

UCEN Manchester Board Meeting

Minutes of the meeting held on 13th November 2025 at Openshaw Campus.

Present	Alison Blackburn (Chair/Governor), Rachel Curry (Principal/Governor), John Thornhill (CEO/Governor), Cheryl Dunn (Co-optee), Philip Johnson (Governor) and Rhona Bradley (Governor)
Apologies	Dame Ann Limb DBE DL (Governor), Orla Wood (Divisional Finance Director) & Adam Hewitt (Group Quality Director HE)
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), Jenny Smith (Senior Finance Business Partner), Ed Lack (Group Director Quality and Standards), Helen Ashley Taylor (Director of Governance and Company Secretary), Sarah-Jane Gilmore (Deputy Company Secretary) and Yetunde Dadebo Olabode (Governance & Legal advisor)

PART A

The meeting opened at 10:00am and was quorate with at least 4 members present including at least two LTE Group governors.		
01/26	Apologies Apologies were received from Dame Ann Limb DBE DL, Orla Wood (Divisional Finance Director) & Adam Hewitt (Group Quality Director HE). It was noted that Rhona Bradley (Governor) was attending as an observer and would join the UCEN Manchester Board when Ann Limb stood down in December 2025.	
02/26	Declarations of interest No new declarations of interest or loyalty were made to the standing register of interests or in relation to any specific agenda items.	
03/26	Minutes of the meeting of the UCEN Manchester Board held on 3 July 2025 The minutes of the meeting of the UCEN Manchester Board held on 3 rd July 2025 were received and approved as an accurate record to be signed by the Chair in hard copy.	
04/26	Meeting Actions and Matters Arising It was noted that all the actions agreed at the previous meeting had either been completed or were being progressed. On actions noted as ongoing the Deputy Company Secretary advised:	
	Action	Update
	Deputy Principal and Dean to consider visuals to best present the acronym and an expanded form of the name alongside strategy in Autumn 2025	Work is ongoing in relation to this as part of the wider LTE Group brand architecture which will be reported to Group Board
	Vice Dean to report the schedule of policies to UCEN Manchester Divisional Board. Company Secretary to ensure specific policies for approval by UCEN Manchester Divisional Board are explicit in Terms of Reference.	This will form part of a piece of work to be undertaken by the Company Secretary across the wider group scheme of delegation.

	Involve the Student Union in the group strategy objective relating to carbon reduction. Vice Principal Resources, Planning and Performance to action as appropriate.	The CRP is going to Executive before the end of December, at which point we will have an approved plan and will involve students as per the action
05/26	Principal's Overview The Principal advised that given the full agenda, colleagues would be taking each report as read to ensure sufficient time for questions. She added that the pack in its entirety should be considered within the emerging landscape relating to the White Paper on Post-16 Education and Skills, coupled with the Office for Students (OfS) consultation on new approach to regulating quality, and linking that to future fee levels. Initial consideration of the White Paper and following discussion with others in the sector, would suggest that the UCEN Manchester strategy (including progressing with DAPs and the collaborative work with Total People) remains the right approach and in line with government thinking on higher technical; the need to demonstrate social and economic impact, and maintaining a strong quality profile. The vision report on the agenda reflected on how the White Paper played into UCEN Manchester strengths. In relation to risk, the register had been reviewed. However the Chair of the Group Board had subsequently received a letter from the OfS in relation to the risks that they see as the key for the HE sector. These have been listed in the letter highlighting 5 major areas where they ask institutions to reflect on the risks and how they will mitigate them. The Chair of the Group Board advised he had shared the letter with the Company Secretary and has asked that the risks be reviewed to ensure any process issues are addressed. He noted that he has no concerns, however it is good governance to review processes in the light of other governance issues within the wider HE and FE sector. The Deputy Principal and Dean noted that the white paper has several references to governance and governors. The Chief Executive advised that an Internal Audit had been agreed to provide assurance on some of the issues highlighted by governance issues identified elsewhere in the sector. The Principal advised a second letter addressed to the higher education sector from the OfS had been received which related to harassment and intimidation of Jewish students and staff and which set out obligations on freedom of speech. A member noted that risk 6 in the report (challenges to recruitment and retention of staff impact including focus on wellbeing and staff communication and CPD), may be archived and asked if this was the right action given the pressures staff were under; the Deputy Principal and Dean explained there were two aspects to this risk originally when there were challenges to recruit and retain, however since improvements in terms and conditions and colleague pay this has receded. He felt that wellbeing should retain a focus on but not as a risk impacting on recruitment & retention. The Vice Principal Resources, Planning and Performance reported that retention had improved, sickness statistics were positive and monitored very closely. The Principal advised a full review of the risk register would be undertaken, following receipt of the two letters from the OfS and would be reported back to the next Board Meeting. Action: Sector Risks from OfS Letter dated 5th November to be reviewed and reported back within the risk register at the next meeting of the UCEN Manchester Board. Governance to add to Cycle of Business for the next meeting. Delegate: Vice Principal Resources, Planning and Performance and Deputy Principal/Dean Date: 12-Mar-26 The Board received for information the Principal's Overview.	
06/26	Update from Academic Board The Deputy Principal and Dean noted the reference in the Post-16 white paper to reviewing the role of External Examiners and the fact that Board highly values their work. A member noted the section on policies contained in the report and that for other business units all policies come through the divisional board; the Deputy Principal and Dean advised this had been	

	reviewed with the previous Company Secretary to understand where they should go and this would be fed into the group wide work on scheme of delegation to be undertaken by the new Company Secretary. A member asked if approval of closure and suspensions was a risk area; the Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean advised for programmes at risk of closure there is an established process in line with our obligations, including a 28 day period to look at an alternative, with a panel asking the proposer to document how they plan to inform students and assure a progression route. The Board received for Assurance the Update from the Academic Board.
07/26	Student Outcomes 2024-25 The Group Director Quality and Standards advised linked to item 8 (Self-Evaluation Document 24-25 and Quality Enhancement Plan 25-26) that there had been strong performance across most measures for UCEN Manchester. Performance had strengthened compared to the previous year, underperformance was usually seen in areas with low learner numbers. The Deputy Principal and Dean advised that the report included destinations data as per previous enquiry from a member. A member noted that in relation to metrics the commentary advised considerable progress had been made and queried how much more work was required; the Deputy Principal and Dean advised additional metrics were provided because UCEN Manchester is part of the LTE group, there is an element of duplication but it was not unduly onerous. Work had focused on continuation rates initially; completion rates were nearly done and then the focus would be on destinations. The Principal reported that all data was now being captured and provided a good base of accurate information which could be interrogated. Work would then assess any gaps to inform the next iteration and Board would be informed what was being captured and completed as the work progressed. A member noted that many colleges do not complete NSS data and have to focus on other areas and ensure it's robust. The Deputy Principal and Dean noted data requirements will change along with the White Paper outcomes. Action: As part of a future quality/metrics report, an overview of what data is in place, what will be needed to evolve, and if there are any gaps emerging from consultation on the revised TEF would be included. Governance to add to Cycle of Business. Delegate: Deputy Principal and Dean Date: 2026 cycle of business as required The Chair advised it was pleasing to see the gaps in pass rates were low and was advised that Law & Business were to be covered in item 8. A member queried preparation for TEF and 'gold' noting that the report assessed threshold levels; the member felt the focus should now be on the benchmark not the threshold and queried the risk here; the Deputy Principal and Dean advised the next TEF being 2.5 years away, the benchmark had been removed however it would be reinstated for future reports. The Deputy Principal and Dean felt, based on the consultation, the new TEF submissions first wave would be in the 2027-28 academic year. It was difficult to say if UCEN Manchester would be undertaken in the spring or the following year, but he would work on the assumption UCEN Manchester would be in the first wave in spring 2028. The Board received for Assurance the Student Outcomes 24-25.
08/26	Self-Evaluation Document (SED) 24-25 & Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) 25-26 The Group Director Quality and Standards advised the self-evaluation had been built from the ground up. At a school level there was an upside in performance and the SEDs showed improvement on previous year. UCEN Manchester was noted as the strongest performing business unit in the group. The Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean noted that the SED covered 6 areas, with minor exceptions outcomes were good across all areas. On the whole, the overall effectiveness judgements arrived at

	during the SED drafting process were confirmed during the validation process with only a small minority of changed grades. This meant that most colleagues were able to accurately self-evaluate. It was noted that UCEN Manchester was two years into a revised leadership model that has positively impacted on student experience. Business and Law, the smallest school with 34 students last year, was contained in the QEP. Some programmes were not aligned with the UCEN Manchester curriculum strategy therefore the course may be reviewed given it was currently a foundation degree, with the top-up elsewhere. The Deputy Principal and Dean noted that the previous Student Governor had been on this course. A member asked what level 7 was referred to and was advised this is PGCE which is validated by the University of Huddersfield and a Masters in Directing in Performing Arts validated by Sheffield Hallam University and the achievement rate will include PGCE and MA. [PART-REDACTED] The Chair noted that degree classifications and the number of 'good' degrees were higher than the sector-wide rate and another area that the OfS was spotlighting. As they were applying algorithms the Chair queried the position for UCEN going forward; the Deputy Principal and Dean advised there were robust internal processes and all validation was undertaken by external partners which enabled learning for UCEN Manchester's own degree awarding powers process. On AfE 4, student engagement in module surveys was below expected levels and with limited representative feedback at modular level and therefore further engagement with student representatives was being undertaken to gain feedback. The CEO noted innovative practices in TMC will be looked at for UCEN Manchester. On AfE 5 the quality of the student journey from enquiry to enrolment was under-developed and impacted by ineffective systems and processes. The Deputy Principal and Dean advised work had been undertaken here to reduce the number of touch points and create a consistent tone of voice. The Board resolved to approve the Self-Evaluation Document 24-25 and Quality Enhancement Plan 25-26
09/26	National Student Survey Outcomes The Director of Student Experience and Engagement noted this was a standard report to Board each year to share the National Student Survey (NSS) Results for 2024-25 shared by the Office for Students in July 2025. The 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 overall satisfaction rate had been removed. UCEN Manchester had participated in the pilot for the online-only Sexual Misconduct Survey (this data had not been published just used for the pilot). UCEN Manchester had received their aggregated data set in late September in order to support any local initiatives; areas of good practice and areas for improvement were embedded into the SED/QEP processes and monitored through UCEN Manchester's Committee structure and Quality and Leadership Team (QLT). The Library, which had been previously discussed, was to be included in the Future U Student Support Strategy ongoing. A member asked if internal processes enabled or hindered swift progress; the Director of Student Experience and Engagement advised time had been allowed to enable staff and student input but was vital for future planning. The Principal confirmed that processes do not hinder activity and if an issue was identified, the team responded to that swiftly to resolve, rather than waiting. The Vice Principal Resources, Planning and Performance advised the library team were being proactive and meeting the needs of students, using informal surveys and engaging with students and the work referred to was enabling alignment to the overall strategy. A member noted DAPs required correct academic governance around the library strategy.

	A member noted that under protected characteristics, students with a declared disability were less satisfied and queried if this related to resources/may be linked to the library strategy; the Director of Student Experience and Engagement explained that challenge was that individual students were not identified to enable further clarification however the group could be surveyed. Action: Director of Student Experience and Engagement to establish detail relating to the lower satisfaction from students with a declared disability Delegate: Director of Student Experience and Engagement Date: 12-Mar-26 The Board received for information the Update from the Academic Board.
10/26	Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) Update The Deputy Principal and Dean noted that following notification by the OfS on 9th June 2025 that the decision had been made to grant New DAPs to the LTE Group, the Power to Award Degrees (LTE Group) Order was issued on 17th September 2025. The Order would come into force on 1st January 2026, allowing UCEN Manchester to enrol the first students onto internally validated degrees from September 2026. As outlined at the previous Divisional Board the probationary period for all DAPs awards had been increased from 3 to 4 years, meaning the period for LTE Group would end on 31st December 2029. [PART-REDACTED] The Board received for Information the Degree Awarding Powers Update & OfS Monitoring Process.
11/26	UCEN Strategy 2030 The LTE Group Board had previously advised they were comfortable with the strategy but had asked that the vision be reviewed and the definition of 'UCEN' removed through a refined proposal for final approval, having considered any implications arising from the White Paper. It was also asked that consideration be given to developing an additional Strategic Objective focusing on commitment to staff. The Deputy Principal and Dean advised both actions were included in the document presented in the Board pack. He added that the term 'Rooted in the North' which had been developed by the marketing team had gained traction with colleagues and students and had been incorporated into the new proposal. From the White Paper the implications for the UCEN Manchester strategy were presented as: • Specialisation/link to LSIP • Quality • Fees • Focus on HTQs/modular provision/apprenticeship units • Employer voice/External examiners • Collaboration Combining elements of both Visions presented to colleagues, and incorporating a sense of place, the proposed new Vision for UCEN Manchester was noted as: 'Rooted in the North: Delivering excellence in Creative and Technical Higher Education' A new Strategic Objective of: "Value, support and celebrate our colleagues, empowering them to develop a HE ethos" was also proposed. To accommodate this additional objective, two of the previous and similar objectives had been merged into "Pathways aligned to sector needs, delivered through flexible modes of study". A member felt this was an improvement and asked when it would be implemented. The Principal advised there had been significant consultation with colleagues, which had built on the work from Data HE and activity was already in train. The next step would be the formal launch as part of the wider LTE Group Strategy, and an operating plan would then be created.

	A member noted that strategy articulation was needed to inform investment requirements. The Deputy Principal and Dean noted that the objectives would be underpinned by new performance measures for approval at the March meeting Under 'Our Core' (page 221 in the pack) a member queried if UCEN Manchester can use the word 'unique'; the Principal explained that the team do feel UCEN Manchester is a unique organisation where students are treated as individuals and work collaboratively across disciplines that is not seen elsewhere. The Deputy Principal and Dean advised when the film degree was validated the external assessor advised they had not seen another film degree that had the same elements/access to collegiate approach across Manchester. The Chair suggested in response that in the sentence 'UCEN Manchester provides a unique learning experience' that the word unique be amended to uniquely. With the amend noted Board resolved to approve the vision and additional strategic objective.
Rhona Bradley left the meeting	
12/26	Freedom of Speech The Deputy Principal and Dean explained this was a challenging area, the report to Board was an update to provide assurance to UCEN Manchester Divisional Board on the requirements placed on LTE Group as a provider and the steps taken so far to ensure they are met. The Deputy Principal and Dean advised that the duty applied to staff and students at a higher education provider, not higher education staff and students at a provider. Therefore, the regulations applied across LTE Group and not just UCEN Manchester, but the extent to which they applied and what was 'reasonably practicable' in terms of securing freedom of speech would vary across different parts of the group. Two of the immediate requirements of the regulations were for providers to make an explicit statement on their commitment to freedom of speech and academic freedom and to publish of a code of conduct. A statement was posted on UCEN Manchester website in July 2025 along with the Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom and Student Guide on Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom (both provided as appendices to the report). The documents set out clearly to staff and students UCEN Manchester principles around freedom of speech and academic freedom; operational arrangements and the approach to engaging external speakers; rights and responsibilities of staff and students; and how complaints would be dealt with under the regulations. Another important aspect of the regulations was the requirement for both staff and students to be appropriately trained and made aware of the freedom of speech duties. To facilitate this the Group Quality Team Director – HE, supported by the Dean, delivered a CPD session to all UCEN Manchester staff on 26 August. Following this all staff were asked to confirm they had read the Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom by completing a mandatory training module on Thrive Learning platform. Similarly, tutorial sessions on Freedom of Speech have been delivered to all UCEN Manchester students. The Chair noted this was an area that would need to be monitored, UCEN Manchester had taken appropriate steps to be compliant, and there was to be ongoing activity to keep pace with changes. The CEO added that work was ongoing with the Principal in relation to potential impacts on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion which could touch on organisational values. The Board received for assurance the Update on Freedom of Speech.
13/26	UCEN Manchester Leadership Update on Research and Scholarship

	Following a previous request from UCEN Manchester Board this report outlined the principles by which learning and development was encouraged and supported for HE colleagues in UCEN Manchester in order to deliver outstanding performance, along with measures of impact. The report provided details around research and scholarship (including dual professionalism). A member noted that academic regulations required annual CV updating to ensure all were maintaining their scholarliness; this was noted and would be addressed in the ongoing work in this area. The Board received for information the UCEN Manchester Leadership Team update on Research and Scholarship.
14/26	Annual Report on Complaints and the Application of Academic Regulations 2024-5 The Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean advised the report provided an overview and analysis of academic year 2024/25 complaints, mitigating circumstances, academic misconduct, academic appeals, suspension of study and recognition of prior learning applications. In future reports the data would be broken down into student characteristics as identified in the UCEN Manchester QEP 2024/25. A member noted that academic misconduct was reducing which was surprising given AI and asked if there was confidence that all matters were being picked up; the Vice Principal Adult and Vice Dean advised there was a high level of confidence. On appeal a member asked if there were lessons to learn from appeals upheld/partially upheld; the Principal advised lessons learned would be added into the next report and DAPs action plan. Action: Lessons learned to be added into the next Annual Report on Complaints and the Application of Academic Regulations 2025-26 Delegate: Principal Date: Nov-26 A member asked regarding the governance of AI and asked if a dashboard regarding quantitative and qualitative governance of AI would be reported to Audit & Risk Committee; the CEO advised the AI Strategy was to come to Group Board in December where this could be considered. The Chair asked if discussion on automatic extensions was included in the DAPs plan and the Deputy Principal and Dean confirmed this. The Board received for information the Annual Report on Complaints and the Application of Academic Regulations 24-25.
15/26	Performance Report The Vice Principal Resources, Planning and Performance noted that staff turnover was positive, and the first budget reforecast process was underway. [PART-REDACTED] Action: Deep dive on offers made, based on applications within performance report next meeting. Delegate: Deputy Principal and Dean Date: 12-Mar-26 A member noted that the Period 2 table appeared to have a totaling issue. The Vice Principal Resources, Planning and Performance confirmed that despite an error in the table there were no areas of concern. A member asked if any of the actions coming out of the UCEN BSI audit were significant; the Vice Principal Resources, Planning and Performance advised none were high risk or of concern and that the audit had been undertaken by the LTE Group H&S Team.

	A member felt that the number of students considered to be vulnerable adults seemed low based on number of students; the Director of Student Experience and Engagement advised numbers are from disclosures made and the categorisation is defined by the care act. The Principal advised case reviews were undertaken to look at the difference in safeguarding for TMC/UCEN where there is a threshold to be reached. The Chair of the Group Board advised Rhona Bradley as Safeguarding Governor had expressed her comfort around UCEN Manchester safeguarding. The Board received for information the Performance Report.
Date of next meeting 12 th March 2026	
	----- Chair ----- Date
Meeting closed at 1.22pm	