

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY COURT

**MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 4 OCTOBER 2022
(in the Sir Duncan Rice Library and via Teams)**

Present: Julie Ashworth (in the Chair for items from minutes 3 onward except for minutes 37)
Colette Backwell
Camilo Torres Barragán
Eleanor Bentley
George Boyne (except for minutes 36)
Martina Chukwuma-Ezike (in the Chair for minutes 1-2)
Owen Cox
Nick Edwards
Iain Mackay
Gary McRae
Helen Martin
Lyndsay Menzies
Caryn Miller
Martin Mills
Anne Minto
Vanessa Mabonso Nzola
Iain Percival
Charlotte Pope-Williams
Diane Skåtun
Otto Thoresen
Joachim Schaper (via Teams)
Robert Traynham
Neil Vargesson
Ilia Xypolia.

In attendance: Debbie Dyker
Pete Edwards
David Evans
Jenny Fernandes
Karl Leydecker
Tracey Slaven
Alan Speight
Ruth Taylor
Louise Thomson
Mark White
Bruce Purdon (Clerk).

Apologies: Keith Anderson
Iain Torrance KCVO.

WELCOME AND RECTOR'S REPORT

- 1 The Rector welcomed Vanessa Mabonso Nzola and Ilia Xypolia to their first meeting as Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA) nominated member and Senate Assessor member respectively. The Rector also welcomed David Evans to his first meeting as a Governor Apprentice member and Louise Thomson as Head of Governance and Executive Support (in attendance).
- 2 The Rector provided an oral and written report (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*) which highlighted some of the different types of issues that had been raised by students at her surgeries. These included support for employability, course assessment issues and impact of absence due to ill-health, visa-renewal issues, and the cost of living and financial hardship concerns. The Rector also reported on the meetings and events that she had participated in across the University community since the last meeting of Court.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND REMINDER OF COURT AND MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

- 3 The Court noted the standing reminder of the responsibilities of Court and members as charity trustees (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). A declaration of interest in the agenda was noted from Owen Cox as a Trustee of the University of Aberdeen Superannuation and Life Assurance Scheme (UASLAS).

MINUTES

- 4 The Minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2022 were approved (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*).

ACTION LOG, MATTERS ARISING AND DECISIONS BY CIRCULATION

- 5 The Court noted the updated Action Log (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*) and a report on matters that had been agreed by circulation, these being:
- Approval of the membership of Court Committees and the Pension Advisory Group, and of the proposed composition and membership of the Investment Committee while noting that this would require further approval by the Development Trust Board.
 - On the recommendation of the Senate, approval of draft resolutions regarding changes to Degree Resolutions, changes to the Policy on Fitness to Practise, changes to the Code of Practice on Student Discipline (Academic) and to the Policy for Dealing with Allegations of Academic Misconduct Against Graduates of the University.
- 6 In discussion, it was noted that there had been further developments with regard to the SFC Pathfinder initiative and agreed that this action could be considered complete. The Senior Governor provided updates regarding progress against some further matters noted in the action log which remained pending.

REPORT FROM THE SENIOR GOVERNOR

- 7 The Court received and noted a report from the Senior Governor on the meetings and activities she had undertaken since the previous meeting (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). In discussion, it was suggested it would be helpful to receive more information on the main issues discussed by the Senior Governor in meetings with wider sector stakeholders.

REPORT FROM THE PRINCIPAL AND UPDATE ON THE SECTOR/UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENTS

- 8 The Court received a report on policy developments relating to higher education and the recent achievements of staff and students at Aberdeen (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*), supplemented by an oral report from the Principal.
- 9 The Principal discussed with Court the implications of the cost of living crisis for staff and students and the steps the University was taking, in partnership with the Students' Association, to provide support for those most in need including with regard to PhD stipend increases, international students and the provision of designated warm spaces across the campus. The Principal also noted the University's recent performance in league table rankings and congratulated staff and students for the University moving from 20th to 13th in The Guardian University Guide – Aberdeen's highest ever ranking – and in consolidating its Top 20 position in the Times/Sunday Times Rankings in which it had moved up one place to 19th. The achievement of staff and students in Aberdeen moving from 5th to 4th in the UK in the National Student Survey was also noted and the Court recorded its appreciation of the contribution of all staff and students to this and the Vice-Principal for Education.
- 10 In further discussion, the Principal anticipated some of the key issues that the Court would have the opportunity to engage with at its strategy day. The importance of the University building on its recent success and maintaining momentum by focusing on new opportunities and creating the headroom for further investment was noted. As part of this and the later discussion of the Operational Plan for the year ahead, the Court also noted that the current significant fiscal crisis

in the UK economy and wider external economic pressures could present challenges for the University and that it would need to be able to respond to these. The Principal assured the Court, that while recognising that risk, the University should take confidence from its recent achievements but that it had the ability to manage those challenges by pausing or stopping aspects of the delivery of Aberdeen 2040 if necessary.

- 11 It was noted that members would welcome:
- an infographic or short briefing on the sector funding position that could assist them in their advocacy role;
 - a discussion at a future meeting of the longer term plan for the physical and digital estate;
 - further updates on the work being undertaken to support students that had been noted above.

ABERDEEN 2040 STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN TO 2025

SUMMARY OF PERFORMANCE 2021/22

- 12 The Court received a report on the University's progress over 2021/22 against the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in place to track delivery of Aberdeen 2040 (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). These covered Education, Research, Regional Engagement, Inclusive, Interdisciplinary, International, Sustainable, Financial Sustainability, and League Table Performance. The Court noted that in overall terms good progress had been made against the majority of KPIs and the report outlined the further work being undertaken to address areas where performance was behind the relevant KPI.
- 13 The connection between teaching and research and challenges of workload for staff in delivering both to a high-standard, in particular in terms of research excellence, were discussed. It was acknowledged that while new investment in staff had meant student:staff ratios were improving, the aspiration was to go further but that was dependent on achieving the growth in income to sustain further investment.
- 14 The Court approved the report.

PROPOSED OPERATIONAL PLAN FOR 2022/23

- 15 The Court received the Aberdeen 2040 Operational Plan for 2022/23 (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). The plan proposed in particular that, as was also consistent with the Principal's objectives for the year, the University would give enhanced focus to the following six key areas of strategic importance over 2022/23:
1. Delivering the Court-approved budget, including a targeted £20million increase in tuition fee income.
 2. Rebuilding research capacity and research quality.
 3. Supporting student employability, with a primary focus on work experience opportunities for students.
 4. Strengthening connections with industry by increasing collaborative activities and economic impact.
 5. Developing a plan for institutional growth and investment to 2030.
 6. Supporting the wellbeing, health and safety of staff and students, and enabling people to achieve their full potential.
- 16 In discussion, the Court considered the challenges to student recruitment in the widening access context, particularly given the cost of living crisis and that further deliberation would be given to what further support the University could offer in that context to mitigate that. The Court noted the significant risks that the external environment could pose to the delivery of the priorities and that the challenge would be to be able to quickly adjust and revisit priorities in the wider plan beyond those key areas if those risks were realised.
- 17 The Court approved the Operational Plan for 2022/23, noting the potential challenges to delivery from the external environment.

AUDIT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

STRATEGIC RISK MANAGEMENT – BIENNIAL REPORT

- 18 The Court received the bi-annual report on risk management at institutional level (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*), the timing of which had been brought forward from November, to ensure the most recent version of the Strategic Risk Register (SRR) informed the University's Annual Report. This would be a permanent re-alignment of the reporting cycle with reports submitted to Court in September and March/April each year, dependent on meeting dates.
- 19 The Court noted that the report included six areas of risk that were rated as critical, in particular the volatility of the external environment which had increased further since the point the report had been written. The assessment of staffing risks was discussed and the basis for the assessment as being significant rather than critical was noted. A number of members noted their concern regarding workload and staffing levels and it was acknowledged that while investment had been made and more planned to address this, more was required. It was suggested the University should, as part of its staffing planning, consider the continuing need for staff with the skills, experience and training to meet the needs of a student community that was growing in size and diversity.
- 20 The Court noted the report on strategic risks and the measures that were in place or planned to mitigate against these.

AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE REPORT

- 21 The Court received a report of the business considered by the Audit and Risk Committee at its meeting of 5 September 2022 (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*).
- 22 The Court ratified the Committee's terms of reference for 2022-23. The Court also noted the following business that had been considered by the Committee:
- the Committee's input and comments on the draft Risk Appetite Statement.
 - the following items that had been approved by the Committee via its delegated authority:
 - the Schedule of Business for the Committee for 2022-23.
 - the process and timeline for the tender process to appoint new internal and external auditors during 2022-23.
 - the draft Internal Audit Annual Report and Opinion for 2021-22 from the internal auditor, for inclusion with the Annual Report and Accounts.
 - the final Internal Audit Plan 2022-23 and the Committee's oversight of progress in respect of associated internal audit fieldwork.
 - the Committee's consideration and discussion of the following matters:
 - the progress of recruitment of two new External Members to the Committee to commence office from 1 November 2022.
 - current developments within the University's external and operating environments from a risk management perspective and the bi-annual risk management update (see minute 18 above), and the Committee's requests for the addition of emerging risks relating to energy and people issues, and a review of individual risk ratings in the context of their overall importance to the University's operation.
 - the findings and recommendations of the *Supplier Continuity and Resilience (IT Infrastructure)* and *Payroll* internal audit reports).
 - progress against outstanding internal audit actions.
 - the ongoing work of the external auditor to finalise and report on the 2021-22 audit by the deadline for inclusion within the Annual Report and.
 - the further requirement for the University to submit USGAAP accounts for 2021-22 to the US Treasury Department.

GOVERNANCE AND REGULATORY

ANNUAL REPORT TO SFC ON INSTITUTIONAL-LED REVIEW OF TEACHING QUALITY

- 23 The Court received and approved the Annual Report to the Scottish Funding Council on Institution-Led Review of Quality 2020/21 (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*).

USE OF UNIVERSITY SEAL

- 24 The Court received a paper which set out proposed guidance on the use of the University Common Seal (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). This had been developed in response to recommendations in the Governance Review Action Plan. The Court approved the guidance document for further implementation.

SCHEDULE OF COURT BUSINESS FOR 2022/23

- 25 The Court received a proposed schedule of business for the year ahead for further input and development (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). The Court noted that it might revise the schedule should members identify further priorities for discussion arising from the Strategy Meeting.

REPORTS FROM THE SENATE AND COURT SUB-COMMITTEES

SENATE

- 26 The Court received a report on the key items of business considered by the Senate at its meeting of 21 September 2022 (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). The report detailed the Senate's consideration of:
- Reports from the Education Committee and Research Policy Committee;
 - Reports from the Academic Promotion Review Working Group;
 - Revisions to Honorary Degree Procedures;
 - Nominations to the Dick Bequest Trust where it was noted that the Senate had agreed that it would no longer elect individuals to the Trust.

COURT-SUB COMMITTEE REPORTS

Finance and Resourcing Committee Report and Financial Year-End Position

- 27 The Court received a report of the key items of business from the Finance and Resourcing Committee of 15 September 2022 (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). The Court:
- approved the Committee's terms of reference for 2022-23.
 - noted that the Committee had approved the following under its delegated authority from Court:
 - a revised Schedule of Business for the Committee for 2022-23.
 - tuition fees for 2023-24.
 - a draft institutional Insurance Strategy.
 - a summary of debt write-off for 2021-22, totalling £338k.
 - a revised Treasury Management Policy, amended to take into account all recommendations made by the University's internal auditors as part of the Financial Forecasting internal audit.
 - noted the Committee's consideration and discussion of the following matters:
 - current developments within the University's external and operating environments.
 - the repayment of outstanding tuition fee debt.
 - a deep-dive presentation on the Financial Sustainability elements of the institutional Risk Register.

- the transfer of relevant outstanding actions and matters arising from the dissolved Policy & Resources Committee to the Finance & Resourcing Committee, including an update on progress with regard to the University's Field Cycling Imaging (FCI) Scanner project.
- the draft outturn 2021-22, on which a further oral update would be presented to Court (see Minute 30).
- the renewal of all University insurance cover for 2022-23.
- updates on the current status of the annual valuations of the University of Aberdeen Superannuation and Life Assurance Scheme (UASLAS) and the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS).
- a summary of the anticipated financial implications across the key focus areas of Aberdeen 2040 for 2022-23.
- an update from the Investment Committee in relation to the University's endowment, Development Trust and Northern College portfolios and progress against the revised Investment Strategy and commitment to fossil fuel divestment.

28 In discussion of the Committee's consideration of insurance matters, it was noted that the Business Committee of the General Council had expressed an interest in the condition of the University retained areas of Marischal, in particular with regard to fire safety. It was confirmed that the University had undertaken a fire safety assessment of the building and that work was ongoing to develop an appropriate response to its findings.

29 The Court also received a verbal report from the Chief Financial Officer on the University's unaudited financial year end position for 2021/22, noting that this had resulted in a £6.9M surplus against a budget target of a £3M deficit. While this was welcome, it was noted that the surplus had in large part been due to underspends that would impact the current financial year.

Governance and Nominations Committee

30 The Court received a report from the meeting of the Governance and Nominations Committee held on 13 September 2022 (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*).

31 The Court, on the recommendation of the Committee, agreed to delegate authority to the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee to approve the appointment of two external members of that committee.

32 The Court approved recommended amendments to the Governance and Nomination Committee's terms of reference and composition.

33 The Court approved minor amendments to the wording of the Court Members' Code of Conduct.

34 The Court was advised of the opportunity to express an interest in undertaking the role of Court Race Champion and received details of the role description. The Court noted the commitment required of the role and whether it was reasonable to expect to be fulfilled on a voluntary basis but agreed to await the outcome of the expressions of interest process.

REPORT FROM THE PARTNERSHIP, NEGOTIATING AND CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

35 The Court received for information and reference the report from the meeting of 25 August 2022 of the Partnership, Negotiating and Consultative Committee (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). A member expressed concern regarding delays in the progressing of grievances and complaints. It was agreed that the points raised would be reported to the Committee as the appropriate forum for their consideration, while noting that Committee could escalate any matter to the Court should it agree to do so.

CLOSED BUSINESS: REMUNERATION COMMITTEE

36 The Court in closed session (for which the Principal and officers in attendance bar the Secretary withdrew) received and noted report from the Remuneration Committee meeting of 28 June 2022 (*copy filed with the principal copy of the Minutes*). The minute of that discussion is restricted to members of Court and held separately.

CLOSED BUSINESS: SENIOR GOVERNOR PERFORMANCE REVIEW

- 37 The Court in closed session (for which the Senior Governor and officers in attendance bar the Secretary withdrew) considered the Senior Governor's Annual Performance Review. The minute of that discussion is restricted to members of Court and held separately.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 38 Tuesday, 22 November 2022 9am to 3pm.



Julie Ashworth, Senior Governor

22/11/22

Date Approved