

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 4 NOVEMBER 2021

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Jenny Mordue (Vice-Convener), John Campbell, Eric Crockart, Colin Duncan, Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, Euan Mackenzie, Jan McRobbie, Dan Montgomery, Iain Percival, Patricia Pugh, Heliang Shi, Susan Strachan, Judith Taylor, Yafan Zhang, with George Boyne (Principal), Tracey Slaven (Clerk & Registrar), Julie Ashworth (Senior Governor), Tavis Potts (Director for the Centre for Energy Transition), Camilo Torres Barragán (AUSA Vice-President for Communities), Nicole Cochrane (Assistant Clerk & Registrar).

Apologies: Lisa Henderson, Graeme Nicol, Mary Stephen and Mark Strange.

1. WELCOME

The Convener welcomed everyone present to the first blended meeting of the Committee, with some attending in person and others online. He particularly welcomed John Campbell, Colin Duncan, Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, Heliang Shi and Yafan Zhang to their first meeting since their recent appointment as members, Julie Ashworth as observer following her appointment as Senior Governor and Camilo Torres Barragan as a representative of current students.

2. UPDATE FROM PRINCIPAL, PROFESSOR GEORGE BOYNE

The Convener welcomed Principal George Boyne for his customary annual report on the state of the University.

The Principal spoke about *Aberdeen 2040*, the University's 20 year strategy, and the 4 year implementation plan. Progress on each component of the strategy was reported on the website. Financially, the University had moved from a deficit of £3.9m in 2017-18 to a surplus of £8.7m in 2020-21, which gave scope to invest in buildings, technology and (most important) staff. Income came from education including online and in overseas campuses (60%), research (30%) and commercial activity (10%).

There had been significant changes in the student population over the past 5 years, although the total number studying on campus in Aberdeen had changed little. Brexit had greatly reduced the number of EU **undergraduates** (almost halving the number of undergraduate students from the EU). But that had largely been counterbalanced by an increase in the number of undergraduate students from Scotland and from the rest of the world. International **postgraduate taught students** had markedly increased, although there had been a small but concerning decrease in the number of Scottish students. Comparable figures for **postgraduate research students** were not yet available but were likely to show a decline, which needed attention. As a result of these changes, the University was more diverse, and revenue per student had increased by 50%.

Research had in the past suffered from the 20% reduction in academic staff between 2012 and 2018 to redress the University's financial deficit. There were signs of a recovery in external grant applications and awards, with a large increase in applications in 2020-21, the result of which was not fully known. External research grant awards had exceeded £50m in 2020-21. In addition, about £22m of government research funding was allocated on the basis of the Research Excellence Framework.

Much effort had been devoted to improving the morale of University staff, the fruits of which were evident by comparing the results of the 2020 staff survey with the similarly worded survey in 2018. Particularly notable was the increase in staff identification with the strategic plan, which had increased from 47% to 91% thanks to the work on *Aberdeen 2040*. There was recognition also in terms of rankings. The University was 5th in the UK for student satisfaction; 158th in the Times HE global rankings (an increase of 20 places); in the Top 20 UK universities in the Guardian and Times ranking; and had the best strategy in the UK according to the HE Strategic Planners Association.

In the next period, the accent would continue to be on the continued implementation of *Aberdeen 2040*, money, and staff morale. A large expansion of the Qatar campus was a possibility. It was important to improve the University's ranking for research reputation, which was out-of-line with its research quality. A fundraising campaign was being prepared by the Development Trust – updating and reconfiguring the University's estate.

The Committee thanked the Principal for his report and congratulated him on what had been achieved, particularly on rankings. Discussion on student numbers focussed on the importance of scholarships and funding of supervision costs for research students, the advantages, and disadvantages of the 4-year Scottish undergraduate degree (which did not seem in practice to discourage students from the rest of the UK) and the effect of the pandemic on student numbers (which was much less marked than in the previous academic year). On rankings, members asked about the Teaching Excellence Framework and underlined the importance of increasing the University's position in the Times HE global rankings (especially for attracting overseas students). Other points of discussion were the University's collaboration with Chinese universities, the role of the Committee in supporting the forthcoming fundraising campaign and the importance of finding a future for the Marischal College building.

2. MINUTES

The minutes were noted and approved.

3. MATTERS ARISING

Colin Duncan stressed the importance of publishing the history of the General Council in hard copy, not in electronic form alone, because it was a companion volume to the 1860-1960 history and because there was likely to be demand for hard copies, probably exceeding the number mentioned in the minutes. The Convener thanked Mr Duncan for his reinforcement of the efforts which he and Dr Charles Calder were making to bring the book to publication, including in hard copy. The Committee – and the University Secretary, who would be arranging the funding - would be consulted on the final proposals.

4. BUSINESS COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP (Paper GC21:16)

The paper highlighted three loose ends. The first was the role of the four Court nominees: The Committee agreed with the paper's analysis. The Committee also agreed that the General Council standing orders allowed for the appointment of the Court nominees. Eric Crockart pointed out that it appeared that Court would be nominating only four of its independent members, which Tracey Slaven confirmed. The Convener regretted that there would be only four nominees and explained that it would be open to the elected members of the Committee to select a smaller number than four.

The Committee discussed whether to specify the skills and experience (for example, age or international experience) of the four nominees but concluded that it was more important to

allow the Court flexibility to nominate members who would be likely to play a full part in the work of the Committee.

The Committee agreed that the Convener should respond to Court along these lines.

Action: Convener

5. TAVIS POTTS, CENTRE FOR ENERGY TRANSITION

Tavis Potts, interim director of one of the five specialist centres being established by the University, spoke about the work of the Centre in its first 14 months. The Centre aimed, in collaboration with industry, government and civil society, to bring to bear interdisciplinary research (from 7 Schools and 200 academic staff at a variety of career stages) to support the achievement of net zero carbon. The Centre had 8 themes, including renewable generation and governance and just transition. It had submitted £15m of research applications, of which so far £5m had been successful and £2-3m unsuccessful. Research projects included, in the “renewable energy” theme, large-scale wind, tidal and wave generation and small-scale rural systems and, in the “just transition” theme, how to empower communities and assess outcomes. The Centre was unique in its ability to engage a wide variety of disciplines, including law and humanities alongside the more obvious geoscience and engineering.

Questions from the Committee included marketing the Centre’s research capacity, managing contacts with potential customers and the importance of being located in a region greatly affected by energy transition. The Convener thanked Professor Potts for his presentation and the impetus he had given to the Centre.

6. PROCEDURE FOR REMOVAL OF MEMBERS OF THE UNIVERSITY COURT (Paper GC21:17)

The Committee agreed to the Court’s proposal to provide for a review of a decision to remove a member of Court. The Convener would reply on the Committee’s behalf.

Action: Convener

7. MARISCHAL COLLEGE REVITALISATION (Paper GC21:18)

Jenny Mordue reported that the group which she chaired had submitted, on behalf of the Committee, a response to the call for proposals. Eric Crockart, who was a member of the university’s task group on the subject, said that it had received several proposals, which had common themes. The next stage was for the task group to meet to consider the proposals and consider widening the consultation on the future of the building. He would suggest that a heritage architect be asked for advice.

The Committee thanked Jenny Mordue and her group for their work on the topic.

8. COURT DIGEST FROM SEPTEMBER 2021 MEETING

Iain Percival, a member of Court, mentioned that in its consideration of investment strategy, the Court had recognised the importance of working with the oil and gas sector to achieve a future for energy in the region.

Colin Duncan asked for a progress report on the election of a new Rector. Camilo Torres Barragán explained that the student body had been working to identify potential candidates and Tracey Slaven reported that nominations had just closed, and it seemed likely that more than one eligible candidate would be standing for election.

9. FUTURE MEETINGS (Paper GC21:20)

On the timing of the **Business Committee** meetings, it was important to find arrangements which suited both the UK and Chinese members. A poll of current members had however identified no single agreeable time. Dan Montgomery pointed out that membership in future might include someone from the Americas, which would further complicate matters. Euan Mackenzie suggested alternating between late afternoon and morning. Jan McRobbie pointed out the importance of encouraging young members, for whom late afternoon would probably be most convenient. Yafan Zhang said that an advantage of the current timing was that she did not have to take time off work and Heliang Shi pointed out that the inconvenience of the hour in China was limited by the fact that there were only 4 meetings per year. The Committee agreed to continue to meet at 16.00 UK time meantime, and to ask members periodically what time would suit them best.

On the agenda for the next meetings, the Committee agreed that either Debbie Dyker or Pete Edwards should be invited to address the March meeting and that the June meeting should focus on the outcome of the Research Excellence Framework. Subject to the rules for preventing the spread of Covid, the meetings would be held on a blended basis, allowing attendance in-person or online. Dan Montgomery pointed out that the date of the June meeting coincided with a public holiday and Nicole Cochrane agreed to propose an alternative.

Action: Nicole Cochrane

Nicole Cochrane that it might be possible to arrange a **General Council** meeting in the late afternoon on 15 December, before the University carol concert, which might encourage attendance. The key points in the agenda might be a report from Alumni Relations, and a report of progress on *Aberdeen 2040*, focussing on the “International” dimension of the strategy. The Committee agreed.

Action: Nicole Cochrane

10. AOCB

There was none.

**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL
CONVENER'S REPORT**

1. This paper summarises events since the November meeting of the Committee and seeks views on a number of points.

History of the General Council

2. Members will recall that Dr Charles Calder has completed the manuscript of the history of the General Council since 1960. The next step towards publication is to digitise the manuscript, and a contract for that work is about to be let. Nigel Lindsay, my predecessor as Convener, has agreed to help Dr Calder and me with any necessary editing prior to publication. I will report progress to the June meeting of the Committee, when I hope a decision can be taken on the exact form of publication.

General Council meetings

3. It proved impracticable to arrange the meeting of the General Council in mid-December, and it was held online on 13 January, attended by 44 members. The main agenda items were reports on progress with the University's Aberdeen 2040 strategic plan, and on the work of Alumni Relations. The meeting seemed to run well. Feedback from Business Committee members who attended would be welcome.

4. The next meeting of the General Council has in the past few years been combined with the University AGM. It is uncertain whether or not that will be repeated in 2022. The University's governance review has raised some questions around the visibility of Court and that might require a different approach. The alternative is to revert to the previous standalone meeting of the General Council, perhaps in June, including the normal annual report from the Principal. Members' views are invited.

Court representatives on Business Committee

5. The Committee agreed in November the proposal that four independent Court members, who are also General Council members, be appointed to the Business Committee. I wrote accordingly to the Court and its Governance and Nominations Committee is in the process of identifying which independent Court members might be proposed to the Business Committee. In the interests of allowing these Court members to take part in the June meeting of the Business Committee, I might seek the Business Committee's approval in correspondence to all or some of the Court's eventual nominees. Is that acceptable to members? In the meantime, we continue to benefit from Iain Percival's membership both of Court and of the Committee.

Duncan Macniven
Convener
23 February 2022

Court Digest

This digest provides a summary of the main items of business discussed at the meeting of the Court held on 23 November 2021. The papers from the Court meeting and the approved minutes of the Court's previous meeting are also available here: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/governance/court-information.php#panel2453>

NEW MEMBERS

The Court welcomed Robert Traynham and Otto Thoresen (Independent Members) to their first meetings of Court. *The Court also welcomed Pete Edwards to his first meeting in his new role as Vice-Principal for Regional Engagement & Regional Recovery* and Phil McNaull (Interim Director of Finance) as observers from the Senior Management Team.

REPORT FROM THE SENIOR GOVERNOR

Julie Ashworth provided Court members with a report on the activities she had undertaken in the role of Senior Governor since the previous meeting, including meetings with the Chairs of Robert Gordon University and North East Scotland College (NESCOL). The Court was pleased to hear that a competitive and positive Rectorial Election had been concluded and looked forward to Martina Chukwuma-Ezike, Rector-Elect, joining Court following her formal appointment on 1 January. Court welcomed the opportunity to meet informally with Martina and with Adam Lambert (AUSA Vice-President for Sports) and Ivana Drdakova (AUSA Vice-President for Welfare) later in the morning.

REPORT FROM THE PRINCIPAL AND HE SECTOR/UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENTS

The Principal highlighted the strong student intake in September 2021, which had resulted in the projected academic fee income being c.£1M ahead of budget for the financial year 2021/22, supported by the recruitment of additional academic staff. The Court noted that in-person graduation ceremonies in both Aberdeen and Qatar would take place in November. The Court welcomed the ongoing progress being made in research, including the appointment of Interdisciplinary Challenge Centre Directors and the awards and distinctions achieved by members of staff across the University.

PRESENTATION: WHY LEAGUE TABLES MATTER

The Court received a presentation from Karl Leydecker, Senior Vice-Principal, which provided a critique on the methodologies and use of League Tables in the Higher Education sector, including a summary of the University's position in national and international rankings and the ongoing activities as outlined in the Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan to enhance performance in key areas such as academic and employer reputation, staff/student ratios and graduate outcomes. Further enhancement of student employability skills and employer engagement would be key to improving graduate outcomes, international student recruitment, reputational recognition and League Table ranking.

ANNUAL REPORT/ACCOUNTS AND ASSOCIATED REPORTS

The Court approved the University's annual report and accounts for the year ended 31 July 2021, which reported a surplus of £8.7M from operating activities following the receipt of Covid support to the sector from the Scottish Funding Council. The Court also received related reports from the Audit and Risk Committee, the University's external and internal auditors and a going concern analysis.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION WITH CHAIR OF SCOTTISH FUNDING COUNCIL

The Court was joined by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Chair, Deputy Director of Policy and Outcome Agreement Manager. The Court received an update on several sector-wide matters, including the findings and recommendations arising from the [SFC Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#), and the establishment of two Tertiary Provision Pathfinder initiatives in Scotland. The Court noted the opportunity for the University to engage with schools and other education providers in the region as part of the North-East Scotland Pathfinder initiative to support the future planning of skills provision and skills alignment to support economic recovery.

ADDRESSING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The Court welcomed the activities being undertaken to address Gender Based Violence at the University and endorsed the new Policy and Action Plan which will be launched as part of the [16 Days of Action Activism Against Gender Based Violence campaign](#).

GOVERNANCE

The Court approved the findings and recommendations arising from the Senate Effectiveness Review which had been undertaken by Advance HE and accepted by Senate at its October meeting. The Court noted that the report had made several recommendations for change to the way Senate operates, including recommendations to enhance communication and connections between (i) Senate and its sub-committees and (ii) sub-committees and Schools. The Court was advised that the review had been undertaken in parallel with the wider Governance Review which Advance HE had undertaken for Court and that a project plan would be developed to ensure that the recommendations of each report were addressed. Court endorsed a high-level direction of travel for committees structures which would see the business of current Joint Committees of Court and Senate aligned to Senate sub-committees.

The Court noted the discussions which had taken place at Senate in relation to the IHRA Definition of Anti-Semitism, arrangements for delivering teaching for the rest of the current academic year and possible alterations to the session dates for 2022/23.

The Court also received and approved the report from the Governance & Nominations Committee and the Naming of Assets Policy.

ITEMS FOR APPROVAL AND INFORMATION

The Court also considered the following further items of business for information or approval:

- Scottish Funding Council Annual Outcome Agreement;
- Annual Report on Procurement;
- Annual Update of Modern Slavery Statement;
- Adoption of Changes to Standing Orders and Amendment of Resolution [Procedure for Removal of Members of Court];
- Reports from sub-committees: Policy and Resources Committee; Research Policy Committee, and University Education Committee.

Any questions regarding the Court digest should be sent to Mr Bruce Purdon, Clerk to the Court b.purdon@abdn.ac.uk