Queen Mary
UNIVERSITY of London

AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE
Tuesday 11 March 2025

CONFIRMED MINUTES

Present:

Peter Thompson (Chair)	Patricia Gallan	James Hedges
Malcolm Hitching	Indy Hothi	

In attendance:

Professor Colin Bailey CBE	Dr Sharon Ellis	Karen Kröger
Dr Nadine Lewycky	Jonathan Morgan	Neil Thomas [internal audit]
Amy Warby [internal audit]		
For m. 2024.039:	Dr Rachel Bence	Richard Holland

Apologies:

James Aston [external audit]	Sarah Durrant [external audit]

Welcome, apologies and declaration of interests

2024.035   The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted the apologies for absence. There were no declarations of interests.

Strategic Risk Register [ARC24/29]

2024.036   *Minute 2024.036 is confidential*.

Legal compliance report [ARC24/30]

2024.037   *Minute 2024.037 is confidential.*

Update on Freedom of Speech [ARC24/31]

2024.038   The Committee **considered** the update from the University Secretary on Freedom of Speech. The following points were noted in the discussion:

[a]   We typically had *c*.500 events go through our approval processes annually, including 50–60 through the Students' Union. Around 5% of events had required mitigations, such as additional security or the presence of a staff observer. There had been no cases where a speaker was refused.

[b]   The University held a strong position of long standing on free speech and our compliance risk was therefore low, with some other process-related risks. Our Code had been updated to align with the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and benefited from significant academic and student input

through a task and finish group establish by the Senate. It was established practice for the Students' Union to adopt our Code and engage with our processes on free speech. This ensured that final appeals about student-led events would be heard by the President and Principal, or their nominee.

[c] We were clarifying the process for booking events so that the correct channels were always used. We would create an expert team to advise decision makers and to support the implementation of recommendations.

[d] The University's neutral position on political and cultural issues presented challenges with stakeholder perceptions. This had emerged strongly in relation to student protest activity around the Middle East conflict. We had introduced a joint gateway process with the Students' Union to ensure that issues raised through its democratic processes could be routed appropriately through the University and that responses could be provided where relevant. We had also started to work with the Students' Union on building joint communications to the student body on shared issues. The Campus Good Relations Group, which involved members of the Students' Union, Senior Executive Team, Student Experience Directorate and Security, had also been established to explore issues around freedom of speech and support event preparation. We were looking in this for greater engagement from the Students' Union and to surface the role of the QMSU executive in supporting the sabbatical officers.

[e] We were supporting our academic leaders to lead staff and students in implementing our free speech policy and were exploring options to introduce training for students in line with the duty to promote free speech.

[f] The Committee commented positively on the Code and in particular the starting point that speech is permitted unless restricted by law. In response to a question about why sustainability was not addressed specifically within the Code, it was noted that this was addressed by our Investment Policy.

[g] The Committee asked about the culture within the University around freedom of speech for staff and students. There were inevitably pockets where it could be difficult to debate certain topics, for example in relation to identity politics and the Middle East conflict. We were aware of the issues and were constantly challenging each other to ensure the University provides a safe space for respectful debate. Our values around inclusivity were important in this.

Update on information governance and cyber security [ARC24/32]

2024.039   *Minute 2024.039 is confidential*.

Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) return [ARC24/33]

2024.040   The Committee **received** an update on the Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) return for 2023–24. The following points were noted in the discussion:

[a] The Committee was being asked to review the TRAC return process to ensure that the guidelines and processes had been followed. Benchmarking data would be available in the summer which would allow us to compare ourselves to other research-intensive universities. The time allocation survey had been updated this year resulting in more costs being allocated

to research and the research recovery rate going down. This obscured the progress we had made to improve the underlying research recovery rate. We had improved how we did our costings for funding applications and were now looking to improve the mix of research funders.

Planned internal audit reports [ARC24/34]

2024.041   The Committee **considered** planned internal audit reports. The following points were noted in the discussion:

Students' Union
[a] The review had focused on the management of the block grant and the use of University-allocated space by the Students' Union. The report provided an overall assurance rating of 'Significant assurance with minor improvement opportunities' (amber-green). There had been 6 medium and one low level recommendations and all actions had been agreed.

Course quality assurance – test of operating effectiveness
[b] The review tested the operating effectiveness of the controls identified in the *Course Quality Assurance* report completed in September 2024, which had received an overall assurance rating of 'significant assurance with improvements required' (amber-red). The report found good assurance that controls were working effectively. One additional recommendation had been made in relation to the process for reviewing programme outcome reports.

Update on internal audit recommendations [ARC24/35]

2024.042   The Committee **considered** an update on the internal audit recommendations. The following points were noted in the discussion:

[a] There were slight delays to the fieldwork for the review on *Estates projects – contractor management* which was now being finalised and would be reported to the next meeting. All other reports in this year's audit plan were on track.

[b] Eight actions had been added to the action tracker since it was last reported in September 2024. Since then, 29 actions had been reported as implemented with four actions overdue, representing a significant improvement on the previous reporting period. 20 actions were not yet due.

Any disclosures under the Whistleblowing procedure since the last meeting [ARC24/36]

2024.043   *Minute 2024.043 is confidential.*

Any allegations of fraud or financial irregularities since the last meeting [Oral report]

2024.044   *Minute 2024.044 is confidential.*

Minutes of the previous meeting [ARC24/37]

2024.045   The Committee **confirmed** the minutes of the meeting held on 06 November 2024.

Draft agenda for the next meeting [ARC24/38]

2024.046   The Committee **received** the draft agenda for the next meeting on 19 June 2025. The following points were noted:

[a]   The Committee would receive a paper on lessons learned relating to the costing of capital projects. This arose out of the growing costs for the School of Business and Management and Queens' Building Phase 2 projects. The scheduled deep dives on external risks and the regulatory landscape would be combined to allow for the additional item.

[b]   A paper on the changes to the Higher Education Statement of Recommended Practice (SORP) would be added under external audit.

Dates of meetings in 2024–25:
➢ Thursday 19 June 2025 at 1500 hours, room 3.05, Department W.