UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SUSTAINABILITY STEERING GROUP

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 5 MAY 2021

Present : K Leydecker (Chair), L Benvie, J Boyle, D Burslem, M Campbell, A Donaldson, D Dyker, J Fernandes, H Gannicliffe, S Jindra, F Lovie, T Potts, A Price, L Rattray, R Slater, T Slaven, A Speight, H Sveinsdottir, Y Tanino, N Vargesson, R Wells and H Crabb (Clerk).

Apologies : D Beattie, R Moncrieffe, R Taylor and C Wallback.

1. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 16 December 2020 were approved.

2. **TABLE OF ACTIONS**

The Committee received the Table of Actions arising from the previous meeting and noted the following:

2.1 Aberdeen City Council

The Group was advised that discussions were ongoing with Aberdeen City Council regarding heating, hydrogen and power and that a meeting had taken place with the ONE Group.

2.2 Sustainability Leadership Scorecard

The Group was advised that work remained paused following the activities/workload review but that consideration would need to be given to this in due course.

2.3 Sustainable Design Guide

The Group was advised that work was ongoing to highlight the sustainability of University buildings across the website, including a dedicated landing page and the inclusion of references to sustainability issues across other webpages. Ongoing work in relation to (i) the AUSA sustainability website and (ii) the University’s energy and carbon webpages (including a live carbon tracker tool) was also noted.

2.4 Utility Consumption

The Group was advised that utility consumption had not featured in the School planning round which had just concluded but its inclusion would be considered in Session 2021/22.

**Action: HS**

2.5 UKRI Environmental Sustainability Strategy

The Group was advised that the strategy would be considered by the Research Policy Committee at its meeting in June.

2.6 Environmental Disclosure – Enhanced Corporate Climate Reporting

The Group noted that the topic was scheduled to feature on a Court members’ briefing and that a date would be confirmed shortly.

**3.** **ABERDEEN 2040 IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

The Group received and noted the Operational Plan template which would be completed for all commitments within the Aberdeen 2040 plan. It was agreed that the templates for the four commitments relating to sustainability would be shared via the Teams site and members were invited to provide input and/or feedback by the end of May.

**Action: All**

The Group was advised that work was ongoing to develop the objectives for Commitment 18 *(we will excel in research that addresses the climate emergency, enables energy transition and the preservation of biodiversity)* and it was agreed that consideration would be given to the University hosting a conference/event to showcase the interdisciplinary research that was being undertaken in this area.

**Action: MC**

**4. NET ZERO**

4.1 Science-based Targets

The Group received a presentation from the Energy Manager outlining the work which was being undertaken to develop science-based emissions targets and which would be captured within the Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan templates. The Group noted that the University had greater control over its ability to reduce Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions than those in Scope 3 (which are associated with the supply chain). It was agreed that the scale and scope of the actions and resources required to underpin the delivery of the net zero target would be reflected in the planning template for Commitment 19 (*we will achieve net zero carbon emissions before 2040*).

**Action: KL**

The Group agreed that the sustainability agenda afforded the University positive opportunities to enhance and align its institutional activities with the net zero commitment. It also noted the importance of encouraging appropriate investment in time, effort and resources to ensure that net increases in carbon emissions are offset in moving forward.

The importance of continuing to ensure that mechanisms are in place to support the consideration of net zero implications at an early stage of discussions around decisions, projects and institutional activities was also highlighted.

It was agreed that consideration would be given to how emissions data from the AFG campus in Qatar should be captured and reported.

**Action: TS/AD**

4.2 Aberdeen City Council - Net Zero Leadership Board and Net Zero City Route-Map

The Group received the Aberdeen City Council report entitled “Participation, Inclusion and Behaviour Change” which had been considered by the Council’s Net Zero Leadership Board and the accompanying “Route-Map Towards Becoming a Net Zero City by 2045” which was subject to an ongoing consultation process. The Group noted the Council’s intention to set out a pathway towards the city becoming net zero by 2045 in partnership with (i) political, business, public sector, community and civic leaders and (ii) City residents. The Group also noted the 6 themes within the Route-Map: (i) mobility, (ii) buildings and heating, (iii) circular waste economy, (iv) energy supply, (v) natural environment and (vi) behaviour change, and the implication that they would have in relation to a wide range of activities.

The Group was advised of the City Council’s desire to engage the student community in particular with this initiative and welcomed the opportunities which the Route-Map provided in relation to engaging in meaningful partnership working to support the City’s future development.

The Group also noted the level of ambition and pace of change anticipated within the Route-Map and the likelihood that partner organisations would be expected to match these by both local Councils and the Scottish Government. The importance of continuing to engage at a senior level with the City Council on sustainability matters and initiatives was highlighted and the Group noted that the establishment of the new Vice-Principal (Regional Engagement & Regional Recovery) portfolio would assist in this regard.

**5.** **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

5.1 SDG Accord Update

The Group was advised that the format of the report had changed and that the required policy survey would be submitted shortly, with any case study submitted thereafter. The Group noted that the revised format may impact upon the collection of evidence for future Times Higher Impact Ranking submissions and that consideration was being given to how to ensure that the information could be captured in other ways.

The Group anticipated receiving a copy of the submission once it had been agreed.

**Action: FL**

5.2 Times Higher Impact Ranking Update

The Group welcomed the University’s strong performance in the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking exercise having been ranked 57th in the world (up 16 places from 73rd in 2020). The Group noted in particular that the University’s ranking had improved from 16th to 12th (UK) and from 5th to 3rd in Scotland. The Group was also advised that the University’s overall score represented the highest level that it had achieved in the three-year history of the ranking, with a top quartile position being achieved across all areas.

The Group was advised that the working group would continue to meet to reflect on the results and to identify areas for enhancement in future submissions.

Thanks were expressed to all those involved in developing the submission.

**6. FAIRTRADE ACCREDITATION**

The Group received a paper outlining changes in the way University Fairtrade status is accredited to inform an institutional decision on whether to pursue accreditation under the revised scheme. The Group was advised that the new accreditation scheme was more prescriptive, including checklists of eligible activities, student audits and a 2-year timescale and that accreditation would be available on a tiered basis (gold, silver, bronze). The Group also noted that an annual subscription fee would be levied under the new model (£1,195 + VAT) for support from the NUS affiliate organisation SOS-UK.

The Group considered the two options outlined within the paper, one of which involved entering into the new accreditation scheme and the other remaining committed to the principles of Fairtrade (including an exploration of other ethical procurement regimes) but not seeking formal accreditation.

On balance, it was agreed that in view of the sustained level of commitment required from various staff members across a range of areas over a 2-year period, it would be appropriate to pause Fairtrade accreditation at this time. The Group agreed that it would be important for the University to continue to act in line with the commitment to Fairtrade principles and keep future participation in the revised accreditation scheme under review.

**7. PUBLIC SECTOR REPORTING DUTY**

The Group noted the letter from Roseanna Cunningham MSP highlighting that with effect from 31 March 2022 onwards, public bodies will be required to report the following in their annual reports:

* Target date for achieving zero direct emissions;
* Targets for reducing indirect emissions of greenhouse gases;
* How spending plans/resource allocation models with contribute to reducing emissions and achieving emissions targets;
* How progress towards achieving emissions reduction targets will be published; and
* The contribution made towards delivering Scotland’s Climate Change Adaptation Programme.

The Group was advised that the additional guidance referred to within the letter, and which had been anticipated in April 2021, was still awaited. The Group also noted the direction of travel towards a “joined-up” approach to partnership working and sustainability reporting across public sector organisations as previously noted (agenda item 4.2 refers).

**8. UNIVERSITIES SCOTLAND INTERNATIONALISATION WORKING GROUP**

The Group received the briefing note from the COP26 Universities Network in relation to carbon offsetting and was advised that 10 universities had entered into a pilot scheme to consider approved accreditation schemes for offsetting where necessary.

The Group was also advised that Richard Wells was convening a Universities Scotland group with a view to developing recommendations that may form the basis of a Scottish sectoral approach to capturing data on the impact of business travel on carbon emissions. The Group anticipated receiving a copy of the outputs from the national working group following publication.

**Action: RW**

The Group was advised that the institutional contract for the provision of travel services with Diversity Travel would expire over the course of the next year. It was noted that the University’s travel service provider could play a key role in capturing data in relation to business travel and emissions. It was agreed that the activity to establish a working group to consider business travel which had been paused as a result of the workload review in early 2021 would be re-started as quickly as practicable.

**Action: KL**

**9. HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPLY CHAIN EMISSIONS TOOL (HESCET)**

The Group received and noted the Scope 3 Emissions Report in relation to the CO2 emissions associated with procurement spend. The Group was advised that discussions were ongoing with APUC to develop and implement a more sophisticated tool which would support more detailed and comparative reporting across the sector in future.

**10. UPDATE FROM AUSA**

The Group welcomed the paper summarising progress made by AUSA in relation to the Green Champions scheme, the launch of online Sustainability Q&A sessions and the development of the sustainability section of the AUSA website. The Group was also advised that work was ongoing to re-start the bicycle rental scheme and continue Carbon Literacy Training sessions. The Group noted that AUSA had recently changed its default search engine to a provider (Ecosia) which supported renewable energy and tree planting initiatives.

The useful resources provided by Zero Waste Scotland, particularly in relation to behaviour change and training material, were highlighted.

**11. UNIVERSITY PREPARATION FOR COP26 GLASGOW 2021**

The Group noted the progress made in relation to participation in the COP26 Glasgow event which was being co-ordinated by a working group led by Liz Rattray. The Group welcomed the partnership approach which had been adopted to sharing material and seeking a regional approach to participation wherever possible.

The Group was advised that over recent weeks, there had been some discussions around the potential for COP26 to be cancelled again with UN and UK representatives citing challenges around travel and querying the effectiveness of an online event. However, the prevailing view from the Cabinet Office at this stage is that the event would still go ahead.

The importance of the event in relation to increasing the University’s profile and reputation, particularly in relation to (i) highlighting the interdisciplinary challenges and sustainability targets and (ii) the opportunities to engage with external stakeholders throughout the ‘Road to COP26’ was highlighted.

The Group was advised of a recent Scottish Government announcement that oil and gas companies would no longer be eligible for some support interventions.

The Group noted the importance of the COP26 event and of encouraging widespread internal and external engagement with it. In this connection, it was agreed that an early discussion with UMG and Heads of School would be helpful.

**Action: LR/JF**

**12. CENTRE FOR ENERGY TRANSITION UPDATE**

The Group welcomed the progress made by the Centre for Energy Transition in its first year and noted in particular the efforts to facilitate a culture of interdisciplinary research across various themes, champions and Schools and the ongoing high level of stakeholder engagement.

The Group also noted the range of educational activities that were ongoing within the Centre and the positive response from prospective Masters students following the signature of the Partnership Agreement with Total and the launch of the new Environmental Transformation programme.

It was agreed that future reports on the research activities within the Centre would include details of both the funder and the value of the award/submission wherever possible.

**Action: TP**

The Group expressed its best wishes to all staff and students within the Centre involved in the forthcoming official launch event.

It was agreed that future agendas would include an update on the work of the Centre for Environment & Biodiversity.

**Action: Clerk (for agenda)**

**13.** **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Sustainability Steering Group will be held on Wednesday 25 August 2021 at 2.05pm via Microsoft Teams.