

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 3 MARCH 2022

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Jenny Mordue (Vice-Convener), John Campbell, Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, Euan Mackenzie, Graeme Nicol, Dan Montgomery, Iain Percival, Heliang Shi, Susan Strachan, Mark Strange, Judith Taylor, Yafan Zhang, with Tracey Slaven (Clerk & Registrar), Martina Chukwuma-Ezike (Rector), Pete Edwards (VP Regional Engagement and Regional Recovery) and Chloe Bruce (Alumni Relations).

Apologies: Eric Crockart, Colin Duncan, Lisa Henderson, Jan McRobbie and Patricia Pugh.

1. WELCOME

The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting, which some were attending in person and others online. He particularly welcomed Martina Chukwuma-Ezike, attending her first meeting following her election as Rector, and Chloe Bruce who was acting as clerk.

2. MINUTES

The minutes were noted and approved.

3. MATTERS ARISING

MARISCHAL REVITALISATION PROJECT

In Eric Crockart's absence, Professor Jenny Mordue reported that the work of the Task and Finish Group, of which he had been a member, was concluding with a report shortly to be submitted to the University's Senior Management Team. It would consider future uses for Marischal East and related buildings. It would be important for the University to work closely with the City Council to ensure that developments complemented plans for the surrounding area. The Committee should seek continued involvement in the project.

NEW RECTOR: MARTINA CHUKWUMA-EZIKE

Martina Chukwuma-Ezike explained that she graduated in 2009 and had remained connected to the University. She had felt supported as a student and wanted to help today's students where she could. She had consulted students on what her manifesto should contain. One of the key components was mental health, given the toll the pandemic had had on everyone. Students had also asked for support in relation to equality, diversity, and inclusion, as well as safety where they study, live, and socialise. Climate change and future employability were also concerns. Martina Chukwuma-Ezike commented on how well the 2040 Strategy was aligned with what the students were passionate about: it was reassuring that the University was listening to what students wanted.

Martina Chukwuma-Ezike noted that she had been in post for 2 months and had learned a great deal already. She had been involved in the launch of the student mental health agreement and was delighted the University was taking action on this topic. She also hoped to learn from the Business Committee and lend her voice where she could.

4. REPORT FROM THE CONVENER

The Convener informed the Committee that the manuscript of the history of the General Council was currently being digitised.

On the topic of General Council meetings, the Convener commented that 44 members had attended the last online meeting, which was slightly less than the previous meeting. He was keen to find ways of increasing attendance. He noted a desire to move to hybrid meetings in future, allowing people to attend in person on campus as well as online, which Judith Taylor and John Campbell thought would be very welcome and hopefully raise interest. Jenny Mordue suggested combining the meeting with something else, to make it more attractive – for example, the May Festival. Dan Montgomery agreed, noting also that it might take time for people internationally to appreciate how easily they could join online. Susan Strachan suggested inviting notable alumni to talk at future meetings as a way of making the meeting more attractive.

There was discussion on the recent practice of combining the University annual open meeting and the General Council meeting. Tracey Slaven explained that the open meeting was intended to engage staff, students, alumni, and the wider community and to allow conversation between Court members and these groups. The recent combined meetings stretched the definition of compliance, and she was working with Court on future practice. That did not however limit the University's ability to engage with the General Council meetings and agreed that having a research presentation or a popular speaker would help encourage interest. The Convener said that the Committee had been happy with the combined meeting, but he did not see it as essential.

The Convener noted that Court was not yet ready to propose independent members who might be appointed to the Committee and the Committee agreed to consider the nominees in correspondence, with a view to agreeing their appointment before the next meeting. Iain Percival noted the desire to publicise the role of the General Council and the Business Committee when describing the roles of the Court and Senate.

5. UNIVERSITY UPDATE

Tracey Slaven spoke about the war in Ukraine and the effect on the University community. She stressed the University's unwavering solidarity with the people of Ukraine and the work being done to support staff and students who have been impacted – including Russian staff and students concerned about being associated with the actions taken by the Russian government. The University was also working with sector bodies to support research colleagues in the universities in Ukraine. Martina Chukwuma-Ezike thanked Ms Slaven for the update and for the support provided by the University.

On other topics, Ms Slaven spoke about:

- the recent deaths of notable alumni, particularly former Principal Sir Duncan Rice who had made an enormous impact on the University community.
- the Queen's Anniversary Award, which had now been received - a wonderful recognition of the work of the soil science team and their impact on climate change.
- an expansion of student recruitment in January, with a 66% increase on the previous year creating an increase of 7% in the student population year-on-year – including those attending South China Normal University, where demand for places had been roughly twice that predicted.

- expected further easing in Covid restrictions on 21 March 2022, replacing legislation with new guidance which would recognise the importance of getting back to in-person teaching and would apply on campus broadly the same constraints as society generally.
- the results of the Research Excellence Framework 2021 would be published on 21 May 2022. The University was confident about the quality of the submission made to REF, although the assessment would inevitably be affected by the significant reduction in research staff numbers/income for budgetary reasons in 2014.

In response to questions from members of the Committee, Ms Slaven:

- explained that the University had little interaction with Russia. The Director of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies was working to identify where the impacts were and to support researchers who were concerned about the situation. The University was not taking any action against Russian students whose recruitment was separate from the action being taken by the Russian government. The University was investigating its investments in Russia, which were not however believed to be significant.
- confirmed that summer graduations were being planned, as well as graduations for those who had not graduated in person due to Covid. The ceremonies were likely to be off-campus due to capacity, taking place in early July.
- emphasised that the University remained a campus-based institution. In-person interactions were generally superior to what could be gained online, although digital learning could be beneficial and would be retained where appropriate. Hybrid working was available for most staff and the majority were currently working both at home and on campus.

The Convener thanked Ms Slaven for the update.

6. PROFESSOR PETE EDWARDS – VICE PRINCIPAL (REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND REGIONAL RECOVERY)

The Convener welcomed Professor Edwards.

Professor Edwards explained that he was a professor in computer science and still an active researcher. His Vice Principal role, a new position, aimed to put the University at the heart of the region. Regional engagement entailed supporting the regional economy, engaging with communities, promoting culture, and improving the environment and sustainability. The regional recovery responsibility covered making the university an effective partner with business and the public/third sectors, including fostering innovation, promoting the formation of new businesses, and supporting business and economy in the Northeast

In discussion:

- Mark Strange asked what was meant by 'region', noting that there might parts of the North-East which might not nowadays have close links with the University: people would react and be involved only if they saw the University within their own community. Pete Edwards explained that "regional" included the North-East of Scotland, but there is the need to include Scotland as a wider region, as well as close neighbours in areas such as Tillydrone.

- Heliang Shi and Yafan Zhang stressed the importance of the university positioning itself positively in relation to the international community, building on the reputation of Aberdeen as a regional centre for oil exploration.
- Pete Edwards spoke about the development across the UK of “civic university agreements”, to which Aberdeen was committed, involving consulting people inside and outside the university, explicitly including the local community.
- Dan Montgomery and Duncan Macniven gave examples of how engagement with local groups, such as the Bailies of Bennachie and the Braemar music festival, were ways for the University to be seen out in the community, while Iain Percival noted the lack of such engagement in the Black Isle and Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle advocated a process for communities to reach out to the University for speakers.
- Judith Taylor emphasised the importance of a joined-up approach with RGU and NESCOL and Susan Strachan asked if the University was represented on boards relating to regeneration and improvement, commenting this would allow for better understanding of economic priorities of the area.
- Yafan Zhang commended government opportunities in her city to fund students to get work experience and receive mentoring in local companies.
- John Campbell explained the interdisciplinary work being done in Edinburgh and how this was shared with secondary schools to inspire young people into careers related to STEM. Pete Edwards noted that student recruitment was not within his remit but that sharing research and encouraging STEM careers would fall more under what he aimed to achieve.

The Convener thanked Professor Edwards for his stimulating presentation.

7. COURT DIGEST FROM NOVEMBER 2021 MEETING

The Committee noted the digest.

8. FUTURE MEETINGS – AGENDA & SPEAKERS

The Convener asked for suggestions on this topic, noting that Professor Marion Campbell had been invited to speak in June and that Debbie Dyker had been unable to attend the current meeting.

Judith Taylor enquired if Julie Ashworth, the Senior Governor, was currently on the list. The Convener noted that she had attended the last meeting and Tracey Slaven suggested that a strong connection between Ms Ashworth and the committee would be beneficial going forward but agreed not as a specific speaker. She suggested that the Committee invite Professor Ruth Taylor as a future speaker on equality, diversity, and inclusion. Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle agreed, assuming that the Committee had not recently considered the topic. Judith Taylor also suggested considering the proposed fundraising campaign and the Convener agreed to liaise with Nicole Cochrane on the timing of a discussion.

Heliang Shi suggested international programmes and university locations. Dan Montgomery enquired specifically about Qatar. Tracey Slaven noted that student recruitment there had been above expectation in recent years, though National Service had had a negative impact this year, and that the gender balance had been very positive for the region. Expansion of the campus was being considered at strategic planning level. It was agreed to include the topic.

Euan Mackenzie suggested considering the University's policy on being a safe space for free speech and voicing of opinions. Ms Slaven explained that the University sought to strike a delicate balance, protecting freedom of expression without allowing inappropriate and harmful behaviour. The Convener suggested that the Principal might want to share the work being done on this at the next General Council meeting.

9. AOCB

The Convener noted that his 3-year term of appointment to the role would end later this year. He was eligible for re-appointment and was willing to continue if the Committee wished, although he would probably not wish to hold the position for a further 3 years. He confirmed that Jenny Mordue did not wish to take on the role of Convener and asked the Committee to consider future candidates. Martina Chukwuma-Ezike welcomed this succession planning and encouraging younger members of the Committee to shadow the position and perhaps step into the role in future.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would place on Thursday 9 June at 4pm. Members would have the option to join in person or online.