

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 2 SEPTEMBER 2021**

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Mel Roberts (Vice-Convener), Nuala Booth, Euan Mackenzie, Lynne Mennie, Alan Milne, Dan Montgomery, Jenny Mordue, Patricia Pugh, Judith Taylor, Brian Wood, with Tracey Slaven (University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer – items 1 to 6).

Apologies: Eric Crockart, Lisa Henderson, Tom Lynch, Willie McColl, Jan McRobbie, Graeme Nicol, Iain Percival, Jenny Shirreffs, Mary Stephen, Susan Strachan, Mark Strange and Nicole Cochrane (Clerk).

**1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES**

The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting. The apologies were noted.

**2. MINUTES**

The minutes were noted and approved.

**3. MATTERS ARISING**

Ms Slaven explained that there was no plan to hold evening language classes this semester, rather to publish a new schedule in November for a January start.

The Convener confirmed he had responded to Ben Jump on the motto and coat of arms issue. Subject to discussion when the agenda was clearer, Mr Jump was in agreement that this should not be debated further at the next Statutory Meeting.

**4. REPORT FROM THE CONVENER**

The Convener provided a written report to the committee.

He had met Anne Smyth, Edinburgh University General Council Secretary. Edinburgh was in much the same position as Aberdeen, facing the same issues about how to relate to university governance and how to make their agenda relevant to the university and General Council members.

The Convener referenced the ongoing work of Dr Charles Calder on the history of the General Council. The Convener sought the committee's view on making the publication literal as well as virtual, his view being a physical publication would be advantageous, although with a poorer environmental impact. The cost of physical publishing was minimal, assuming a small print run (approx. 50 copies). In discussion, the committee felt that hard copies were desirable, although an indication of readership was necessary to inform the number of copies which might be printed. Ms Taylor had researched sustainable printing organisations and found one in England: the cost might be higher but the impact on the environment better.

Regarding Bishop Elphinstone's cenotaph, the condition of which had caused concern to a General Council member, the Convener noted that the head of Museums and Special Collections was not concerned about the current state of the cenotaph. Since restoration

work would be costly, the committee agreed not to press for action by the university. The Convener would respond to the General Council member. *Action: Convener*

The Convener explained that the idea of a committee away day was on hold until the committee was able to gather safely.

The Convener asked for suggestions for speakers at future committee meetings. It was suggested that Marion Campbell, Tavis Potts and Debbie Dyker be asked to speak at future meetings. Ms Slaven suggested inviting Julie Ashworth, new Senior Governor, to attend a future meeting. The Convener explained he planned to invite Ms Ashworth to the November meeting, not as a speaker but to observe. *Action: Convener / Ms Cochrane*

## **5. UNIVERSITY UPDATE – TRACEY SLAVEN**

Ms Slaven confirmed a really positive student recruitment outcome. There were still questions on who might not be able to travel due to restrictions but generally COVID-19 did not seem to be impacting the intent of students to attend. Postgraduate taught recruitment was looking strong and Undergraduate recruitment would have filled Scottish Funding Council places for home students.

The university was now beyond level 0 of Covid precautions and there would be an increasing amount of in-person teaching. Timetabling taking into account 1m distancing had already been carried out before restrictions had been lifted and would be in place at the start of term - a good contingency in the face of recent higher infection rates. Teaching would continue online but with more in-person teaching than before. Transmission management continued to be a big part of planning and would be assisted by the vaccine rollout to teenagers. There were ongoing discussions regarding the government announcement on vaccination passports.

The Scottish Funding Council report had been positively responded to by the university and work continued with colleagues in NESCOL and RGU to explore better collaboration on regional recovery and transition. Professor Pete Edwards had been appointed as Vice Principal Regional Engagement and Regional Recovery.

On university pensions, formal consultation would be sought on the proposals put forward by Universities UK.

Ms Mennie asked if student recruitment had seen lower European applications due to Brexit. Ms Slaven confirmed that there had been at UG level but not so much at PG level. There was work being done to explore options to boost this in future.

Mr Montgomery asked if student turnout at the start of the new term might be lower than hoped. Ms Slaven said this was possible, but the university had been very clear that students who could not get to campus to begin, or resume, their studies would be supported. The university would also cover the cost of managed quarantine for those arriving to begin their studies.

The Convener asked if there were other points to note on the SFC report. Ms Slaven offered to share the link with anyone interested in reading the report. The report had been positive, focusing on coherence and sustainability while challenging the sector to be increasingly student-centric and ensuring the best education delivery.

The Convener thanked Ms Slaven for the update.

## 6. MARISCHAL COLLEGE REVITALISATION

Professor Mordue spoke to her paper, noting the Marischal East vision document and the call for responses by 30 September. She welcomed the feedback she had received from committee members via email and updated the committee on a recent meeting with Neil Curtis, head of Museums and Special Collections, whose ideas on the space were aligned in many ways with those of the committee. Professor Mordue asked for feedback on the ideas noted in the paper.

In discussion:

- Ms Mennie and Ms Pugh supported the idea of a Museum of the North, noting that account should be taken of the demise of Archeolink.
- Mr Milne asked about Scottish Government involvement and offered his and his wife's assistance in relation also to the City council. The Convener noted that Ms McRobbie might be able to contribute on the attitude of Aberdeenshire Council.
- Mr Montgomery wondered if the Kirk of St Nicholas might be of interest to the city at some point and noted the need for a unique selling point with regards to Marischal. Ms Roberts confirmed she had raised previously the potential match in these types of projects. Mr Mackenzie also spoke of the importance of connection with other landmark buildings in the city centre.
- Ms Pugh thought that a community hub was missing from the proposed ideas.
- The Convener asked how the university viewed the use of the building for teaching (eg by the Business School). Ms Roberts and Professor Booth considered that a return to a split campus was not the way forward and that the plans for the Business School envisaged it remaining on campus. They emphasised the need to be cautious about the cost of the project, which should be income-generating.
- Mr Wood noted the empty spaces left behind from the oil industry, the lack of tourism and the lack of tourist attractions which were under cover - as Marischal could be.
- Ms Mennie suggested that many people in the city would be unaware of what the university was doing: Marischal might be a 'shop window' for the university.
- Ms Pugh noted the loss of student presence in Aberdeen and the potential for students having access to a part of Marischal.

The committee agreed that the working group should submit a response on its behalf to the call for feedback. *Action: Professor Mordue, Mr Roberts & Mr Crockart*

## 7. RAISING THE PROFILE

The Convener introduced the paper which he and Ms Roberts had prepared. He referenced the desire to have the committee sit within the wider university governance structure in the University Secretary's office, whilst maintaining strong links with Alumni Relations. The committee agreed.

The Convener emphasised the importance of developing new methods of working with the independent members of court who would become members of the committee. The next step was the meeting of the Governance and Nomination Committee on 6 September, with guidance thereafter coming from Ms Slaven. Ms Roberts stressed that the committee was behind the curve in relation to feeding into Court and it was important to improve this. Professor Booth noted that getting new Court members involved would be very positive: she was not the only Court member who believed that the Business Committee must not be forgotten about when considering the governance of the university.

The Convener referenced the opportunity to work with international alumni chapters to increase engagement worldwide, noting that this depended on a small group of committee members being more active between meetings to maintain these relationships. The committee supported the proposal.

The Convener spoke of the potential to work with the university communications team to engage staff members who are also General Council members, and to share short post-meeting summaries regularly with the wider General Council community on social media. Professor Booth noted that one advantage of the committee's secretariat being provided by the University Secretary's office was the recognition that the General Council was more than alumni, which would help academic staff members realise they had a voice in this area. Ms Taylor pointed out the need for administrative support for these new areas of communication. Ms Roberts advised that the expectation would be to gain functional support from the university.

The committee was in support of the proposals outlined in the paper.

## **8. BUSINESS COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

The Convener noted that Ms Roberts, Ms Mennie, Mr Milne and Mr Wood had reached the end of their terms on the committee. He thanked them for their service. The end of the terms of two of the former General Council assessors on Court, Professor Booth and Ms Shirreffs, was also approaching and he thanked them for their support to the committee. Professor Booth conveyed her gratitude to the committee for the opportunity to serve. The Convener explained that Ms Gibson had had to resign due to health reasons. He also noted the recent deaths of previous committee members, Corinne Blackstock and Kathleen Preston.

The Convener confirmed that, following the recent call for new members, Colin Duncan, Mark Lindley-Highfield, Heliang Shi and Yafan Zhang would be joining the committee. The Convener noted the importance of welcoming new members, particularly those from overseas which might affect meeting times.

The Convener proposed that Professor John Campbell and Iain Percival should be co-opted to the committee (in the latter case, assuming he was not appointed to the committee as one of the independent members of Court). The committee was in support of these co-options.

The committee agreed that nominations for the vice-convener should be sent to Ms Cochrane by noon on Friday 17 September.

## **9. ALUMNI RELATIONS & REGULAR GIVING UPDATE**

Due to unexpected absence this update would be circulated at a later date.

## **10. COURT MINUTES FROM MARCH 2021 MEETING**

The committee noted the minutes.

## **11. AOCB**

The committee noted the desire for blended meetings as soon as it was safe to do so. It was also noted that times of meetings would need to be considered carefully, both to make it easier for overseas members and to maximise attendance of members who were working. The timing of the November meeting would be arranged with these factors in mind.