UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 20 SEPTEMBER 2023

Present: Rasha Abu Eid, Scott Allan, Sumeet Aphale, Joanne Anderson, Lesley Anderson, Euan Bain, Simon Bains, Martin Barker, John Barrow, Nigel Beacham, Siladitya Bhattacharya, Thomas Bodey, Jason Bohan, George Boyne, Alex Brasier, Isla Callander, Delma Childers, Sandie Cleland, Chris Collins, Matthew Collinson, Irene Couzigou, Rebecca Crozier, Andrew Dilley, Pete Edwards, Marie-Luise Ehrenschwendtner, Karin Friedrich, Nick Forsyth, Greg Gordon, Beatriz Goulao, Aravinda Meera Guntupall, Malcolm Harvey, Richard Hepworth, Jonathan Hicks, Gareth Jones, Dragan Jovcic, Kirsty Kiezebrink, Rhiannon Ledwell, Karl Leydecker, Colin Lumsden, Beth Lord, Laura McCann, Catriona MacDonald, Gary Macfarlane, David McLernon, Alan MacPherson, Sam Martin, Samantha Miller, Heather Morgan, David Muirhead, Mintu Nath, Sam Newington, Adelaja Israel Osofero, Amudha Poobalan, Graeme Paton, Ekaterina Pavlovskaia, Stuart Piertney, Brice Rea, Joost Rommers, Thereza Raquel Sales de Aguiar, Joachim Schaper, Karen Scott, Diane Skåtun, John Skåtun, Valerie Speirs, Mary Stephen, Lorna Stewart, Fiona Stoddard, Ruth Taylor, Bert Timmermans, Steve Tucker, Neil Vargesson, Ursula Witte, Ilia Xypolia, Zeray Yihdego

Apologies: William Barlow, Alessandra Cecolin, Alasdair MacKenzie, Anne-Michelle Slater, Alan Speight

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

1.1   The Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members of Senate to the first meeting of the new academic year. The Secretary reminded members of procedures: there were no planned fire alarms; the meeting would be recorded; members were asked to state their name before contributing to discussion and advised to use the chat function to state when they wished to ask a question. Members were reminded that the chat itself does not form part of the formal minute, and to remain muted when not speaking. Any voting would take place using the auditorium functionality for those present in person and Forms within the chat for those on Teams.

1.2   Senate approved the agenda and the meeting proceeded.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES OF 24 MAY & 7 JUNE 2023

2.1   Senate approved the minutes from the meetings held on 24 May and 7 June 2023.

ORAL REPORT FROM THE PRINCIPAL AND

UPDATE ON HE SECTOR/UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENTS

3.1   The Principal reminded Senate that its purpose was to oversee teaching and research, making sure that appropriate standards were maintained. In this context, he congratulated everyone on the National Student Survey (NSS) results noting that for the second year running the University had been ranked in the top ten for the quality of the education and support experiences provided, by everyone in the University, to students. Noting that the NSS results

feed into league table rankings, he noted also that these were again good: for the third year running the University had achieved top twenty rankings in both the Guardian and the Times & Sunday Times league tables.

3.2 In contrast to this good news, the Principal noted that student enrolments for the coming year were challenging. He highlighted that the UK sector as a whole was expecting, at best, flat numbers of international student enrolments. This could be explained by the UK Government's position effectively discouraging international students from coming to the UK, with many opting to go to Australia instead. He noted that once numbers were known for September and January, if flat numbers were achieved, it would be a relief.

3.3 Turning to research, the Principal noted the good news that the UK would be rejoining Horizon Europe and noted that access to apply for research funding from this source would help to mitigate the reductions in funding being faced following performance in REF 2021. He noted that, against this backdrop, it was particularly gratifying to see research funding growing, noting it was 10% up on the previous year, and if this level of growth could be maintained the University would gradually compensate for the REF cut. The Principal also noted that the Institutional Research Leave Scheme had run for the first time with most applications receiving funding.

3.4 Noting that whilst there was a lot he would like to say on the topic of industrial relations in the sector, the current 'live' vote by UCU in Aberdeen meant it would not be appropriate for anyone present to say anything which might be interpreted as an attempt to influence the vote outcome, and as a result he would say nothing on the subject until the vote outcome was known.

3.5 Finally he congratulated those members of Senate who had been successful in achieving promotion since the previous meeting.

3.6 Karin Friedrich, School of Divinity, History, Philosophy & Art History queried what capacity there was to challenge the Government's hostile policies on immigration. The Principal confirmed that Universities UK (UUK) lobbies the Home Office constantly on behalf of the sector to try to secure a different position. In addition, the Scottish Government is sympathetic towards a change in how international students are treated within the immigration figures, noting the view of many that they should not be included. If this could be achieved, it was the expectation that the current problem would not continue but such a change seemed unlikely at the current time. He noted that every opportunity possible was being taken to seek a change.

3.7 An elected member noted there were plans to increase the immigration healthcare surcharge by 65% and queried whether there were any plans to help support international students to meet this and other rising visa costs.

3.8 Tracey Slaven, University Secretary, confirmed that the costs of studying overseas are very much at the front of ongoing reviews of scholarships. There was not a direct answer to the question but it was a matter that, institutionally, everyone was well aware of.

3.9 Aravinda Guntupalli, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition noted that when speaking to prospective students in India, Australia had been a popular choice for students due to the fee level. Visa considerations aside, fees in Australia are much lower. She noted that our scholarship information could be more visible as well as taking a more complex approach to fees comparing with the international sector as well as the UK sector. She further noted a strengthening in the global market for healthcare programmes which had come on the back of the stringent border controls put in place by Australia during the pandemic and, as soon as those were relaxed, the market shifted back to Australia. She further noted that Australian Universities recruit collectively as a country in a way the UK does not.

3.10   In response, the Principal noted that UUK does act for the sector as a whole and also noted that fees and scholarships are currently under review. Tracey added that levels of scholarship available for January entrants had already been increased, noting the importance of understanding market dynamics at a country level, she acknowledged the importance of understanding the intended position within the global marketplace as well as where the sector average is. Tracey highlighted the importance of the appointment of the new Interim Director of Student Recruitment who is very focused on this aspect together with how the University is marketing itself.

REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COURT

4.1   Diane Skatun, on behalf of the Senate Assessors, reported on the final meeting of Court for the academic year 2022/23, held in June. She highlighted that Court had considered the budget for the now current year, and the following two years. Court had engaged in a frank discussion of the proposed budgets and the underlying assumptions the budgets were predicated on. Court approved the proposals and requested regular updates on progress against the targets. Court had also received further updates on the capital projects at Kings and Johnston and agreed that, given the new costings and uncertainties, the projects should not now go ahead. Instead, a campus review would be undertaken, incorporating both the digital and physical estate, and Court would be kept up to date with that. Diane noted that the motion voted on by Senate at the meeting held on 24 May had not been included in the Senate Report to Court, but Court had been updated verbally on Senate's view.

FUTURE ACADEMIC YEAR STRUCTURE

5.1   Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education) introduced the updated academic year proposals noting that this was the third iteration to be considered by Senate. Following the previous fruitful discussions at Senate, feedback had been taken away and revised proposals brought articulating how the feedback had been incorporated.

5.2   Ruth noted that the paper included for Senate's consideration included links through to previous versions of the paper, and to the feedback that had previously been provided, to demonstrate the evolution of the proposals following feedback received at Senate and other committees.

5.3   Ruth gave a [presentation](#) which provided an overview of the changes made and the final proposal being brought to Senate for approval.

5.4   Ruth summarised the key features of the final proposal as:

   (i)   Commence teaching w/c 23 September 2024 (week 9 of AY) with Welcome Week w/c 16 September 2024 (week 8 of AY) to allow student recruitment activity.
   (ii) Put in place a three-term structure for the academic year (AY).
   (iii) Utilise 'term' as the terminology for the teaching periods.
   (iv) Implement 13-week terms for terms 1 and 2, including one floating week; and a 12-week term 3 (PGT) with no floating week (PGT teaching in term 3).
   (v)   Align University holidays, as far as possible, with school holidays in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire for the Winter break and the Spring break.
   (vi) Implement an 'Induction/Transition and Employability Week' (ITEW) at the beginning of terms 1 and 2 for continuing UG students with this time being used for a Welcome Week for new UG and PGT entrants.

5.5   Brice Rea, School of Geosciences noted that where courses did not contain exams then continuous assessment should be stretched as far as possible to the end of the twelve weeks rather than stopping after ten weeks of teaching. He noted that with ten weeks of teaching, and aggregating the notional hours of study across the weeks, resulted in the appearance that

the University was requiring students to study for 60 hours per week. He acknowledged the University was not out of step with the sector on this but noted that the SQA requirements around credits and hours of study are not feasible in an academic year structure and that discussion needed to be had around this.

5.6   Responding, Ruth noted Brice's points around notional effort and the sector as a whole and confirmed that there was nothing to prevent the use of continuous assessment, and there was work ongoing discussing support for schools wishing to make use of this. Ruth acknowledged that there was a need for exams in some subjects and so it was necessary to have a structure that supported both forms of assessment. This was particularly important within a breadth curriculum where students are taking subjects across a range of schools.

5.7   Jo Hicks, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture noted the difficulty in responding at the third iteration as most things had been said already. He did, however, have comments from staff in his school mainly around the broad concern connected to the possible increase in summer teaching. There were colleagues who remained sceptical that the proposals would not make it easier to increase summer teaching. He acknowledged that this was not what the proposals had been designed to do, but the fact remained that the proposals would permit repeat teaching of postgraduate taught courses.

5.8   Ruth reiterated that this version of the paper, together with previous versions, make it very clear that this is not what the proposal intends to do. It was a matter of record, in terms of the minutes of Senate discussions, that this was not the aim of the proposal. The programmes to be delivered, and the associated workload, were matters for schools to determine internally.

5.9   Malcolm Harvey, School of Social Science, noted that section seven of the paper detailed start dates at other UK institutions and noted that the University of Leicester had freshers' week and the first week of teaching merged together. He asked whether there had ever been any consideration given to doing something similar as this might be one approach to alleviating some of the concerns over pressures around marking time at Christmas.

5.10   Ruth confirmed that all options had been considered with nothing dismissed as a possibility however the view was that welcome week serves an important function in permitting students to arrive and orientate themselves and start to develop a sense of belonging with the University. In addition, the development of the focus on employability would mean that an adoption of a dual purpose first week would not necessarily have the outcome described in terms of increased marking time. Ruth also acknowledged the limit on available space to undertake teaching as well as having it available for welcome week activities.

5.11   Aravinda Guntupalli, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition asked a question of specific concern to her school relating to medical students undertaking intercalated degrees and the start date for their final year of study. She acknowledged this was not a significant number of students but queried whether this had been considered.

5.12   Siladitya Bhattacharya, Head of the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition confirmed Aravinda's point was a valid one but noted, however, the relatively few students falling into this category mean that this could be dealt with separately and away from the main debate.

5.13   Euan Bain, School of Engineering, asked whether the intention was to commit to the new structure for a given minimum term.

5.14   Ruth confirmed that she did not anticipate that it would be something she expected the University to want to undertake again in the near future, and suggested that the new structure would likely be in place for at least three years, but this would depend on the external context. Changes externally might lead to changes having to be made to take account of external requirements.

5.15   The Principal proposed that the proposals were approved by consensus, however members indicated that a formal vote was preferred.

5.16   Senate voted to approve the proposals with 65 voting to approve, 6 abstentions and 4 voting against the proposals.

POLICY & PROCEDURES ON STUDENT ABSENCE

6.1   Jason Bohan, Dean for Student Support spoke on behalf of the Quality Assurance Committee to introduce the proposed changes to the policy and procedures on student absence following a review. The review had been undertaken in response to moves by local GPs not to provide the written evidence required by the University to support absence. The University was in discussion with local GPs to determine exactly when written evidence would be supplied.

6.2   Jason confirmed that details of discussions and the proposed changes were included in the paper. He noted the main changes being made related to: when submission of written evidence was required; how the policy relates to other policies and procedures, for example student monitoring and late coursework and the impact on students holding visas. He clarified that the main changes related to when evidence should be submitted, and that it could be from a range of healthcare sources not just GPs. Additionally, changes are proposed to permit the submission of a written narrative in circumstances where this is appropriate. Input had been gathered from a wide range of sources, including all schools, school admin managers and with AUSA as well as being discussed and well received at education committees.

6.3   Rhiannon Ledwell, Student President for Education confirmed that the student body was very supportive of the changes and thanked Jason for the opportunity to contribute to the change process.

6.4   Senate confirmed its approval by consensus.

RESEARCH

7.1   The Principal welcomed Nick Forsyth, Vice-Principal (Research) to the University and his first meeting of Senate.

7.2   Nick thanked everyone at the University for the welcome he had received since joining the on 1 August. He gave a [presentation](#) to Senate outlining his vision for Research at the University. In the course of his presentation, he provided an update on the ongoing consultation on REF 2028, and the likely implications for the University, together with an update on progress to date with the Institutional Research Leave Scheme. Senate was given the opportunity for questions and discussion.

7.3   Karen Scott, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition commented that she felt the change of emphasis within the REF structure to put more emphasis on the research environment was very important. She urged caution with dealing with the balance between environment and outputs due to the potential for the REF stocktake to make individuals feel undervalued. The environment can be affected in a negative way when an individual submits the output from what they perceive as a 'good' piece of research, and it comes back rated badly. She observed there is the potential for disillusionment and this needs to be handled carefully to avoid a negative impact on the research environment.

7.4   Chris Collins, Head of School Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, noted that if the proposals for REF go ahead and the University adopts the 'no minimum' approach it will lead to a greater variety of ways for people to participate in the REF. There will be a wish to maximise four-star submissions, and everybody could be included in the narratives but not everybody will have outputs submitted. This is not completely new as traditionally this is how impact has

worked, but Chris queried whether this means a change in research culture within the institution and whether something was required to ensure this was seen as a positive change.

7.5 Ian Greener, Head of School Social Science, commented that many departments in assessment terms are quite small but we know there are advantages, up to a certain point, to scale in terms of the units of assessment in submissions. This leads to the question whether internal governance structures work against this and so he suggested that there should closer cross-school collaboration in deciding on the units of assessment to be submitted, followed by consideration of how to build research collaboration and culture across those schools to ensure the submissions, and the environment for colleagues are as strong as they can be.

7.6 Responding to the points made around culture, Nick noted that, with the increased weighting for culture, university's cultures are pitted against each other explicitly in a way that differs from previous exercises. He noted that in terms of outputs there was a need to be fair and objective in providing support and not to be valuing one individual's research more than another's while still maintaining objectivity to ensure the assessment is as strong as it can be.

7.7 Responding to the points raised by Chris (7.4 above) Nick noted that exactly how this aspect would look remained to be determined and this might disappear from the final methodology. He commented that he would not be sympathetic to the creation a of two-tier system for support for research. He noted that there would still be a requirement for discipline level statements that evidence contribution, came from the cohort collectively, so high level outputs from a select few senior staff will not provide a strong outcome in the People, Culture & Environment section. Hence it is important for the University to create systems to support a collective view of what is considered important. He further noted that one of the drivers for this change had been a desire not to disadvantage Early Career Researchers (ECRs) but it might be argued that this is exactly what the system does. He noted from his experience that ECRs did often come in with strong profiles and it was his wish that this metric did not become a problem for the University.

7.8 In response to Ian (7.5 above) Nick noted that in previous REFs many institutions had opted to return small, bespoke groups comprised of their top performers within any unit in an attempt to push themselves up the GPA ranking at the expense of the Quality Ranking (QR). It was also clear that the larger submitting units were able to evidence critical mass more effectively and hence win the environment statement because of the size of the unit submitted. Nick concluded that it was important that the University decides to tell the correct story for the institution. Groupings must flow and demonstrate cohesion so if there are areas which lend themselves to this, it needs to be recognised and supported, and conversely if things do not fit we need to be honest about this also and find alternate solutions.

7.9 Beatriz Goulao, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition asked what the research leave was intended to provide for, as a senior colleague had queried whether it could be used to pay for a more junior staff member to undertake some of the impact work or whether it had to be used by him personally? She also asked for the definition of 'early- and mid-career' as used in the tables within the presentation.

7.10 Regarding the definitions Nick did not have the definitions to hand to respond. He noted in terms of impact that it was expected that this flowed from research and in this he did not feel it was necessarily effective to bring in others to undertake the impact work. It is appropriate to have R & I colleagues involved to promote uptake with stakeholders but ultimately it is academic involvement that drives impact forward.

7.11 Irene Couzigou, School of Law queried Nick's indication that high performing units receive more research income per individual researcher and asked for clarification.

7.12   Nick expanded to explain that individuals in high performing units apply for more grants, and secure more grants, because of the critical mass associated with being part of a high performing unit.

7.13   Dragan Jovcic, School of Engineering noted that there was an indication that 'rigour' would be introduced as a new criterion as part of impact in 2028. He noted that it would be important to understand whether this meant that some impact case studies would be 'better' than others as they take a lot of time to prepare.

7.14   Nick responded to say that he did not really have a satisfactory answer to this question as 'rigour' had always been part of REF in terms of the underpinning research. One of the changes was that there used to be a requirement that the underpinning research for impact statements had to be at least two-star, but this had now been removed. He noted that he was not clear how rigour in the new framework was expected to be evidenced.

7.15   Brice Rea, School of Geosciences, noted that Geosciences had invested heavily in interdisciplinarity, but the amendments proposed for REF seem to discourage interdisciplinarity, so he queried how the School should be looking to weave this into its narrative. Secondly, he queried whether there would be institutional support for coverage for staff appointed to REF Panels.

7.16   The Principal responded to the second question to confirm that there would be support to cover for staff on Panels.

7.17   Nick confirmed that REF does indeed encourage interdisciplinarity, but it has not recognised this in its organisational structure. The structure remains single submitting units, that align to traditional names of schools, with a single interdisciplinary panel member to assess school's narratives around interdisciplinary work. Nick suggested that interdisciplinary output does tend to garner more general interest and by that metric is more likely to secure a wider readership and therefore more likely to be taken account of. He also noted that he had not heard of interdisciplinarity being criticised at an individual panel level; although interdisciplinarity has not been recognised explicitly it was his view that this should not be interpreted as a negative.

7.18   The Principal also noted that if the rules remain as published, 40% of the score will come from the narrative: what is our own version of ourselves; what is our own interpretation of our research journey and hence we need to recognise our own investment in interdisciplinarity ensuring this is strong and that appropriate credit is awarded.

7.19   Aravinda Guntupalli, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition raised a query in her capacity as a Race Equality Champion. She noted that it was good to see gender included in the analysis of the research leave data but noted it would be good to see other characteristics included in the future. She asked which characteristics would be considered as part of 2028 and with the increased focus on the people element, would EDI form part of this metric?

7.20   Nick responded generally to say 'yes'. Regarding the institutional research leave he had included a snapshot of some of the data showing the largest inequity, but institutionally a full range of data were available.

7.21   Karin Friedrich, School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History noted single discipline submissions as positive for the for Arts & Humanities where the monograph is still the preferred 'gold' standard publication. She questioned how metrics would be applied in this context, noting in the past there has been a lot of argument from the Arts & Humanities against citation indices. She asked how this would be handled in the next REF: had there been any strengthening of indices? She also noted that some disciplines teach intensively and was this being recognised in the work being undertaken on workload models?

7.22 Responding, Nick confirmed the expectation that the University becomes a signatory to CoARA (Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment) which contains a clear indication that citations do not form the only basis of research evaluation within the institution. He indicated his view was this was right for the sector as well as for the environment institutionally. Nick confirmed that input to the workload modelling was being made.

7.23 Diane Skatun, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition queried whether there would be an opportunity for academics and Senate to feed into the Institutional Response on REF 2028.

7.24 Nick confirmed the draft response, to the consultation being carried out by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), had already been considered by Senior Management Team (SMT) and the University Research Committee (URC) and was included in the papers for Senate.

7.25 Alex Brasier, School of Geosciences noted that Geosciences had not made any applications to the institutional research leave scheme, and that this reflected a lack of time to apply rather than a lack of desire for research leave. He asked if the scheme could be rolling rather than with a deadline.

7.26 Thereza Raquel Sales de Aguiar, Business School agreed with the comments made by Alex. She also stressed that there is, currently, a shortage of members of staff in some areas of her constituency. Thus, a sabbatical would probably be an unrealistic possibility.

7.27 Nick confirmed that the lead in time was already under consideration and that the research leave scheme is intended to provide resource to buy out time and so there should be no constraints in this context on staff wishing to apply.

7.28 The Principal thanked Nick for his presentation and noted that it had highlighted that the next REF was already underway, and it was particularly important that time is made to undertake the high-quality research needed. He further noted that the University was right to be mindful of the limitations of citations and that those limitations are accepted. Notwithstanding this, the Principal highlighted the University's citations relative to the judgements made on it by REF Panels: the Panels ranked the University 52nd in the UK for research outputs however in terms of citations the University is often ranked 28th or 29th or 30th depending on the metric used. On this occasion he opted to believe the citations rather than the REF panels, as there is a lot of quality in the University. He thanked members for the discussion and the meeting closed.