to suspend programmes because this was a management activity that reflected a decision to recruit zero students in a given year whilst retaining the programme in the University Regulations and this had always been the case. It was highlighted that following discussion with the faculties and schools about programmes identified as having very low recruitment, decisions had been taken to suspend recruitment to a number of these programmes. As an example, it was reported that, in Arts and Humanities, the 18 suspended Dual Degree programmes involving subjects from the Faculty, had only 6 accepted offers between them. Management had considered these cases very carefully and was working hard to retain programmes with important content, develop more attractive offers and redirect students that had accepted offers to other programmes.

8.4.3   Senate approved the new, significantly amended, and closed programmes and title changes (as set out in minute 8.4).

9.   Report of the Senate Research and Innovation Committee
(Meeting held on 6 February 2025)
9.1   Senate received and noted the Report of the Senate Research and Innovation Committee (SRIC).

10.   Report of the Senate University Research Ethics Committee
(Meeting held on 5 February 2025)
10.1   Senate received and noted the Report of the Senate University Research Ethics Committee (SUREC).

OTHER MATTERS

11.   Major Research Grants and Contracts
11.1   A report listing major research grants and contracts awarded since the last meeting of the Senate was received and noted.

12.   Minutes of the Previous Meeting
(Meeting held on 11 December 2024)
12.1   The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2024 were approved.

13. Matters Arising on the Minutes

13.1 Updates were provided on the matters arising on the minutes that were due and were not covered elsewhere on the agenda. The following updates were shared:

13.1.1 Minute 8.5 - Student Protection Plan - In December 2024, when Senate approved the updated Student Protection Plan, a query was raised about the wording of section 3.4.2. It was noted that, on consideration, the wording of the SPP was not changed, because the wording reflected an institutional assessment in a sector context and there was nothing material to suggest that the risk level should be increased. The SPP had been shared with the OfS and published on the University website.

13.1.2 Minute 15.1.1 e - Proposed changes to the membership of Senate - In response to a question about any potential impact on the terms of appointment of current Senate members, it was highlighted that the University Secretary had reported at the December meeting that Council had approved the implementation of Option 2B for Senate membership, and all of the paperwork was shared with Senate after that meeting. This was the option whereby the number of elected members from faculties would equal the number of Heads of School. The change would take effect from the start of 2025/26, but Heads of School not already members of Senate would be added to the membership immediately and that was done ahead of the March meeting.

There were two ways to make these changes, by asking all elected members to re-apply or by existing elected members seeing out their current terms, both of which were considered in the Equality Impact Assessments. The University Secretary's Office had looked into this on the basis of the relative sizes of the constituencies and vacancies arising for 2025/26 and had proposed that all elected members whose terms of appointment continued to 2026 and 2027 could continue to see out their existing term on Senate. Elections were still needed in all five faculties and the Professional category, a position which had not arisen the first year in which the constituencies were introduced. Only AMG did not require an election this year. Therefore, taking the approach to allow all existing elected members to see out their terms avoided all elected members' periods of appointment finishing at the same time, or having to apply a workaround to stagger appointments. It also provided continuity in Senate's membership, and was fair to members currently in their first or second year of appointment who would otherwise have to stand for re-election. Council had endorsed this approach when it was reported to their previous meeting. The Governance Team was working up the relevant documentation and communications and hoped to publish the call for nominations to stand for election in early April.