

**THE FURTHER EDUCATION CORPORATION OF MIDDLESBROUGH COLLEGE
CONFIRMED MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE
15 MAY 2025**

PRESENT: P Lynn (Acting Chair for the meeting and CG), R Davies (CG), M McClintock (Chair and CG), Z Lewis (Principal), L Wood (CG).

Officers: Z Foster (Head of Governance), L McKenna (Deputy Director – University Centre), B Robinson (Deputy Principal), O Rodley (Vice Principal), J Sharp (Head of Quality), and P Stone (Director of Higher Education).

Student Reps: A Afzaal and A Doughton.

KEY: CG – College Governor

1. Apologies for Absence

O Rodley.

Z Foster arrived at 1.50pm and R Davies and Z Lewis at 2.05pm due to the overrun of an earlier meeting.

Introductions and welcomes were given to J Sharp and Student Reps - A Afzaal and A Doughton.

2. Declarations of Interest

It was noted that R Davies' daughter was Head of Marketing and PR at the Open University.

3. Unconfirmed Minutes of 10 December 2024 – were approved as a correct record.

4. Matters Arising not on the Agenda

4.1 **Terms of Reference Review** it had been previously agreed to review the Terms of Reference after a full academic year to ensure they remained fit for purpose. After discussion, there was a request to include the linkage with the Academic Board.

Action by P Stone/Z Foster – to update the Terms of Reference and share with Committee members for confirmation, ahead of recommending for approval at the July meeting of the Governing Body.

5. Principal's Verbal Overview and Risk Summary

(This item was taken after Item 8)

Z Lewis gave a brief appraisal of the key risks for the Committee including: i) Retirement of P Stone in the summer – L McKenna had been appointed which would give good continuity. P Stone would also be staying on in a consultancy capacity to assist with the Degree Awarding Powers process. ii) Degree Awarding Powers in the current complex environment (adult debt, HE in FE struggling generally, pressure on University finances, increased apprenticeship numbers, influence of social media, and wider economy issues).

P Stone detailed the ambition to increase Higher Apprenticeships and Higher Tech quals and mapping of the HE offer to those and the Committee discussed how increasing employers supporting their staff through those qualifications could be developed.

6. Business Planning Update including Forecast Enrolment (3 Years)

P Stone gave an update to recruitment predictions including detail of where some courses had closed and others which had grown significantly (Culinary Arts, Travel/Aviation and Construction) resulting with live applications similar to this time last year. Assuming the current position it was anticipated that there would be 23 fewer students with a £78K loss of income. However, it was expected that the budget would recover by enrolment and be around target for income and slightly under for student numbers.

Questions and discussion centred around progress in relation to developing external student applications further by offering more flexibility (e.g. evening classes/part time/modular etc), with confirmation that despite positive employer engagement, the economic landscape, and political changes (e.g. immigration, DWP) was making this a tricky prospect in terms of employer support at the current time. There were some courses where further investigation would be fruitful (via employer forums/local employers/account management processes) as opportunities were

there, albeit a balance would have to be achieved in relation to viability of numbers. The Committee discussed some courses where flexibilities had been employed successfully (e.g. Childcare) and P Stone confirmed that it was part of the strategy that the flexible offer consider alternate ways to deliver L4-6 courses (acknowledging that this could possibly be strengthened in the strategy further).

The reintroduction of courses not running this year was also discussed including methods of keeping interest warm, particularly in light of sector priorities for the area (Digital and Social Care) and of other options for those students (e.g. integration into other related programmes/pathways).

P Stone confirmed that the numbers outlined were expected to convert into enrolled students.

7. Student Voice

A Doughton and A Afzaal gave their individual feedback on their student experience, with key themes including excellent support from staff in and out of lessons (tutors and lecturers); possible breaking up of lessons times (as some were 3-4 hours); and how more work experience within courses would benefit progress to employment.

Discussion focussed on: how courses/lessons could be further broken up to best support student learning; and the issue of getting jobs within the relevant profession/sector – specifically the benefit of increasing work experience where possible (including offers such as sandwich courses with a year's work experience built in), particularly in a tight recruitment market where experience was key.

M McClintock gave an update in relation to the Council Tax exemption rules, where student views had been fed in and policy changed to ensure the continuation of the exemptions. He encouraged further feedback from student reps on similar such matters.

The Committee thanked the two student reps for their updates which were of considerable value to both the faculty and Committee.

8. Teaching and Learning

P Stone confirmed that the model was working well with positive results overall. He detailed the areas of focus (evidence informed approaches and the use of digital tools). He also drew attention to an increase in academic misconduct cases with AI and how this issues had been built into staff CPD along with the wider HE strategy.

The Committee discussed student use of AI with a mix of views on usage and on detecting AI, actions if AI misuse has been identified, partner support on AI guidance (e.g. OU), and the anticipated incorporation of AI modules in future degree courses.

9. Research and Scholarly Activity and CPD

P Stone reminded the Committee of the faculty ethos which encouraged all staff members to get involved in some form of RSA and detailed incentives such as honorarium payments for staff who do get published.

L McKenna outlined the agenda for the forthcoming HE conference which would include presentation of research by groups of staff via a number of methods. It was confirmed that there was a strong standard of academic research being carried out by College staff.

Questions and discussion included: the number of staff completing doctorates (4 currently); positive numbers doing Master Level courses; high engagement with Engineering and Construction with some being used as examples of good practice; and possible additional use of TTE centre for HE with confirmation that there was already a dedicated degree level space for students this year for lab work.

Action by L McKenna – to provide a report on the HE conference for the Committee.

10. Quality Assurance Cycle Update including KPIs/SAR

P Stone presented a positive picture thus far detailing key strengths and areas for improvement, drawing particular attention to improvements with staff turnover and collaborative work with local colleges in relation to improving the TEF rating next time round.

The Committee discussed: lobbying over TEF rating approach to the OfS through the various forums (HE Forum, Northern AoC regional forum) with confirmation that the AoC has now taken this on directly with the OfS; and the compromised position of OfS with universities and FE providers of HE which would likely hamper any major change.

P Stone detailed the department work to ensure the College contextualised its submission appropriately to better its chances at improving the grading next time.

11. Regulation and Partnership

P Stone confirmed that the department was 100% compliant with all conditions of registration. He also outlined a number of pressures on institutions going forward (which would apply to the College).

Questions and discussion included: penalties to colleges falling foul of conditions; whether students were contacted directly by OfS (yes); College knowledge and related tight processes in place for prospective students taking out student loans then failing to attend the course (with approx. 1.6% being the maximum exposure of this); wider effect of rogue institutions on conditions of registration; the excellent NSS score for the College; potential effect of new Vice Chancellor of OU; and the strength of the College partnership with OU.

12. Strategic Plan Update

P Stone detailed progress and advised revisiting the strategy early to ensure it reflects the ambition to apply for DAPs and appropriately acknowledging the changing HE landscape. However, as the plan needed to align to the new College strategic plan (being reviewed during 2025-6) this would need to follow that publication. He drew particular attention to the future inclusion of consideration of alternative provisions e.g. degree apprenticeships and the need to ensure balancing bigger class size efficiencies with the student experience.

Governor questions and discussion included: further consideration of achieving maximum flexibility for study patterns (including evening classes); how the HE team was picking up on aspects of supporting students with interviews; careers guidance access for HE students where it was confirmed information was given; student experience of lack of feedback from employers in application processes, high competition rates for many graduate schemes, e.g. BA 60 places and 6000 applications within 48 hours, and few wider opportunities resulting in job deadlines closing early; the impact of lack of work experience with job applications (particularly for first jobs) and of possible assistance through the Turing Scheme with applications for HE which may be used for work experience opportunities; and use of volunteer work to bolster cvs (albeit recognising this had more weight if in the respective industry).

Clarification on wording was given with action by P Stone to add further points in relation to widening participation and engagement with employers.

13. Degree Awarding Powers

P Stone reminded governors of the pausing of applications for DAPs until August. He confirmed that the full review of all required documents etc. for the self evaluation should be completed by the end of the academic year, now the HE Office was back to full staffing capacity. This would allow for submission in Spring 2026, with the process and timelines being OfS led thereafter.

The Committee asked questions around: the pros and cons of gaining DAPs; acknowledgement of the OfS of the dual regulation placed on Colleges (Ofsted and OfS) wherein R Davies confirmed had been discussed at the recent OfS governors meeting in Sheffield; impact if the OU fails to meet OfS requirement and of the wider franchising challenges in such situations with P Stone confirming the high level of scrutiny by the OU on the College due to such pressures; student feedback on where the qualification comes from (College rather than Open University); and the point at which the College would commit money to the DAP process, and the building in of an additional role to support this and of further external support should this be required.

It was agreed that at the next natural assessment point, the HE team would determine whether to commit to seeking DAPs, which would then come to the HE Committee for consideration, ahead of the wider Governing Body.

14. OfS Conference Update

R Davies detailed the conference in which HE and FE institutions were split and greater detail was given regarding the recognition of the dual regulation requirements placed on colleges by the OfS.

The Committee discussed the positive level of governance within the College on HE matters and hope that the OfS continued to engage positively with Governing Bodies.

15. Academic Board Update

P Stone presented the main points from the recent Academic Board meeting for the Committee, and it was acknowledged that this was an essential component for the papers going forward.

Some suggestions were made in respect of some aspects of the minutes for future consideration, particularly in relation to actions which were a little unclear. Action by HE office team to attend to those suggestions for the minutes going forward.

16. Committee Review of Top Risks

The Committee discussed: the impact of the immigration announcement which may have some positive effect on employer led support for development of staff; the importance of student destinations i.e. students getting the jobs/careers they want/difficulties getting the first job; and the pace of change – social media and student perception of HE going forward.

Action by L McKenna to circulate the Sutton report to the Committee.

17. Date of Next Meeting

To be confirmed – November 2025

Post Meeting Update - this was later confirmed for Tuesday 25 November 2025 1.30-3.30pm

18. Any other Urgent Business

Thanks and appreciation were given to P Stone for his leadership of the HE office and being instrumental in setting up the HE Committee itself.

The meeting closed at 3.30pm