

UCEN Manchester Board

Minutes of the meeting held on 6th December 2024 at Openshaw Campus.

Present: Rachel Curry (Principal), Philip Johnson, Malcolm Todd (Chair), John Thornhill, Alison Blackburn, Cheryl Dunn

Apologies: Ann Limb, Adam Hewitt (Group Quality Director), Ellen Letton

In Attendance: Mark Harris (Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean), Wendy Pennington (Director of Student Experience and Engagement), Debbie Sanderson (Vice Principal Resources, Planning and Performance), Michael Walsh (Deputy Principal and Dean), Janet Faulkner (Director of Academic Standards), Orla Wood (Divisional Finance Director), Lorna Lloyd-Williams (Company Secretary and General Counsel), Donna Reid (Governance Officer), Sarah-Jane Gilmore (Deputy Company Secretary), Edward Lack (LTE Group Director Quality and Standards)

Prior to the start of the meeting the CEO thanked Malcolm Todd, Chair, for his work with UCEN Manchester/LTE Group as he stood down from his role. The CEO noted the Chair's help and challenge had been very helpful and he wished him well for the future. The Chair advised he was glad to have played a part in the work that had been delivered and cited LTE Group values/commitment to learners.

01/25	<p>Apologies</p> <p>The Company Secretary confirmed that apologies were received from Ann Limb, Adam Hewitt & Ellen Letton. Ellen was the new Student Governor who will attend Group Board on 17-Dec-24. She had been appointed further to the Student Governor process and via a written resolution to Group Board.</p>
02/25	<p>Declarations of interest</p> <p>In relation to current validating bodies, Malcolm Todd (Chair), declared that he is a Non-Executive Director on the Sheffield Hallam University Board.</p>
03/25	<p>Minutes of the meeting of the UCEN Manchester Board held on 26-June-2024</p> <p>The minutes of the meeting of the UCEN Manchester Board held on 26th June 2024 were received and approved as an accurate record to be signed by the Chair in hard copy.</p>
04/25	<p>Matters Arising</p> <p>The only outstanding action related to the Board request for an update on research and scholarship, this would be reported to the Board meeting in June 2025.</p>
05/25	<p>Principal's Overview</p> <p>The Principal noted that her overview of the meeting set out the areas to be covered by reports. She highlighted the letter to the HE sector from the Secretary of State for Education in November which outlined priorities for the reform needed of the sector and advised the Board that UCEN Manchester was in a strong place to respond to these areas.</p> <p>Under AOB the increase in Student Fees would be covered.</p>

06/25

Findings and conclusions emerging from the mid-point review research

The Deputy Principal and Dean noted that current UCEN Manchester strategy had been launched as COVID started and that this had changed the landscape. The Leadership team had been asked to commission a review of the position in the HE landscape; the slides in the pack showed the emerging themes. It was originally intended that the final report covering each theme, along with recommendations, would be presented to the UCEN Manchester Divisional Board on 6 December 2024. Due to the prioritisation of the application for DAPs, it was decided that the research findings would be considered at the December 2024 Board, with a roadmap to recommendations being made to the LTE Group Strategy session in May 2025 subsequently being developed.

The Deputy Principal and Dean explained therefore that the paper aimed to capture findings and emerging themes. External consultants Data HE had been engaged to analyse UCAS data and project a forward national picture. Applicants and current students (both within UCEN Manchester and level 3 students within The Manchester College) had been surveyed to enrich the data. He added that infrastructure would be reviewed following the completion of the DAPs process.

Looking at the student context the Deputy Principal and Dean noted that UCEN Manchester had two distinct Faculties with very different cohorts:

- Faculty of Creative Arts and Media Industries - Students tend to be college leavers from across the UK, apply through UCAS and stay in student accommodation.
- Faculty of Higher Technical and Professional Industries - Students tend to be adults from Greater Manchester and apply directly. Almost 80% are from the most deprived wards and 79% adult (20+) at start of programme

To obtain data relating to how survey respondents compared UCEN Manchester to their top other provider 5 groups of learners were surveyed to ascertain the factors considered. For all surveyed the 5 key factors when making decisions were:

- Content of the course modules
- Course facilities
- Employability/links with Industry
- Graduate employment rates
- Reputation of course

52% rated UCEN Manchester higher than other providers considered due to the content of courses. The absence of accommodation was a negative factor for a number of applicants. A significant factor for decliners was unconditional offers provided to them by other universities/colleges - 24% of students who declined a UCEN Manchester offer had received an unconditional offer from their first choice. On the perception of UCEN Manchester being linked to TMC the outcomes showed some found this positive; however some were put off by this and a number of those who declined a place cited this as a reason in their feedback.

Data HE reported that Higher Education was becoming a younger market and had seen an increase in 18 year olds enrolling alongside a decline in adults.

The data related to the 'UCEN Manchester Offer' set out the relationship between UCEN Manchester programmes and market share. It noted a national demand for increased courses related to Cyber Security amongst 18 yr olds.

Looking at capacity, the Arden School was predicted to stay in a steady state. There would be a need to consider where growth could be achieved and absorbed within the current capacity.

A deep dive into competitors validated the Data HE and local knowledge of declining areas. Norwich University of the Arts and Leeds Arts University were highlighted by Data HE as similar providers to UCEN Manchester who had delivered growth by focusing on a wider offer to 18 yr olds and could be utilised to inform future planning.

Data HE advised that lower tariff providers reliant on domestic students had been hardest hit by tuition fee value erosion: the total real terms cohort fee value dropped from over £7bn in 2015 to under £4bn in 2024.

Turning to the Policy Landscape, uncertainties were highlighted as:

- The potential for Ofsted to be given responsibility for overseeing HTQs, rather than the Office for Students
- Uncertainty over the future of the Office for Students.
- The Lifelong Learning Entitlement had been delayed
- The Government had announced plans to move some level 7 apprenticeships outside the scope of levy
- No capital or recurrent funding had been announced for HE in the Autumn Budget for 2025-26

Additionally, the recent OfS Report on the Financial Stability of the HE Sector illustrated the challenges in recruitment.

Emerging themes noted included the decline in take up for Health and Social Care; however this was an LSIP requirement in Greater Manchester. It was also noted that improving perceptions of UCEN Manchester in relation to the Top 5 Key Factors amongst applicants, particularly those from TMC and those applying to CAM, could have a significant impact on enrolments. The data demonstrated that the location (Manchester) was the second highest factor for selection by learners.

Through the Customer Choice research outcomes there was a view that UCEN Manchester “feels more like a college than a university” which suggested the question of ‘what UCEN Manchester is’ may need to be reviewed.

Policy Landscape research outcomes cautioned that higher education reform may be wider ranging than initially expected; however this would not be known until summer 2025 when the Government would set out its plan for higher education reform.

A member noted their surprise that unconditional offers were still common place with the higher education sector and queried if these were offered by UCEN Manchester and which other providers utilised them. The Deputy Principal and Dean explained analysis showed these were widespread, with a number of providers offering them to TMC students. For UCEN Manchester this had been discussed in Board previously and a small number of unconditional offers were made where appropriate, generally in relation to adults applicants with relevant experience etc.; however UCEN Manchester have never offered the conditional/unconditional approach.

A member noted that perception of the quality of the course and reputation in the eyes of tutors were important, alongside wrap around support. The member queried what the feedback on Graduate Employment Rates related to; the Deputy Principal and Dean suggested this was probably based on perception and could be improved by the links to industry being made clearer alongside the numbers of learners who go onto gain employment.

A member queried the findings on the adult market which had been described as 'will not grow'; the Deputy Principal and Dean explained this was feedback from Data HE based on their analysis of UCAS applications only, and the fuller summary could be shared with Board. He added that the national picture for adults is one of reduced demand since COVID. The member noted that the higher or degree apprenticeship market was burgeoning. The Deputy Principal and Dean advised that discussions were underway with Total People around higher/degree apprenticeships and this model would be explored as part of the strategy.

The Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean advised there is a large adult population that needed upskilling/reskilling; evidence suggested that the modular approach upskilling was the modular approach and reskilling the apprenticeship angle. There was a need for Health and Social Care but the take up for this area was low.

A member queried why the data was not suggesting the optimisation of numbers at the Arden linked to potential growth in the college leaver. The Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean noted the figures represented Data HE best predictions if no action was taken. Responding to this research was an extensive undertaking but agreed areas could be focused on. Data HE felt there was scope to grow provision associated with The Arden and not just through the theatrical provision.

A member asked whether additional space could be required. The Deputy Principal and Dean advised that the Arden School in its current location was at capacity. However, if, for example, a degree in creative writing was introduced it would need a classroom rather than studio space. Through the analysis undertaken it was felt by the Leadership team that UCEN Manchester had been attempting to cover many areas and required greater clarity – the outcome of this could be a structural shift into two themes 'college-leavers' and local adults. The Principal agreed there were questions about the location of UCEN Manchester provision, and advised that the team were challenging themselves to see how the positive reputation and influence of the Arden could be replicated across other disciplines. That would be a clear strand in the strategic planning.

The CEO noted there were no issues with demand or capability and no deficit; the aim was optimisation of current provision to encourage more learners to attend. He felt that the core of the operation should be clarity of what UCEN Manchester wanted to be known for and on this the offer could be built. That would enable better understanding of how delivery could be enabled.

A member advised that providers can be multidisciplinary or specialist; the member had experience of another provider who was renowned for specialist subject areas and the member felt the LTE Group was also in that space with the Arden being well known and respected. The Director of Academic Standards queried if consideration should be given to promoting the identity of the Schools in place of the UCEN Manchester brand.

A member queried if this was aimed at the student market or at employer requirements; the Director of Academic Standards advised it is imperative to have employers on board to ensure the value is there.

The Chair noted from his experience that the quality of open days is crucial and that the accommodation point needed to be considered as this was critical for the demographic.

The Principal advised the Leadership Team would look to optimise current operation and potentially remove anything not required due to low demand; and work would continue to agree how to apply

	<p>the learning from the research to maximise the current offer and define UCEN Manchester clearly. A member asked that this include understanding what employers are looking for as the key thrust of the LTE Group was employability.</p>
<p>07/25</p>	<p>DAPs Application Update</p> <p>The Director of Academic Standards explained that the Manager of the OfS assessment team had stated that the draft report would be received by 11th December 2024. This draft report would provide an indication of the recommendation the assessors were making to the Quality Assessment Committee (QAC). If the report is not ready for the January QAC it will go to the March QAC. The QAC would then make a recommendation to the OfS, who ultimately would make the final decision on DAPs applications, and the outcome was expected approximately 10 weeks after the QAC.</p> <p>The Deputy Principal and Dean noted that UCEN Manchester had been considering submitting a DAPs application for some time, with progress paused due to COVID, with the application finally submitted in February 2023. The positive relationships with current validation partners had been maintained throughout. The CEO felt that DAP was a key strategic capability to be achieved by the Group which demonstrated maturity as a provider.</p> <p>A member noted there would be a need to recreate in house any service currently provided externally by degree awarding bodies; the Deputy Principal and Dean concurred and added the relationships would be maintained to provide for the potential for awarding Masters Degrees which could not be awarded through DAPs.</p>
<p>Ed Lack Joined the meeting</p>	
<p>08/25</p>	<p>Quality & Standards Update including SED/QEP progress report and learner outcomes</p> <p>This report shared with Governors an overview of HE performance data at the end of the 2023/24 academic year alongside the Higher Education Self Evaluation Document (SED) for 2023/24 and the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for 2024/25. The SED document had been refined following validation by the Group Quality Team.</p> <p>The student outcomes had informed the development of School-level self-evaluation documents (SEDs), and the overarching UCEN Manchester SED as well as the validation processes applied to those SEDs. Where areas for improvement were identified and included within the UCEN Manchester quality enhancement plan (QEP) or departmental QEPs, target setting was based on current performance as reported.</p> <p>A member felt there was a narrow gap for students declaring a disability and asked what had been done to make this less significant; the Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean advised a great deal of work goes into ensuring support was in place early.</p> <p>The Director of Student Experience and Engagement explained that Personal Learning Plans have enhanced engagement with the curriculum, underpinned by extensive staff training. There was also a Disability Officer in place. A member felt the extent of support was to be commended.</p> <p>A member queried discussion about progression data; the Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean advised a better measure was required to set this out. The current data did not flag any concerns.</p>

The SED/QEP documentation provided the Board with an overview of the UCEN Manchester’s business unit SED (23-24) and QEP (24-25). This document had been built following the validation of the UCEN Manchester Curriculum School and Directorate SEDs and QEPs. A ‘bottom-up’ approach to self-evaluation in UCEN Manchester had been continued whereby curriculum programmes, schools and directorates self-evaluated first to provide the basis for self-evaluation across the business. The full documentation had been provided as part of the overall report pack for members. Performance was strong and above national outcomes data, it was the best outcome across the LTE Group.

It was resolved to approve the SED (the Company Secretary noted that the QEP is not approved by Board as it is a live document).

Ed Lack and John Thornhill left the meeting and the meeting remained quorate

09/25

Student Voice

The report shared with the Board the National Student Survey (NSS) Results for 2023-24 published by the Office for Students in July 2024. This report detailed UCEN Manchester’s performance at an institutional level and programme level, and offered a comparative analysis against internal targets, NSS benchmarks and competitors (the NSS report was appended to the Board pack for full details).

The Director of Student Experience & Engagement drew the Board’s attention to the highlighted extracts in the cover report as:

- The NSS participation rate for UCEN Manchester in 2024 was 85% (a total of 210 students out of a possible 246 eligible to participate in the survey did so). The internal target was 86%, meaning UCEN Manchester achieved -1% points below target, yet +13% above the sector. (One more student participating in the survey would have achieved the target).
- UCEN Manchester’s results reflected improvements in all key NSS categories, with significant improvements in organisation and management (+21.5% on last year) and awareness of mental health and well-being services (+30% on last year).
- Teaching and Learning and Academic Support continue to be strong, and the highest level of satisfaction achieved for UCEN Manchester is for teaching and learning.
- Learning Resources, while increasing year on year, is still some way below benchmark. Student comments further support the improvements needed to learning resources, specifically around the Computing and Childhood and Youth Studies programmes and Library resources.
- The strongest performing question types were around staff making the subject engaging, (91%) how good staff are at explaining things (90%) and accessibility of staff when needed (91%).
- Least well performing question types are how well organised the course is (65%) and how clear it is that students feedback on the course is acted on (64%).
- At Programme level BA (Hons) Acting, FdA Make up Artistry and FdA Special Effects declined from last year and these will be scrutinized through the QEP process.
- Whereas the BA (Hons) Dance and Performance and Musical Theatre programmes saw significant increases.
- In comparison to our HE Competitors, UCEN Manchester achieved the highest scoring rating for teaching on my course, learning opportunities and academic support.

The Board were advised that the next survey would include the opportunity for students to respond to questions on sexual harassment.

	<p>A member noted an interesting question around the perceived fairness of marking and asked how this was being reviewed; the Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean advised this was through the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Committee, resource groups and the leadership team. Tutorial sessions with students had been held to explain how the process is delivered. The Board was assured there was no issue with academic standards.</p> <p>A member asked how student feedback is acted upon; the Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean explained that every programme has a representative to ensure activity was close to the students, and to set out actions which had and hadn't been taken. The Director of Student Experience & Engagement noted the need to keep students in the loop as improvements proposed could take time to deliver.</p> <p>The Chair congratulated the teams on the work that had been achieved.</p>
<p>10/25</p>	<p>Update from Academic Board</p> <p>It was noted that the Academic Board provided governors with assurance that the academic strategy was fit for purpose and approved new additions and revisions to academic policy. It had oversight of all academic provision through the Academic Regulatory Framework and the quality management and enhancement mechanisms.</p> <p>The Deputy Principal and Dean highlighted the delivery of the Mental Health and Well-being Strategy which applied to staff and students, and which had been well received. The minutes of the meeting were appended to the cover report for members information and assurance.</p> <p>A member queried the term 'External Panel Member role' and was advised this should have been 'Board Member'.</p> <p>A member queried UCEN Manchester's approach to the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI); the Director of Academic Standards advised there was an AI working group; the approach to AI was to use it but ethically.</p> <p>Action: Provide a considered response to the next board regarding the UCEN Manchester use of AI and academic integrity.</p>
<p>11/25</p>	<p>Review of Proposed Academic Regulations</p> <p>The paper provided an overview of the proposed academic regulations for UCEN Manchester validated higher education courses. The regulations had been approved in principle by the Academic Board with a small number of points to still be decided. A working party had been established to make the final decision on these points. Once this was finalised the regulations would be formally approved by Academic Board and formatted to be more accessible and user friendly.</p> <p>The Director of Academic Standards explained the aim had been to take a straightforward approach and ensure academic standards were maintained without making degrees more difficult to achieve. All staff/curriculum areas had contributed.</p> <p>The Chair asked if the proposal followed QAA guidance and the Director of Academic Standards confirmed this. A member commended the work as very student facing.</p>

<p>12/25</p>	<p>Annual Report on Complaints</p> <p>The paper provided an overview and analysis of academic year 2023/24 complaints, mitigating circumstances, academic misconduct, academic appeals, suspension of study and recognition of prior learning applications. At present this data was not broken down into student characteristics but this would be undertaken in forthcoming reports.</p> <p>The Board were reminded that UCEN Manchester adopts <i>'The good practice framework: handling student complaints and academic appeals'</i> published by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). The Director of Academic Standards and Academic Services Manager maintained developments through engagement in the OIA webinars offered to ensure that policies maintained regard to the good practice framework. There had been a 50% decrease in complaints since 2022/23 with no identifiable trend in reasons for complaints.</p>
<p>13/25</p>	<p>Performance</p> <p>The UCEN Manchester Performance report covered all key areas and no queries were raised by Members.</p> <p>In relation to fees the Deputy Principal and Dean noted the current fees were £8,900. The original proposal discussed in June would increase Arden fees to £9250; however, following recent Government announcements on the lifting of the tuition fee cap consideration was now needed to look at increasing fees in line with this. The Company Secretary advised there should be a formal proposal to be presented to UCEN Manchester board via a written resolution for consideration and approval.</p>
<p>14/25</p>	<p>Finance Update</p> <p>The Divisional Finance Director relayed the commentary for the Finance Update as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budgeted income was predominantly made up of: HE Tuition Fees (£1.5m), Adult Skills Fund (£0.2m) and Advanced Learner Loan income (£0.1m) and the Office for Student grant (£0.1m). • Income YTD reported in line with budget as the outcome of the main enrolment period was awaited to flag any financial risks or opportunities. Early assessment of UCEN Manchester HE student recruitment highlighted a small potential shortfall in income from learners, with enrolment numbers marginally higher than prior year enrolment. • Data validation and fee assessment outcomes were awaited for indication of adult recruitment to Access courses to understand the split of income between funded ASF students and Advanced Loan enrolments. • Non pay marginally favourable YTD, with mitigation planning underway regarding any income shortfall. • Pay slightly favourable YTD, reviewing current vacancies by department. The pay budget had been phased for increments from September (Period 2) with an uplift for the pay award which is currently being accrued to budget. Vacancy management target planning underway in advance of November checkpoint.
<p>15/25</p>	<p>Health and Safety</p> <p>There were no RIDDORs reported to date. Three incidents had been recorded. No queries were raised by Members.</p>

<p>16/25</p>	<p>Risk</p> <p>It was noted there were few changes from the last risk report to Board with summary points noted from the report as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No risks had been removed and no new risks had been added • Each risk had been reviewed by the 'risk owner', comments provided and an assessment of the risk rating completed • The quarterly review had not led to any changes in the inherent risk rating nor the residual risk rating for any of the risks. • It had been proposed that Risk 17 – Damage to / Theft of Organisations Physical asset is removed as this risk is on the LTE Group Risk Register <p>No queries were raised by Members.</p>
<p>17/25</p>	<p>Turnover/Health and Well-being</p> <p>Summary points were noted from the report as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall turnover Year to Date was 5.6%. Of the 10 leavers 2 are resignations. This time last year the overall turnover was 8.12% so there had been an improvement YTD. • The main reason for people leaving was the end of their fixed term contracts – this totalled 6 so far this year. Excluding these the turnover rate is 2.24%. Other reasons for leaving were redundancy, resignation and retirement. • Lifecycle surveys were starting to provide insights into what additional support that could be provided for new employees. <p>No queries were raised by Members.</p>
<p>18/25</p>	<p>Next meeting 21st March 2025</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Chair</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Date</p>

Meeting closed at 1.30pm