

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 21 SEPTEMBER 2023

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Jenny Mordue (Vice-Convener), Eric Crockart, Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, Anne Minto, Dan Montgomery, Graeme Nicol, Mel Roberts, Heliang Shi, Susan Strachan, Judith Taylor and Otto Thoresen, with Tracey Slaven (Clerk & Registrar), Louise Thomson (Head of Governance and Executive Support) and Alease Coleman (Assistant Clerk).

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

There were apologies from John Campbell, Colin Duncan, Lisa Henderson, Euan Mackenzie, Jan McRobbie, Iain Percival, Pat Pugh, Mark Strange, Robert Traynham, Yafan Zhang, Vanessa Nzolo (Student President) and Martina Chukwuma-Ezike (Rector).

2. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting on 1 June 2023 were approved.

3. CONVENER'S REPORT (Paper BC23:12)

Duncan Macniven thanked the members of the Committee who would be standing down at the end of September – Eric Crockart (who had given 14 years' service to the Committee, including 2 years as Convener), Lisa Henderson, Euan Mackenzie, Iain Percival (who had provided a link between the Committee and the Court since 2016), Susan Strachan and Mark Strange.

Prompted by a comment from a General Council member, Duncan Macniven suggested that Neil Curtis (Head of Museums and Special Collections) be asked to talk to the next General Council meeting about the highlights of the collection, the repatriation of artefacts, current storage arrangements and current and future display of the collection. The Committee agreed.

The Committee noted the paper.

4. COMMERCIALISATION (Paper BC23:13)

Otto Thoreson spoke to the paper, which summarised the University's current activity. Court would be discussing the topic at its forthcoming meeting, and he planned to arrange a further meeting in October of the committee which he chaired. There was much activity, and progress had been made especially on governance. The advice of experienced people was essential and he would ensure that the Business Committee remained involved. The topic would always be important, and the Scottish Government was particularly keen for the universities to be catalysts for entrepreneurial activity leading to economic growth. Every university was seeking to foster commercialisation and Aberdeen appeared to be lagging. Nonetheless, the University's research and innovation team was working through the Schools to identify the most promising projects.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- It would be helpful to set criteria to identify worthwhile proposals, including the likely return on investment. The enterprise companies had developed criteria of that kind.
- The University's provision of seed funding was important but longer-term finance was also essential. Other universities had developed relationships with specialist funders to that end: there was no shortage of private sector finance.
- The timeline of the University's involvement was unclear: it should start at undergraduate level.
- It was important to find ways of measuring success and benchmarking against other universities. HESA collected statistics which might serve that purpose.
- The importance of intellectual property rights was not well-recognised.
- Researchers needed to be more nimble in making links with possible commercial partners: a change in culture was needed.
- The Entrepreneurs-in-Residence seemed an excellent idea, the future of which was secure.

Jenny Mordue proposed that the Business Committee sub-group, desirably including Iain Percival notwithstanding that he would no longer be a member of the Committee, should meet again to pursue these points and consider the topic more generally. The Committee agreed.

5. GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY (Paper BC23:14)

Introducing the discussion, Judith Taylor explained that the paper focussed on how Committee members, individually or collectively, could assist the Careers and Employability Service's efforts. Dan Montgomery suggested that the Committee should try to have one of its members acting as a mentor at any given time. Committee members were invited to volunteer in any appropriate way.

The Committee agreed that the sub-group should keep in touch with the developing work of the Service.

6. MARISCHAL COLLEGE EAST (Paper BC23:15)

Jenny Mordue spoke to the paper, which summarised the background to the Committee's interest and updated members on the recent meeting with Morag Beers (Director of Estates).

In discussion, the following points were made:

- There might be scope for a cost-effective project re-opening the Mitchell Hall alone, which could act as a showcase for the University's work.
- The proposals which had been put to the University's Senior Management Team, including a museum of the north-east and a high-quality commercial restaurant, had not been the subject of a financial appraisal only because the Task and Finish Group chaired by Rob Donelson had no funds for the purpose.
- There was little prospect of selling the building when it was still required for storage of the Special Collection and when any buyer would still need to invest an estimated £15 million to bring it to modern standards, including accessibility.

- Further discussions with Morag Beers seemed sensible – focussing on her work on the Re-imagining our Campus Project, rather than narrowly on Marischal East

The Committee agreed that the sub-group should continue its work and that it should circulate in a paper for the Committee's November meeting the sub-group's contribution to the Task and Finish Group and the latter Group's paper to the Senior Management Team.

7. UNIVERSITY'S LEADERSHIP ROLE IN THE NORTH-EAST (Paper BC23:16)

Duncan Macniven explained that the paper sought to re-invigorate the Committee's work on the last of the strategic topics identified in October 2022. In discussion, members said:

- The commitment in Aberdeen 2040 was intended to address a perceived disconnect between the University and other regional institutions.
- The topic was very wide and it was unclear what the University wanted to achieve. The Committee might have little to contribute.
- The University was already influential in the region and, since the publication of Aberdeen 2040, the Principal and Vice-Principal (Regional Engagement) had been active in improving connections. The Covid pandemic had also brought the University and NHS Grampian closer together.

The Committee agreed that Pete Edwards (Vice-Principal Regional Engagement) should be invited to the next meeting to describe the action in hand to deliver the Aberdeen 2040 commitment and to allow the Committee decide whether (and if so, how) it could contribute.

8. RAISING THE PROFILE OF GENERAL COUNCIL AND BUSINESS COMMITTEE (Paper BC23:17)

The paper was noted.

9. UNIVERSITY REPORT

Tracey Slaven highlighted:

- The new academic year was starting and it was good to see students back on campus. There was no problem with accommodation for single students – a marketing point in recruiting students from the rest of the UK. Some married students with families had had problems finding accommodation and (in 2022 at least) school places.
- The University currently shared a sector-wide problem with international student recruitment, created by changes in the Home Office's visa rules, the devaluation of the Nigerian currency, and the reopening of Australian universities to Chinese students. International student registration was in progress and was being closely monitored.
- The University had succeeded in awarding every 2023 graduate a classified degree and the industrial action which had involved a boycott of marking had just been settled.
- The University had reacted early in the year to reported problems with Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete in its estate. Eight buildings had been identified, ranging from a boilerhouse to the restaurant at Hillhead Halls and lecture theatres at

Foresterhill. Action had been taken to avoid disruption for students. There were no immediate plans to replace the material, pending the completion of the Re-imagining our Campus Project.

- Out-turn for 2022/23 (against a budgeted deficit of £1.9 million) was not yet publicly available but was not a matter of concern.
- The University was delighted that the UK Government had agreed renewed access to the EU's Horizon research funding.

The Convener thanked Tracey Slaven for her report.

10. **REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COURT (Paper BC23:18)**

The paper was noted.

12. **AOCB**

Louise Thomson asked Committee members whether they would be willing to provide their views for the QS university rankings. She agreed to email to members.