

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 4 MARCH 2021

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Mel Roberts (Vice-Convener), Nuala Booth, Eric Crockart, Lynne Mennie, Willie McColl, Jan McRobbie, Alan Milne, Dan Montgomery, Jenny Mordue, Graeme Nicol, Iain Percival, Kathleen Preston, Patricia Pugh, Judith Taylor, with Duncan Stuart (Head of Student Engagement) Tracey Slaven (University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer), and Nicole Cochrane (Clerk).

Apologies: Katrina Allan, Lisa Henderson, Tom Lynch, Euan Mackenzie, Kathleen Preston, Jenny Shirreffs, Mark Strange, Brian Wood

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Convener welcomed the Committee to the virtual meeting. Special welcome was extended to Tracey Slaven, University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer, who was attending her first meeting. Ms Cochrane shared the apologies received.

2. STUDENT EXPERIENCE UPDATE

The Convener welcomed Duncan Stuart, Head of Student Engagement, to the meeting.

Mr Stuart provided an overview of the department structure and spoke of the activities currently being carried out by the team. These activities include welcome week planning, staff and student events, excellence awards, student partnership agreements, working with AUSA, and peer support. He explained that online orientation services had expanded due to Covid.

The Student Experience team's work also covers the Infohub, working with the International Centre, student wellbeing, and graduations. They work on all non-academic student communications (such as a fortnightly newsletter) and coordinating peer communications as well.

The Convener thanked Mr Stuart for his presentation and opened for questions.

Ms Roberts complimented Mr Stuart on the comprehensive work of his team and asked about continuity of communication once active students become graduates. Mr Stuart explained that most students graduating now will not retain their university email address, and it is difficult to get their personal email addresses/permission to continue contacting them. He confirmed that they work with the alumni team to try and tackle this as much as possible.

The Convener asked about the student experience survey and the outcome of students being happy with graduating in a marquee. He queried why this is favoured so positively. Mr Stuart noted that most students have never graduated before, so this is their only basis for comparison. He explained that the marquee allows more people to attend and with so many graduating in person (due to fees being removed) the preference of students is to have the space to allow family to attend. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and this is down to the celebration on campus as a whole. He welcomed the committee to come and see what is done in future when in-person graduations are possible.

Professor Mordue asked about the acoustics, as she felt they were quite poor, particularly in relation to the music. Mr Stuart said they will make every effort to improve this and that no plans had been considered yet for future.

Mr Montgomery asked about wellbeing support for students and staff and how that has been expanded since Covid hit. Mr Stuart Duncan explained that the work of the wellbeing team has expanded over the last 12-18 months. Their work is very pro-active, for example arranging extra wellbeing activities at exam time. There are developed toolkits for wellbeing across different categories, including one for self-isolation. There were phone calls made to students three times during isolation periods, as well as complimentary food. This has also expanded to staff wellbeing with regards to dealing with home working, childcare etc.

The Convener congratulated Mr Stuart on the expansive work of his team and for his time at the meeting.

3. MINUTES

The minutes were noted and approved.

4. MATTERS ARISING

Elphinstone Cenotaph

The Convener shared that photographs were taken by Mr Montgomery, following concerns raised by Dr Calder about the state of repair. Angus Donaldson, Head of Estates, has sought the advice of Neil Curtis, Head of Museums & Special Collections. There will be an inspection carried out by a metalwork expert and more information will follow.

525 Alumni of Achievement

The Convener queried if Ms Roberts or Ms Cochrane had an update on this topic, both confirmed they had heard no further updates. Ms Slaven confirmed there were issues around staff resourcing and this has been resolved, which will help get the project back on track.

5. INTRODUCTION & UNIVERSITY UPDATE

The Convener welcomed Tracey Slaven.

Ms Slaven confirmed she had now been in post for almost three months and noted it was an interesting and challenging time to join.

Ms Slaven confirmed that the rest of academic year for undergraduates will be carried out online, unless doing clinical/practical placements. This also does not apply to post graduate taught students, who would hope to return after Easter. Rent rebates are provided for those not in residence and they are cancelling further charges. Students are also free to break leases if they wish.

When the academic year began the financial scenarios was looking quite bleak. She was very pleased to share that the university is in a much stronger position now than predicted. This is down to good management in controlling spend, a very strong level of demand for January start PG taught programmes, some additional funding from the Development Trust, and finally additional funding from the Scottish Government.

Lateral flow testing has been carried out at the university test centre and the centre is now open for community testing too. NHS is also looking to make this open as a broader community asset during the pandemic.

Ms Slaven confirmed planning is underway for the next academic year and they are working with the Scottish Government to establish quarantine options out with quarantine hotels for international students.

The Convener thanked Ms Slaven and opened for questions.

Ms Taylor asked if there was an indication of intake for the next academic year. Ms Slaven confirmed that is it too early to say with confidence. They are still waiting on confirmation on number of places available by Scottish Government, but the indication is that some of the places previously for EU students will be offered to Scottish domicile students. Strong interest still from the international market but not the same from Europe. The drops in applications are not as high as predicted. They are introducing some transitional scholarship arrangements.

Ms Mennie asked what percentage of students have left accommodation and gone home. Ms Slaven confirmed a larger number than usual stayed in halls over winter, some by choice and some by necessity. 50% of Hillhead is occupied currently, but this will move as situations evolve.

Ms McRobbie queried about students who went home for Christmas and unexpectedly weren't able to go back after. Ms Slaven confirmed there is a service offered where accommodation is packed up for them and stored safely if they want to break the lease. They can also arrange to have materials sent home. There is also the hardship fund for additional assistance. Additional books and materials being digitised as a service as well.

The Convener thanked Ms Slaven for her time.

6. MARISCHAL COLLEGE REVITALISATION

Professor Mordue gave an overview of where the group is currently, based on the paper provided prior to the meeting. She highlighted Aberystwyth University, who decided to refurbish old college buildings along the sea front. Cost is £27m. Their plan is multiple use spaces (meetings, arts, science, weddings, bistro, exhibitions etc.) predicting 40 new jobs and 200,000 visitors per year. They got several key partners on board and secured funding from various sources.

Mr Crockart noted two Task & Finish meetings have taken place in 2021. Rob Donelson, Executive Director of Advancement, plans to build on the work of previous groups and place a wider call for input to the University community. The work is going to be complex and may need to be tackled in phases.

Ms Taylor asked if the Business Committee will make representation to Court or will it be the Task & Finish Group. Mr Crockart confirmed there is no end date for reporting to senior management yet. There has been a delay due to work pressure on staff and recognising the need to reduce stress where possible.

Mr Percival wondered if Rob can be an honest broker here, as it was mentioned about this project perhaps taking funding from elsewhere. He queried if there should maybe someone else looking after this effort if this proved to be an issue. He also queried if there could be a

Friends of Marischal College group, noting a similar group in his area that created local improvements.

Ms McRobbie wondered if it would be worth speaking with Professor David Hewitt on possible funding streams.

Ms Slaven shared her experience of the refurbishment at McEwan Hall in Edinburgh. The key is looking beyond the initial refurbishment and finding a way to have a sustainable business case. Maintenance is a key issue. It took 6 years to get a business case for McEwan. Long term use is key in the visioning of this.

Ms Roberts agreed with the points on vision and ensuring the business case is ambitious and takes the bigger picture into account.

The Convener noted the vision section of the paper, wondering if it would be possible to do a shorter version encapsulating what has been said regarding Aberystwyth and encapsulating the Queen Street project.

Mr Crockart raised the change in vision from the original paper from 2019, with the purpose then being bringing students back to Marischal compared to what is being discussed now. He agreed with the discussion today and noted the need to make Marischal more accessible to the wider public.

Ms Roberts reiterated the need for this plan to generate income and be bold in what is proposed.

Professor Mordue agreed with the need to expand the vision and change the mindset a bit to thinking from the other side, not just the University side. What does the city want? Also noted Ms Slaven's experience as being invaluable and asked for some further discussion offline. Ms Slaven agreed.

Action: Professor Mordue

7. DATE OF STATUTORY GENERAL COUNCIL MEETING

The committee agreed with the proposal contained in the paper.

8. REPORT FROM THE CONVENER

The Convener noted no specific report this meeting, as time is better dedicated to the following items on the agenda.

9. GENERAL COUNCIL REPRESENTATION ON COURT

Mr Crockart raised his previous understanding that the original change was to reduce numbers on court, however this is not the case. The number remains the same in the new system, with the only change being how the 4 members of General Council are elected to court.

The Convener said that the change from Court perspective is that the Court can select the individuals rather than an election being required and one individual can be an independent member as well as a General Council member. He proposed the discussion of this needs to stop now.

Mr Percival agreed that there is a high chance where independent members are also University of Aberdeen graduates, but there could be the situation where they are not.

Ms Booth said she feels this discussion should be moved on from now and the focus should be on how to influence Court membership going forward. She also noted that the General Council includes alumni but also many others, and those members must also feel empowered.

Ms Slaven confirmed that the independent member criteria does not state the requirement to be General Council members, however the requirements on Court composition state that at least four members must be General Council members.

Ms Pugh agreed that it is time to move on from this discussion and build better relationships with Court going forward.

Ms Roberts linked this discussion with the importance of improving connections between the Business Committee and the General Council, which is an ongoing discussion with the Alumni Team. The Convener suggested a further discussion be held offline about this.

Action: Ms Roberts & Ms Cochrane

Ms Slaven raised the opportunity the Business Committee has now to make suggestions for new members of Court and candidates for the Senior Governor.

The Convener suggested he write back to Eleanor Bentley meantime.

Action: Convener

10. NEW BUSINESS COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The committee approved the paper and agreed it should be carried forward as proposed.

11. ALUMNUS EMAIL – UNIVERSITY MOTTO

The committee reviewed this point raised by graduate Ben Jump.

Mr Milne feels the motto should be left as is.

Mr Crockart suggested this should be put to the General Council for consideration.

Mr Percival feels there is relevance in the point as the University is meant to be forward thinking, although noted the potential to stir up further issues as a result.

Ms Pugh agrees that this is a valid point and sees no problem in questioning decisions made hundreds of years ago. She believes this should be looked at and it shouldn't necessarily be negative.

Ms Booth feels this has been recast in recent years under the 'Open to all' founding purpose. Thinks the motto should be left as is, being part of history, and the focus should be on the strategy moving forward. Suggested responding to Ben with something along this line.

Ms Roberts agrees with Ms Pugh that the motto is from a different age. Her feeling is the University should stick with the foundational purpose but move on from the dated motto which doesn't necessarily fit with a global and multicultural world.

Ms Taylor noted that not many other UK University mottos have reference to the 'Lord' and Imperial College removed their Latin motto last year due to references to the 'Empire'. She agrees with sticking with the foundational purpose.

Ms Slaven explained the motto is not that old, it was awarded in 1888 with the coat of arms. The foundational purpose is far older. The Latin motto is part of the full coat of arms, so the process of amending would be hugely complicated. The use of the coat of arms as the logo has already removed the motto, although some areas still use it (such as honorary degree certificates). She mentioned recognising history and not denying it going forward and the fact that the motto could be attractive to some communities, (i.e. broad reference to the Lord extends beyond Christianity). A diverse reaction will likely be received on this topic and she is quite happy for the General Council to discuss it further.

Ms McRobbie and Mr Montgomery both agreed with the stance of accepting the motto as part of the university history and moving forward with the foundational purpose.

The Convener agreed to respond to Ben Jump with the outcome of this discussion and offer the opportunity for him to raise this at a future General Council meeting.

Action: Convener

12. ALUMNI RELATIONS & REGULAR GIVING UPDATE

The Convener highlighted the virtual event programme, particularly the Burns Night event and Cruickshank Garden tours. He thanked Ms Cochrane and the alumni team for the work they have carried out here.

Ms Cochrane highlighted the fundraising aspect of the virtual events, getting a much wider reach both with fundraising and engagement. She confirmed that the online offering will continue after the world begins returning to some sort of normality, in order to continue engaging alumni further afield. She also highlighted that current and future students have been attending these events.

Ms Cochrane asked the committee to let her know of any suggestions for future topics or speakers, particularly from within the alumni community.

13. COURT MINUTES FROM NOVEMBER 2020 MEETING

The minutes were noted.

Ms Slaven explained the meeting following the November meeting is not until later this month, so there was not another full Court meeting to update on currently.

14. AOCB

Ms Cochrane confirmed that the next General Council meeting will take place at 5pm on Tuesday 20 April 2021.

Ms Slaven confirmed there were no competent nominations for Rector received by the February deadline. There was a concern that Covid has impacted the usual engagement process. Proposed new date will likely be in October/November time. The Convener asked if

Maggie Chapman continues in office meantime. Ms Slaven confirmed she will not, as her term of office finishes at the end of March.

The Convener proposed writing to Maggie to thank her for her contributions, the committee agreed.

Action: Convener

15. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 3 June 2021, 4pm, MS Teams