ECUB 15/14

Minutes
Board meeting, 23 April 2015

Equality Challenge Unit
Company limited by guarantee

37th meeting of the board of directors

Thursday 23 April 2015, ECU, Queens House, 55/56 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London WC2A 3LJ

Chair
  = Mary Stuart

Board members
  = Margaret Ayers
  = Patrick Johnson
  = Geoff Layer
  = Debbie McVitty
  = John Ryan
  = Barbara Stephens (by phone)

Observers in attendance
  = Dee Easter, GuildHE
  = Peter Mason, HEFCE
  = Amy Norton, HEFCE
  = Fiona Waye, UUK
  = Peter Vokes, HEFCW (by phone)

ECU secretariat
  = Juliet Adams, head of resources
  = Sarah Dickinson, head of equality charters
  = Chris Hall, head of stakeholder relations and communications
  = Gary Loke, head of policy
  = David Ruebain, chief executive

Apologies
  = Janet Beer
Item 1 – Welcome

1. The chair was unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances so Mary Stuart agreed to chair in her absence.

2. The substitute chair welcomed members to the 37th meeting of the board and noted apologies.

3. The substitute chair asked those present to declare any conflicts of interest. None were declared.

Item 2 – Minutes of the last meeting

4. The minutes of the last meeting held on 27 January 2015 were received without further comment.

Item 3 – Matters arising

5. In relation to minute 6, the chief executive confirmed that there would be no ongoing core funding from HEFCE post-2015, although up to three months’ transitional funding may be available on submission of a business plan.

6. In relation to minute 7, subsequent steps would be discussed at item 6 on the agenda.

7. In relation to minute 11, the company secretary confirmed that this had been taken forward with the Charity Commission, from whom a response was awaited.

Item 4 – Chief executive report

8. The chief executive presented his report and made specific reference to the following:

   Athena SWAN in Australia – a formal proposal, draft agreement, costings and roadmap, had been sent to the key contact at the Australian Academy of Science, following which a teleconference took place with key leaders. The main discussion point focused around the length and cost of the project, primarily whether it could be shortened and cost less. Another teleconference was scheduled for the following week with agreement expected to be reached in the near future.
Holborn fire – following the fire on Wednesday 1 April and evacuation of ECU’s offices, the chief executive thanked Fiona Waye of UUK for securing a room at Woburn House at short notice for a policy issues meeting.

9. In relation to the summary and detailed description of project activity and progress, the head of policy clarified that there were a reduced number of projects this year for several reasons. Firstly, that ECU was not planning to start anything new until the income levels had been confirmed and secondly, that some resources had shifted to the charters team to ensure that delivery of the charters met the requirements of the sector. However, with ongoing strategic funding from SFC, publications emanating from work in Scotland are being reviewed for the other UK countries. He noted that there would be ongoing consideration as to how much resource ECU puts into the charters versus research/policy work and striking the right balance.

10. The company secretary drew attention to the organisational chart for information.

11. The chief executive report and associated annexes were accepted without further comment.

Item 5 – ECU post-2015

12. The chief executive summarised the current funding position of each of the six core funders and reiterated that with no core funding from HEFCE beyond December 2015, this would be a hugely transformative year for ECU in which it would need to recalibrate its relationship with the sector, which came with associated risk. The position in Scotland, however, was materially different with a new three-year funding agreement in place from August 2015. In Wales, the existing ‘subscription’ model would continue until December 2015, with ECU colleagues due to meet with HEFCW and Universities Wales in early June. In Northern Ireland, there would be no core funding beyond December 2015 and the ongoing consultation around subscription with UK HEIs had therefore been extended to institutions in Northern Ireland.

13. It was hoped that support from UUK and GuildHE would continue in the existing format, although it was noted that this was more likely be on an annual renewal basis and would be, as always, dependent on availability of funding.

Item 6 – Subscription model update

14. The chief executive confirmed that from January 2016, HEIs in England and Northern Ireland will need to subscribe directly to ECU to continue to access its services, resources and advice, and to take part in the equality charters, including Athena SWAN. He explained that the proposal was to continue with a full service operation with subscription tiers based on turnover and noted that a formal consultation was open at the moment with the sector. All responses would be taken into account and he hoped that ECU would be able to fully realise its mission and strategy in the new funding model. He reiterated that ECU was not unique in this position and that a number of sector agencies were having to reposition themselves. Comments were invited.
15. A full discussion ensued, during which the following points were made and questions raised:

- the consultation asks the right questions and allows scope to give opinion
- it is a contested space with overlap and challenge to contend with
- important that ECU bears in mind who says what e.g. VC versus E&D practitioner
- UUK and GuildHE articulating the value added by ECU is crucial
- subscribers versus members, wish to retain independence to push the agenda
- equality issues versus regulation.

16. The head of equality charters acknowledged the importance of managing the new relationship, especially in regard to Athena SWAN members becoming ECU subscribers.

17. The chair summarised that ECU would need to revisit board membership and its governance and noted that its relationship with HEFCE would also change. She concluded that things would be uncertain for a while and acknowledged ECU’s calm response at a difficult time.

**Item 7 – ECU sector surveys**

18. The head of policy reported that ECU had conducted its sector surveys during late 2014 and early 2015, the results of which had now been analysed and were presented. He reported a slightly lower response rate, although noted that this may have been due to technical issues with Survey Monkey. Respondents were predominantly in equality and diversity and human resources roles, with a small number of staff in student service roles had also completed the survey. However, only 25 heads of institutions, had responded, which indicated that ECU needed to engage more with this level.

19. The chair concluded ECU should create a positive image around subscriptions, which the results from the surveys endorse.

**Item 8 – Financial matters**

20. The company secretary presented the financial papers, drawing specific attention to reserve levels which, at year-end 2014/15, were projected to be significantly lower than the six months operating costs in the reserves policy. This would be discussed at the forthcoming audit and risk committee in June, at which she would be recommending a reduction from six months to three months reserves. This would be adequate to meet its key financial commitments in the event that the Unit is unable to secure sufficient subscription or other income to fully realise its mission and strategy, forcing closure.

21. The chief executive noted the exponential growth in charters and no uplift in core income as the key reasons for this forecast, 2014/15 being somewhat of a tipping point. Detailed financial modelling and scenario planning were ongoing, in preparation for submission of the business plan to HEFCE, which would forecast the next five-year period. Based on current stakeholder mapping and modelling, ECU required 98
institutions to subscribe to optimise capacity and service levels. It was noted that ECU’s financial year is April to March and various scenarios were discussed in this regard. The general feeling was that the subscription model should be simple and offered for 12 months from January in the first instance and be as simple as possible.

22. The company secretary noted that ECU would consider aligning its financial year with the academic calendar. She also reported that there was a high probability that ECU would need to consider relocating premises due to the likely increase in rent at renewal in March 2016. She had approached UUK in this regard, although would be considering other options. **ACTION: JA**

23. Given the change in funding model, the chair reiterated the need to pay close attention to the financial picture moving forward. Overall it was agreed that ECU could head into deficit quite quickly and that the HEFCE transitional money would certainly smooth the way.

24. Board members welcomed the report presented and the financial papers were received without further comment.

**Item 9 - Audit and risk committee matters**

25. The company secretary noted that there had not been an audit and risk committee meeting held since 23 January 2015 so only the usual risk registers and cash flow were resent.

26. In light of the previous discussion regarding collection of subscriptions, it was suggested that money be requested within 30 days, with a differential fee if chasing required. It also should be made clear that subscribers would need to be fully paid up in order to access services and would it be worth considering an early bird discount.

27. Board members reviewed the ECU and Athena SWAN risk registers and cash flow presented. All documents were received without further comment.

**Item 10 - Any other business**

28. There was no other business.