

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 7 MARCH 2024

Present:

Duncan Macniven (Convener), John Campbell, Colin Duncan, Hugh Galbraith, Jan McRobbie (from item 3), Anne Minto, Dan Montgomery, Jenny Mordue (Vice-Convener), Graeme Nicol, Oguto Okudo (from item 6), Pat Pugh, Mel Roberts, Heliang Shi, Mary Stephen, Judith Taylor, John White, Haiyan Zhang (from item 2).

Apologies:

Martina Chukwuma-Ezike (Rector), Vanessa Mabonso Nzolo (Student President), Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, Dorsa Naderimehr, Arnab Paul, Stefan Pelev, Otto Thoresen, Robert Traynham.

In attendance:

Katrina Allan, Head of Alumni Relations and Regular Giving
Ross Anderson, Governance and Executive Support Officer (until item 6)
Pete Edwards, Vice Principal, Regional Engagement (items 1 and 2)
Tracey Slaven, University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer (from item 5)
Louise Thomson, Head of Governance and Executive Support – Clerk

1. Welcome and apologies

1.1 The Convener welcomed colleagues to the meeting and **noted** the apologies received.

2. Innovation and Enterprise

2.1 The Convener welcomed and introduced Prof. Pete Edwards, who outlined the purpose of the University's innovation strategy to transform ideas into products and services.

2.2 Of particular interest to the Committee:

- The Regional Economic Strategy had been launched the previous week and the University had been very active in its development;
- A recent visit to the University by the UK Government's Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing had underlined the importance of place and partnerships in such enterprise and innovation work;
- A new intellectual property policy had been agreed by the University to encourage entrepreneurial activity;
- There were training and development opportunities to support student and others in their relations with industry to foster a more mutually conducive understanding of respective catalysts for innovation and enterprise;
- The North East Investment Zone had a potential to attract £160m in investments, with a focus on research and innovation around green energy and digital or AI activity; and

- An opportunity to establish an innovation hub within the Old Aberdeen campus had been identified (the King's Innovation Quarter: KIQ) and further feasibility work was proceeding.
- 2.4 In response to the presentation, the following questions were raised:
- The potential to use existing buildings to support innovation activity;
 - Whether any consultancy activity had been undertaken to develop the skills and understanding of colleagues to interact successfully with industry;
 - How the KIQ interlinked with the 'Reimagining the campus' activity;
 - What activity was being undertaken to support academic colleagues in any University-wide consultancy initiative;
 - How the innovation work could be connected to fundraising activities; and
 - The degree of analysis undertaken to engage the appetite for engagement across the region.
- 2.5 The Convener thanked the Vice Principal, Regional Engagement for the presentation. Professor Edwards agreed to meet a yet-to-be-established working group of the Committee to discuss how the Committee could support the role of the University of Aberdeen in the North East. On the future of Marischal College East, Professor Edwards suggested a meeting with Morag Beers, Director of Estates and himself.
- Action:** Duncan Macniven to convene working group on the University's role in the North East and Jenny Mordue to meet with Morag Beers and Professor Pete Edwards to discuss 'Reimagining the campus' and Marischal College.
- 3. Minutes of the last meeting and matters arising**
- 3.1 The minutes of the last meeting were **approved** as a true and accurate record.
- 3.2 The Convener **noted** that Iain Percival had left the Committee and Anne Minto was due to leave in the summer, at the end of their membership of Court. The Clerk advised the Committee that the University Court's Governance and Nominations Committee would re-visit the need to propose members of Court for appointment to the Committee.
- 3.3 The Convener enquired as to the potential to hold a joint meeting of General Council and other stakeholders to receive the annual report and accounts. The Clerk responded that the annual report and accounts were due to be signed off at the end of March 2024, at which point the Governance and Executive Support Team would look at potential dates for the annual stakeholder engagement event, as required by the Scottish Code of Good Higher Education Governance 2023.
- 4. Alumni relations update (paper BC24:1)**
- 4.1 The Head of Alumni Relations and Regular Giving updated the Committee on the work of the alumni team. The local engagement programme in the North East had developed successfully over time and international engagement

continued to grow, thanks to the work with alumni chapter leaders and volunteers, but more concerted engagement in the UK was underway. This activity could include more consistent activity in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and London, and introducing events in cities where there was a critical mass of alumni, such as Belfast, Bristol, Leeds, and Manchester. The team continued to work with Student Recruitment and Careers and Employability colleagues to attract and support more alumni volunteers.

4.2 Other items of interest included:

- The visit and talk by former chief constable Sir Iain Livingstone; and
- Acknowledgement that branded mugs at graduations had encouraged sign up to alumni communications.

4.3 In response to the paper, the Committee asked questions relating to the ability to charge fees for some events (the present policy was to cover costs, not make a surplus) and the planned fundraising campaign (currently in 'quiet mode', with oversight undertaken by a project board chaired by the Senior Vice Principal).

4.4 The Convener thanked the Head of Alumni Relations and Regular Giving for her paper and update and expressed the desire for the Committee to continue to work closely with the alumni team. The paper was **noted**.

5. Convener's report (paper BC24.2)

5.1 In introducing the paper, the Convener noted that the Committee had also been represented at the carol service in London, and spoke about his recent meetings with the Senior Governor of Court and the Pro-Chancellor.

5.2 The Convener said that, since the decision at the November meeting to move to online-only meetings, there had been some desire to revisit the arrangements for future meetings. In discussion, members acknowledged the pros and cons of in-person, hybrid and online-only meetings. In conclusion, it was **agreed** to have the next meeting of the Committee online only, assisted by guidance to optimise the experience for everyone. The matter would then be revisited. It was suggested and **agreed** that a breakdown of costs associated with the meetings of the General Council and its Business Committee would be helpful.

Action: Katrina Allan and Louise Thomson to present a paper to the June meeting on the costs of the meetings of the Business Committee and General Council.

5.4 The introduction of MS Teams continued to present some challenges to colleagues. Increased use and familiarity should improve the Committee's ability to benefit from the platform.

5.5 The Committee discussed potential guest speakers for future meetings and **agreed** to approach the Vice Principal, Global Engagement and the Vice Principal, Research.

Action: Governance and Executive Support Team to approach individuals to attend and present to future meetings of the Business Committee.

5.6 It was **noted** that the University's plans for a 'food truck' in Old Aberdeen to support visitors at the weekend had been withdrawn and that further discussions were ongoing with current retail premises in the High Street.

5.7 The paper was **noted** by the Committee.

6. Skills audit (paper BC24.3)

6.1 Judith Taylor highlighted that there were four areas identified as the Committee requiring greater experience: fundraising; property/facilities; IT/digital; and environment/sustainability. The Committee discussed whether a fuller audit was required or if more context around the four areas would be helpful to informing broader composition discussions and **agreed** that no further action was needed. It was **agreed** to add the paper and the annual report on Aberdeen 2040s progress to the Committee's Teams site. The Convener thanked Judith Taylor for her work on the topic, which would inform the call for new members of the Committee.

Action: Clerk to seek the papers mentioned above and to add to MS Teams site. Clerk to ensure that advertisement for new members highlighted the four areas.

7. University Report

7.1 Tracey Slaven explained that the report would focus on wider sector issues and recent meetings of the University Court.

7.2 With regard to the wider operating environment, a number of factors had adversely impacted the sector: the sustainability of the financial model for the sector was analysed in a recent PWC paper published on 12 January 2024; changes in UK immigration policy had complicated overseas student recruitment; government funding decisions had resulted in a near £50m reduction in funds for Scottish higher education institutions; and the cost of living continued to be of concern to potential students. These factors had combined to create an estimated £12 million deficit in the current year. The University's financial recovery plan aimed to constrain and reduce costs, generate income, increase fundraising activity and review the use of accommodation.

7.3 On a positive note, the ability to rejoin Horizon and access European research funding was welcomed, along with £5m received in research funding from other funders. The University's activity on innovation and spin outs was supporting the development of the investment zone mentioned by the Vice Principal, Regional Development, and the University had been favourably

mentioned in the recent Fair Access Report (widening access activity). It was also confirmed that joint degrees and research in modern languages would continue to be offered at the University.

7.4 In discussion, the following points were raised:

- Assurance was sought, and provided, that the University would not be funding early retirement for research-valuable academic staff, to avoid a negative impact on the next REF assessment;
- The loss of international students affected all Schools and had been identified and factored into revised cost plans;
- The new 'Beyond Boundaries' branding created an impression upon which more targeted marketing could be built.

8. Senate composition resolution (BC24:6)

8.1 The University Secretary explained that the draft resolution reflected recent changes in student and staff numbers across different Schools. Nine seats were to be reallocated between Schools. Four Schools would see an increase in the number of elected members, four schools a reduced membership and four would remain the same. The resolution did not change the balance of ex officio, staff and student members. The composition of Senate was subject to requirements of the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act and the University's governing documents (referred to as the 'Grey Book').

Action: Governance and Executive Support Team to circulate the link to the online version of the 'Grey Book'.

8.2 The Committee **approved** the resolution.

9. Court digests (BC24:5)

9.1 The Convener introduced the Court reports covering the meetings of 21 November and 12 December 2023. There were no questions and the paper was **noted**.

10. Commercialisation of research (paper BC24.4)

10.1 The proposals in the paper on commercialisation were **agreed** and would be pursued by the working group in liaison with the Vice Principal, Regional Engagement and the Director of Research and Innovation.

Action: Working Group to follow up the proposals in the paper.

11. Any other competent business

11.1 No other business was raised.

12. Date of next meeting

12.1 Business Committee: Thursday, 6 June 2024 at midday (online).

12.2 Statutory Meeting of General Council: Saturday, 23 March 2024 at 11.00 in King's College Conference Centre (KCCC) and online.