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Committee:	Educational Character Committee
Date:	1st February 2012
Subject:	Educational Character of the University
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Executive sponsor:	Dr Phil Cardew, Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic)
Recommendation by the Executive:	For background and discussion

Executive summary

This paper attempts to provide some background on the nature of education character, the Board's engagement therewith and the particular circumstances of London South Bank University. It is intended solely to stimulate further thought as to how the nature of the Committee's business might locate itself in the future.

	Board/Committee	Date
Matter previously considered by:	N/A	
Further approval required?	N/A	

Communications – who should be made aware of the decision?	N/A
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Context:

1. At its inaugural meeting, the Educational Character Committee discussed the concept of educational character and the ways in which this related to the governance, as distinct from the management, of the University. Following that meeting, the minutes reflect that:

“The committee requested a paper at its next meeting on the reasons for the University’s current educational character.”

2. This paper attempts to address that question, whilst, at the same time, considering, briefly, the nature and role of the committee and its interaction with other deliberative and executive structures of the University.

Educational Character:

3. The Educational Character of any academic institution can be said to be a distillation of:
 - Foundation and historic mission.
 - Development and growth – focus and scope.
 - Academic coverage – subject and level.
 - Relationship with scholarship, enterprise and research.
 - Location – relationship with local community.
 - International identity.
 - Student demographic – level, subject, gender, age and ethnicity.
 - Staff demographic – age, subject, seniority, research activity, other activity.
 - Relationship with government – reaction to departmental agendas, new developments.
4. To a certain extent, all higher education institutions embody these characteristics and, to one extent or another, are either influencers of, or influenced by, them. In simplistic terms, the more influential the institution, the less it seeks to engage with agendas that may be seen to be ‘thrust upon it’ – a prime example being the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, who have very much ‘ploughed their own furrow’ in terms of choosing whether or not to participate in certain activities, or engage with the advice of others. (Oxford, famously, refused to accede to the Higher Education Funding Council’s ambitions for the University to have a Board of Governors, rather than being, in effect, governed by its academic staff – a contretemps which has rumbled on in the background for many years).

LSBU's educational character:

5. London South Bank University has, to some extent, always existed in a world which is much less able to 'engage robustly' with governmental agendas and much more prone to finding a way to adapt them to the best possible (or least worst) ends. In so doing, the University has, at times, seemed to need to react to many different pressures at once and, in this respect at the very least, the Board's responsibility for ensuring the academic character of the University is of paramount importance if we are to determine and retain our identity and retain the strength to maintain a course of action which engages with, rather than being steered by, the outside world.
6. Although the early years of the University are important in retaining an historic sense of identity, it is probably the year 1992, with the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act, which most clearly underpins our current path, particularly in view of the nature of current governmental policy and deliberation.
7. In 1992, all polytechnics achieved university title 'at a stroke' and, with that title, the rights (and duties) of degree-awarding powers. This was a considerable change, in nature, removing the powers of the Inner London Education Authority, and the Council for National Academic Awards, and establishing an incorporated structure of governance, with degree-awarding powers emanating from an authority from the Privy Council. It was the incorporated structure of governance (which established all former polytechnics in much the same way, and which is responsible for most of the elements of our Memoranda and Articles of Association, which, in some cases, require Privy Council approval to be altered) which established the rights and duties of the Board of Governors, and the inclusion of educational character therein.
8. This was, at the time, largely because of the associated power of the right to award our own degrees, which the University acquired 'at one fell swoop' (in contrast, those higher education institutions which were not eligible for university title – mostly through size – had to find a validating partner, quickly, and go through many years of scrutiny before the powers were awarded. Some are still in this process, and it is in this aspect of higher education that private providers are most interested and concerned). Degree-awarding powers established a right which had not existed within the aegis of the Council for National Academic Awards – namely the right to award any degree. The CNAAC had tight controls over the subject and level of awards it validated and would, as an accrediting body, consider (for example) whether or not the coverage of a particular subject

area had reached a peak and thus whether it was desirable to provide further opportunities in this area (a much more centralized, and anti-competition, view of the world than exists now). On the acquisition of degree-awarding powers there is nothing to stop, for example, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in establishing a degree programme in nuclear reactor physics. If such a move were deemed desirable, then, as long as RADA were able to demonstrate to HEFCE and the Quality Assurance Agency that it had put in appropriate resources and staffing and that the degrees it awarded were securely located within the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* then nothing could be done to stop them. It requires a decision of the Privy Council to remove degree-awarding powers, and this had never, yet, been done (although private providers, because of the nature of their governance and management arrangements, retain their powers only for a limited time period, subject to successful engagement with QAA audit and review).

9. The importance of this history lesson (for which, apologies) for LSBU, was that, on the assumption of degree-awarding powers we did not (as did so many other universities) immediately change our nature, and spread out into the world of 'academic' disciplines (philosophy, history, theology being the examples which always spring to mind). The University, very much, retained its nature and character as a 'former polytechnic', firmly engaged in its, founding, mission, encapsulated in Schedule A of the 'Scheme of the Charity Commissioners' for the Borough Road Polytechnic Institute, of 23rd June 1891 – almost exactly 117 years ago – which states that:

'The object of the Institute is the promotion of Industrial skill, general knowledge, health and well-being of young men and women belonging to the poorer classes ...'

10. As we currently iterate, in our Corporate Plan, we retained a focus on professional education, reaching out to a student population who would, for a variety of reasons, find it less conducive to enter a more 'traditional' University.
11. This decision accounts for a great deal of the 'historic baggage' with which the University may, at times, seem encumbered. It also accounts for some of our current (and future) potential strengths (with, for example, sustained and continued engagement in Engineering, which is increasingly deemed a desirable area for governmental encouragement and which many similar institutions deemed to be unsustainable during the 1990's). It has affected our staff profile (with many, longer-standing, staff coming into the University from a professional

background, often without the characteristic academic qualifications associated with University teaching and, more pertinently, being slightly older and less used to engaged in research and associated activities) and, together with our location, affected our student demography (particularly in the technical areas, where students tend, more, to be older, male and often part-time).

12. However, had the University simply remained 'as is' we would, by now, have stagnated and died and it is in our capacity to develop and adapt to circumstance that the nature of 'academic character' is crucially important. What is needed, more than anything, at present, is debate and deliberation about our continued, and future, character. In some areas, our character is fairly 'traditional' (and thus, perhaps, at threat) and although ventures such as the London Engineering Project (which aimed at encouraging less traditional entrants into engineering degree programmes) was a worthy initiative, it does not seem to have greatly changed the demographic of the student body in these subject areas.
13. In other areas – Arts and Human Sciences being an excellent example – the student demographic has markedly changed in the last few years, towards a younger profile with, often, better entry qualifications who come from further afield and do not, necessarily, reflect the general demographic of the local surrounding population.
14. In the future, the impact of the government's agenda to create a multi-faceted sector, increasingly competitive and with far higher public awareness of the differences between individual institutions, will require us to adapt further as an institution, and to make important decisions as to our composition and character. Some of these decisions will focus around:
 - Our mission – exemplified in the current Corporate Plan's deliberations on 'student success' rather than, simply, inclusion and participation. We are, as the VC rightly reflects, not an agent of social change, but an educational institution, and thus need to find the balance between opportunity for all and blind optimism.
 - The size of the University. Past agendas have been predicated on growth (and, even now, are predicated on maintaining our current size and associated income). This has been a wise path in the past (and, indeed, has seen us through potential difficulties) but is at least worthy of discussion and deliberation in the future.
 - (Associated with size) the Academic 'footprint' of the University. The current Corporate Plan is clear about retaining sufficient subject-spread to continue to be a 'community university' able to offer a wide range of opportunities to our

local community, and this is entirely in keeping with our vision and mission. Funding regimes, and commissioning from bodies other than HEFCE (within which I encapsulate student fees in the future) may require us to revisit this area a number of times.

- Engagement with research and enterprise (closely associated with both size and scope). Research, in particular, is vital to our status as a university capable of delivering postgraduate degrees (taught and research). It is also vital in enabling us to attract highly-qualified staff who are not likely to view the University as a 'dead end'.

15. Even more pertinently, particularly given current government imperatives, research activity relates strongly to academic development. Increasingly, as the number of private providers increases and the concept of degree-awarding powers spreads to those who do not, themselves, deliver awards (in effect, the privatization of the Council for National Academic Awards), the sector will split back into those who develop their own degree programmes and those who teach programmes developed by others (the relationship that we currently operate with many collaborative partners, to whom we franchise our programmes). If we wish to remain within the former 'camp' (an important aspect of our academic character) then we must, at the very least, have staff who are actively engaged in the development of their subject areas. This does not entail 'world leading' or 'blue skies' research (but then, in consequence, will always largely be a cost, rather than a source of income).

16. At the same time, our engagement with enterprise activity requires deliberation as to the extent to which this is maintained as 'business as usual' (and thus the duty of all members of staff, to some degree or another) or as a 'parallel' activity, carried on by a separate organisation within the overall aegis of the University. This, in its turn, impacts back upon the nature and scope of our work.

17. Student profile. Should we (can we) seek to become less of a 'University of opportunity' and more exclusive? The former brings with it many of our day-to-day difficulties (student engagement, willingness to supply data, appeals, academic misconducts, complaints, progression statistics, satisfaction) but is, currently, so much the *raison d'être* of the University, that it underpins much of what we do. It is also, it must be said, a characteristic of our location and, thus, not necessarily something over which we have a great deal of control. However, the current trend to drive up entry, increase retention and improve progression and achievement, all seem to be responses not only to the improvement of our

status, but also to a gradual trend towards limiting the increasing strain on resources that this aspect of our character brings.

18. In moving forward and developing the work of Education Character Committee we must, then, find the balance between the 'look and feel' of the University, response to the external environment, status, impact and engagement with that environment, gubernatorial accountability and the enhancement of opportunities for students. We are not an Executive, or an Academic Board, and must, therefore, maintain a clear distinction between the way we use materials that emanate from those areas of the University, but at the same time, we are an important source of influence and advice to the Board as a whole – providing an opportunity to give a distinctive 'flavour' to other deliberations which moves beyond the financial and legal considerations with which Boards, so often, concern themselves.

19. Exactly how this is achieved will, I would suggest, take time to embed and establish itself. James Stevenson and I recently attended a governors' development day on 'educational character' run by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (in my case, as a board member of another institution) and it was clear from the presentations and discussion that:

- There was no one single view of 'educational character'.
- We were 'ahead of the game' in establishing such a committee, but many others were considering it.
- The nature of 'educational character' was highly institution-specific and related to constitution, history and mission.
- The concept required careful negotiation and consideration of the relationship between existing academic and executive structures and Board responsibilities (and authority).

20. We look forward to the work of the Committee developing and to enabling it to develop a clear 'voice' within the governance of the University.

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20/1/12