



**University of Aberdeen**

**Outcome Agreement with the  
Scottish Funding Council  
2018/19**

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**FOREWORD FROM THE PRINCIPAL**

<To follow>

Professor Sir Ian Diamond  
Principal and Vice-Chancellor

DRAFT

## INTRODUCTION

This document supplements the three-year Outcome Agreement (OA) the University of Aberdeen published in 2017 with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) (available [here](#)). It should be read in conjunction with that document. Moreover, it should be recognised that the University presents its OA by aligning it to its Strategic Plan 2015-2020 (available [here](#)) and its interface with SFC priorities. In this way, the University addresses the requirements set out in the SFC guidance for 2017/18 to 2019/20 (SFC/GD/22/2016).

Particular emphasis is given to those areas of strategic importance identified by the Scottish Government for prioritisation and enhanced focus via the SFC guidance for 2018/19 to 2020/21 (SFC/GD/20/2017). These are widening access; retention and enhanced outcomes for disadvantaged learners; enhanced alignment of skills provision with the needs of the economy; increased participation in STEM subjects; supporting enhanced business innovation; and addressing gender imbalances. In this regard, this Agreement is designed to address directly the University's distinct contribution to delivering a positive return against the Scottish Government's strategic priority areas. It does so taking account of the Government's ethos for *intensification*, under which more ambitious demands and challenging targets have been set in specific areas, including widening access. In more general terms, this OA also provides a concise update on all other key commitments made in previous plans, against which the University has and continues to deliver.

As in the three-year OA published in 2017, this document ties all SFC strategic priorities, including the areas identified for prioritisation and enhanced focus, to the key themes that form the basis of the University's Strategic Plan (2015-2020). These are:

- People;
- Teaching and Learning;
- Research and Knowledge Exchange

This demonstrates the direct alignment between the University's own strategic priorities and those set out by the Scottish Government. It should be noted that this document has been developed in consultation with key stakeholder groups across the University, at all levels, including: senior institutional management; management across different professional services functions; the Students' Association; students; and, staff unions.

Finally, the University considers this document live and fluid; it reserves the right to revise this Agreement in response to changes from across the external environment which may adversely affect its ability to achieve the ambitions put forward or the targets set. This statement is made taking account of the great uncertainty currently affecting both the Scottish and UK higher education (HE) sectors, particularly in the context of Brexit and the range of impacts this might feasibly have across all areas considered strategically important, both by the University and by the Scottish Government.

*Note: a summary of the University's milestones and targets for the period, as defined by the SFC under its list of "National Measures", is available under Appendix 1.*

## 1. PEOPLE

A central tenet of the University's Strategic Plan is 'People'. This refers to students, alumni and staff acting as the basis of every success the University achieves. The importance afforded to this area is evidenced by the institutional leadership role of the *Vice-Principal for People Strategy*. A number of institutional strategies with People at their heart are also in place to support this role, and the work of the People Directorate. Institutional strategies under this theme align with the following SFC priority areas:

- **SFC Priority 1: Widening Access;**
- **SFC Priority 5: High Performing Institutions.**

### 1.1. WIDENING ACCESS (WA) AND ARTICULATION

#### SIMD20

The University is pleased to report that across 2016/17, it exceeded targets set for the number and proportion of Scottish-domiciled students recruited from the 20% most deprived postcodes, with year on year growth across both metrics.

The University notes that widening access is now subject to further prioritisation and enhanced focus by Scottish Government and the SFC, reflected in the recommendations made by the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) and the SFC's review of funding arrangements for additional widening access places from 2018-19 onwards. Taking account of this shift, the University has agreed to more ambitious widening access targets over the next four years. For 2018/19, the target has been fixed at 4.5%, although this will increase incrementally year on year, towards a longer term target of 8% by 2021/22, as set by the SFC. The University is therefore intensifying its long-standing commitment for ongoing improvement on widening access, and it supports this position by first, seeking to enhance its strategies for delivering the more ambitious targets set by Government, and second, by reviewing the range of programmes, initiatives and activities outlined last year in its three-year [Outcome Agreement](#) (*please cross refer*), to potentially refocus on activities that aim to increase and support the SIMD20 population specifically. This is led by a dedicated Widening Participation team located within its Marketing and Student Recruitment directorate.

In this regard, at a strategic level, the University is currently revising its WA strategy, with a view to identifying and developing those areas of activity and specific initiatives that have delivered the most successful outcomes. This will then inform allocation of investment to activities most likely to optimise increased recruitment and retention of SIMD20 students. In operational terms, the most notable new initiatives are as follows:

- The offer of free accommodation to all SIMD20 students entering first year of study, rolled out for the first time in 2017/18. This is designed to attract and support SIMD20 students from across Scotland, and comes by way of response to the shortage of SIMD20 students within the University's immediate locality; noting that for financial reasons, students from lower income backgrounds tend to enrol in local universities to minimise living costs. In monetary terms, this initiative equated to an investment of approximately £200K by the University in accommodation costs; going forward, the level of investment will naturally increase, assuming more ambitious recruitment targets are met.
- The provision of free accommodation to Summer School entrants, and students enrolling on the Gateway to Medicine programme. A review is now ongoing to appraise the success of these offerings, to determine the impact and added value in both attracting and retaining SIMD20 students. All of the accommodation offerings are expected to remain in place.
- The offer of a range of scholarships to WA students, designed to enhance not only recruitment, but also retention over the course of the degree programme; in this regard, it is also considering the offer of annual bursaries for SIMD20 students in place of, or as an alternative to free accommodation, with a specific aim of enhancing rates of non-continuation.

It should be noted that Aberdeen has, in the past, developed a number of strategies that align with the *ethos* of WA, even if not meeting SFC criteria around SIMD20/40 *per se*. This has been a deliberate strategy, designed in-part to address more specifically the geographic and socio-economic environment

in which the University operates. To give an example, the University is concerted targeting increased recruitment from local low progression schools, led by the dedicated Widening Participation team referenced above. Work is ongoing with these schools individually, to provide tailored support to meet their specific needs. The University is making effort to expand this to include low progression schools in central and west Scotland, creating a real opportunity for students from these areas to consider Aberdeen as a viable option <to revisit in light of increased focus on MD20 and review of strategy, to ensure accuracy>.

The University prides itself on the extensive measures that have been implemented over the past five years to support the transition, retention and progression of all students. The University does not consider recruitment of students under the widening access agenda a successful outcome *per se*; success also requires that students are supported and retained longer term, to achieve positive outcomes that prepare them to enter the world of work, or to contribute to internationally competitive and impactful research. Whilst recognising that it is vital to ensure appropriate support is available to students who are more inclined to require it, and therefore acceptable identification of such students is necessary, the University makes a concerted effort to ensure that all students have access to the highest levels of pastoral and non-academic support services, including and not limited to dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing support, one-to-one Personal Tutors, careers advice, Students InfoHub, alongside the services offered by the Aberdeen University Students Association.

#### Articulation

Linked to WA, the University retains its absolute commitment to meeting the objectives set by Scottish Government under the Articulation agenda, noting this too is now subject to enhanced focus and prioritisation by the SFC, in line with ministerial expectations. In demonstrating this commitment, the University has agreed to more ambitious targets for the successful articulation of Scottish-domiciled HN entrants from college to degree level courses with advanced standing; noting that the number of students articulating with advanced standing has increased by 64% (14 to 23) from 2015/16 to 16/17, it will look to maintain this trajectory by pursuing more challenging targets over the coming years. The University is pursuing the Articulation agenda via a range of initiatives, including the following:

- **New Articulation Routes:** throughout 2017/18, work has been ongoing to establish new articulation routes with both new and existing providers - including Fife College, Forth Valley, and New College Lanarkshire - resulting in the development of new routes linked to different disciplines, including Social Sciences, Biological Sciences and Engineering, to give examples. The University will continue these efforts into 2018-19. It should also be noted that a review of the University's current articulation agreements was undertaken over the last year to insure that all routes offer full credit transition. Where this is currently not possible due to a disparity in curricula, the University is working with college partners on models to deliver the additional content required, in the form of a Summer School bridging programme.
- **Summer School Bridging Programmes:** the Engineering Transitional Summer School was piloted in August 2017. Due to its intensive nature, students were offered free accommodation and lunches for the duration of their course. It is notable, based on feedback from teaching staff, that students who attend Summer Schools have generally been considered better prepared for study, and for adapting to the non-academic environment, both key to delivering successful outcomes over the longer term. The University also received a wealth of positive feedback from participating students and, based on this success, the Summer School will now become compulsory for all students entering Engineering from an FE College from September 2018. In addition both Psychology and Accountancy intend to pilot summer schools in August 2018. More generally, Summer Schools have been a success across the board, and key to supporting students looking to make the transition into higher education from an FE background; in 2017, Summer Schools had a collective 86% conversation rate, equating to 39 from 45 students.
- **Articulation Day:** the University held its second Articulation Day in December 2017, open to all College students from further education colleges across Scotland, with a view to providing an insight into what student life can hold for an articulating student at the University.

- **Access Programmes:** the University launched two online Access Programmes, for Maths and English, to support students in entering PDGE Secondary Education programmes and is now exploring further opportunities for similar initiatives.
- **UCAS Cycle – Pilot Project:** the University has also developed plans to run a pilot project during the UCAS cycle for September 2018 entry, where applications will be triaged and students will be actively advised on the most appropriate pathways to allow fully informed choice, taking into consideration social and personal factors, as well as academic preferences. This follows a noted increase in students from College applying into lower years of study, rather than their eligible year of entry. The intention is to identify the most appropriate level of entry to help with the retention and progression of articulating students, leading to more positive outcomes.

Finally, the University acknowledges the CoWA recommendation 18 and continues to support local authorities with provision of education where it can, in addition to the various bridging programmes on offer, with a number of initiatives aimed at secondary education. These include offering CPD events for Biology teachers to assist in the delivery of the new Higher and Advanced Higher Biology curriculum and CPD for Chemistry is being discussed in association with the Royal Society of Chemistry. In addition, the University has offered S6 labs days for Chemistry and Biology students for a number of years, supporting their completion of Advanced Highers. In addition to this, Chemistry is exploring offering School workshop visits to S4 pupils, allowing a specific focus on targeting local low progression Schools, instilling an earlier sense of interest in Chemistry, thus also aiding the University's activities to enhance the recruitment to STEM subjects as further discussed in section 2.1. Additionally under the Project REACH banner; discussions are underway with the Law School to potentially offer a Law Course to senior pupils during their final year of school, which would replace one of their Highers. In addition, the proposal states that the pupils would also be eligible for a Summer School offer, which would replace a Higher subject. The University's REACH Schools are largely in rural areas, and for 2017/18 the University was delighted to welcome on board Access to High Demand Professions funding applications to all Schools in Orkney and Shetland. Throughout 2017/18 the University will be developing new REACH activities and looking at new areas of high demand professions to support. Additionally, the REACH project will be opening to all Schools locally to target pupils with an SIMD20 postcode, who are not currently able to take advantage of the project.

#### *Contextualised Admissions*

The University has employed the use of contextualised admissions for a number of years, with minimum entry requirements published for all degree programmes. However, over the course of 2017/18 significant steps are being taken to enhance the provision of contextualised offers, with immediate impact in 2018, but more substantially, in relation to applicant knowledge, in 2019. Work will shortly be finalised on updating the information, to be published in the 2019 Prospectus, and in turn, published online. New access thresholds are also being developed, which will allow two sets of minimum offers to be published. This will specifically allow easy identification of the offer that those who meet eligible widening access criteria need to meet, setting it aside from standard minimum requirements.

#### *Care Experienced Students*

The University is pleased to confirm that in 2017, in line with CoWA Recommendation 21, Aberdeen made an offer of entry to any care experienced applicant who met the minimum entry requirements. This policy will continue going forward. More generally, activities listed in the 2017/18 Outcome Agreement continue to be operationalised to assist the University in working towards delivering the collective national ambitions in this area. This is led by the Widening Participation Team, with more work planned over the coming year. However, the University flags challenges around accurate identification of students from care or a care-experienced backgrounds, though states that it is confident that changes made to its systems are assisting in identification of the relevant students, where applicable.

In terms of its notable activities in this area, the University is working closely with North East Scotland College, Robert Gordon University and the three local students' associations on developing ways of jointly supporting students and applicants who have care experience. This work has led to the creation of a joint FE & HE Regional Corporate Parenting Framework. It should also be noted, in relation, that the University published a Corporate Parenting Plan (CPP) in line with the Children and Young Person's

(Scotland) Act 2014; this was done in 2016 and is available [here](#), via the University website and additionally a Student Carers Policy has been approved and published [online](#). The University is working with the Carers Trust Scotland to formally launch this policy in Spring 2018.

More generally, the Widening Participation team participated in an information and awareness raising event for local Social Workers and Foster Carers. In August 2017, the WP team held an information and awareness raising event for new Student Association sabbatical officers which focused on the support needs and provision for Care Experienced Students, Student Carers and students who are estranged from their families. This was done in partnership with colleagues from NESCOL and RGU. Additionally Aberdeen held discussions with RGU and NESCOL on hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups of students (i.e. strategies and mechanisms to support Estranged Students), and continues to develop a collaborative approach to working on widening participation and access issues with teams across area. The University also continues to participate in the Homework Club, a case study in the previous OA. The University is actively seeking new volunteers to participate.

#### *Early Years Engagement - The Children's University (CU)*

The University continues to work closely with Aberdeenshire Council in this area, who have now brought on board another of the University's target schools, Mintlaw Academy. At the moment Aberdeenshire Council have a dedicated member of staff who co-ordinates the CU activity; however, this may change given amendments made to school funding models. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Graduation took place in June 2017 with 66 pupils taking part, out of a possible 82, with the 4<sup>th</sup> planned for 2018. One hundred and eighty-two family members also attended coming from nine different Schools across Aberdeenshire. Furthering the commitment to supporting engagement in the early years to enhance accessibility to higher education, work is also ongoing with the Aspire North Project and over the past year the WP team has arranged campus visits, one to one meetings with academics and taster sessions for pupils who are taking part in the ASPIRE North programme.

#### *Project Search*

Project Search was included as a case study in the previous OA, and is now in its fifth year. It continues to be a successful project supporting young people with additional needs to gain the skills and experience to set them up for future employment. The University became the first provider in the North East of Scotland to be accredited at Gold Level by Developing Young Workforce North East at the end of 2016, and since commencing the project in 2013, 68% of the graduates from Aberdeen are in employment in the local area.

#### *Health Related Outcomes*

The University is taking forward work to develop of measures focused on increasing access to Medicine for SIMD20 students. This will include working collaboratively with the sector to simplify and clarify the admissions process (*noting this has been reported on separately, as required by the SFC*).

## **1.2. GENDER AND ATHENA SWAN**

The University acknowledges the prioritisation of gender for enhanced focus by the Scottish Government and SFC, under the ethos of intensification, and remains fully committed to enhancing gender equality, both as an institutional strategic priority, and through its Outcome Agreement. The University also remains fully committed to ensuring compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty. The University's ambitions for gender equality are outlined in its new [Gender Action Plan \(GAP\)](#), published in 2017, and underpinned by its strong commitment to the Athena SWAN process, which spans all Schools and Institutes across the organisation.

#### *The Gender Balance – the Student Population*

At institutional level, the University retains its aim of reaching an overarching gender balance of 45%/55% male/female split for Scottish-domiciled students by 2019/2020. In 2016/17 the split was 42.1%/57.9%/, and for 2017/18, the early data snapshot shows a split of 43.0%/57.0%, an encouraging shift. The University also retains its commitment to improving the gender balance in all subjects where there is an imbalance of 75%/25% or more, by a minimum 1% year-on-year.



The University's GAP will proactively seek to redress imbalances at institutional and subject level. As a first step, it is prioritising improving the gender balance in four disciplines: Physics, Computing Science, Psychology and Education. These subjects were selected for various reasons: first, based on internal data they commonly suffer the most consistent gender imbalances across the Scottish-domiciled population, though this does not apply to retention, where non-continuation rates are not markedly different for male or female students, or relative to other disciplines; second, the STEM based subjects and Education are each SFC priorities; and third, they are all the subject of focus under the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) project *Attracting Diversity*, which has remit to improve gender inequality across the sector. The University's GAP outlines a number of high level initiatives to address gender imbalances, both institutionally and with a focus on the subjects listed above. They include involvement in the *Attracting Diversity* project just referenced, and engagement in establishing and leading a Regional Gender Group to develop a regional response to gender inequality; it involves working with local partners like Robert Gordon University. The GAP also includes an extensive operational plan, to be reviewed regularly by a designated Working Group, with specific actions listed designed to address gender issues in a range of areas, including student recruitment and retention, among others. These are included in the [Gender Action Plan \(GAP\)](#); as above, please cross refer.

Outwith the actions listed under the GAP, the University is seeking to further understand why gender-based issues exist at subject level via a range of other measure, including:

- Undertaking a review of the gender balance in 2018 of all STEM Schools, under the Athena Swan process, with a view to investigating the underlying issues that cause imbalances, to make improvements via SMART actions.
- Consulting students using focus groups and surveys;
- Inviting students to sit on self-assessment teams (recognised via the enhance transcript);
- Ensuring gender balance in role models in open days, websites and prospectuses;
- Taking action to ensure potential unconscious bias is being reduced in admissions through the introduction of training – this is currently under trial.

#### *Athena Swan*

The University continues its strong commitment to Athena SWAN, with extensive engagement across the institution. The University is delighted to report that 11 of its constituent Schools or Institutes have received the Athena SWAN bronze award from a total of 15, reflecting a strong institutional commitment to addressing gender inequality, and indeed, impressive progress over the last year; when the three-year OA agreement was published in 2017, only two Schools had achieved bronze status. Of four outstanding Schools/Institutes, each has applied but all were unsuccessful; they will each reapply in April 2018. At institutional level, the University successfully renewed its bronze award in November 2016 and will now assess the action plan to ensure progress is made and the aim of successfully applying for Silver in April 2020 is achieved. The successful Schools are currently implementing their actions plans, which are designed to enhance gender equality across the student population wherever imbalances exist. On the whole, it is hoped that by focusing on gender imbalances within School student populations, improvements made at subject level will have the collective effect of improving the overarching imbalance at institutional level, particularly for male undergraduates where there remains collective under-representation.

#### *Eliminating the Gender Pay Gap*

Building on the efforts outlined in the three-year OA published in 2017, the University will be taking forward the following initiatives over the coming year, subject to approval via its Remuneration Committee (due December 2017). These include: improve training and support for female academics to explore the benefits of achieving professorial tenure through the Reader route; evaluating the annual review process, to include a performance assessment mechanism; ensuring staff have a clear understanding of expectations; supporting applications for salary uplifts; the provision of appropriate benchmark salary data to selection panels to ensure starting salaries are within the norms; development of a mechanism to see, at a glance, the change in pay gap, dependent on starting salaries. It is hoped that combined, these mechanisms will help narrow the gender pay-gap further, and moreover, will enhance the University's ability to monitor current status of the pay gap at any given time, thereby enabling greater understanding of progress, and enhanced ability to exert control.

### *Gender Balance at Senior Academic Level*

In general, the University continues to pursue initiatives designed to enhance gender equality across its staff-base. Adding to those highlighted in the 2017 OA, these include: establishing a Senior Women's Network, which has a core function within its remit to support junior women in career progression; ensuring representation of the Equality Networks on the Advisory Group on Equality and Diversity (AGED), providing an opportunity to engage and participate fully in policy development; and, continued roll-out of mentoring and coaching schemes.

At senior academic level, the University remains fully committed to enhancing gender equality. However, while there has been an upward trend in the past few years across all pay grades when looking at institutional career tracks (Teaching and Scholarship, Research, and Teaching and Research), it is acknowledged that further work remains to be done to ensure the equal advance of women, notably within the research and teaching track across the institution, and within the research track in some STEM subjects. To this end, the University is and will continue to enhance gender equality across its academic functions by (among other initiatives): further supporting women through the promotions process; enhancing research mentoring and peer review initiatives to support women; developing new leadership programmes, such as the International Leadership Development Programme; and, full roll out of unconscious bias training. While it is difficult to project the impact of any one initiative, the University is confident that collectively, these initiatives will deliver greater gender balance among senior academic staff.

### *Gender Balance at Court and Senior Management Level*

With regard to gender equality at board and senior management level, Court has had in place, since 2014, a [Statement of Intent on Diversity](#) within its membership. This includes a goal of achieving and maintaining female representation of a minimum of 25%, with aspirations to achieve 50% over the longer term.

Following the passing of the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act in 2016 which requires governing bodies to include specific categories of members who are either elected or appointed by bodies other than the Court, the Court amended its composition to increase the number of independent members it appoints. A key principle of these changes is to enable Court to better reflect the diversity of the University community and to target gender balance. The Court's revised composition was implemented in July 2017 and now has a gender balance of 56% Male 44% Female (compared to 71% Male 29% Female prior to the changes). The independent membership currently has a 50:50 gender balance. This is consistent with the Committee of Scottish Chairs 40:40:20 commitment. The University takes great pride in these outcomes.

## **1.3. ADDITIONAL AREAS OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE UNDER THE PEOPLE THEME**

### **Equality and Diversity**

The University's commitment to gender equality forms part of a wider commitment to the overarching Equality and Diversity (E&D) agenda. The University is fully committed to meeting all legislative requirements articulated in the Equality Act 2010, and has developed stand-alone strategies accordingly; for example, the GAP referenced above.

In line with the Equality Act 2010, the University has published its Equality Mainstreaming and Outcomes Report (2017). This outlines four key equality outcomes, developed through consultation, that the institution will pursue. These are: considering the principles of E&D day-to-day within all of the University's activities; giving staff greater understanding of their responsibilities in E&D and applying this in their practice to positively advance equality; ensuring that the University is an inclusive community where staff and students are able to fulfil their full potential in their work or studies; and taking care to celebrate and recognise the diversity of the University community so that all staff and students feel respected and valued. Further information on how the University intends to deliver and operationalise these outcomes is available [here](#), via the Mainstreaming Report Action Plan.

Acknowledging the report of the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee: *Universities and Disabilities*, the University is fully committed in its response, and in particular, to the recruitment and retention of learners across all protected characteristic groupings. The University launched a Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in 2016 to enhance the support to both staff and students. To facilitate enhanced recruitment, it is engaged in projects such as Attracting Diversity, co-ordinated by the ECU (referred to above), among others. With regards retention, as stated above under Section 1.1., that the University aims to offer the highest level of support that is available to all students. All students at the University of Aberdeen will continue to have access to the highest levels of pastoral and non-academic support services in order to optimise retention rates and more generally, the wider student experience offering.

In line with SFC priority objectives, the University is fully committed to undertaking meaningful Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) under its well established EIA process; this includes undertaking an EIA on all new policies, and as part of major exercises like the Research Excellent Framework. The University has also expressed an interest in participating in the ECU project to implement EIAs as part of Outcome Agreements; participation is subject to confirmation from the ECU.

Under Ethnicity, the University seeks to adhere to the principles set out in the Scottish Government Race Equality Framework (2016-30), and is fully engaged with the ECU Scottish Race Equality Network Forum. More generally, Internationalisation is a key thread that transcends the major themes within the institutional Strategic Plan; a key part of the Internationalisation agenda is for the recruitment and retention of staff and students from diverse national and ethnic backgrounds – the University pursues this agenda aggressively.

In terms of tangible activities, the University has and will continue to take forward a range of initiatives designed to enhance E&D. A selection of these are given below, to note:

- The governance of equality and diversity has been strengthened by reviewing the remit and membership of the Advisory Group on Equality and Diversity. The remit now covers intersectionality and the membership comprises Heads of School, Chaplains, Head of Communication and representatives from the Equality Networks.
- In relation to LGBT, a submission has been made to the Stonewall Equality Index, and National Coming Out Day was marked with a panel event and the flying of the LGBT/Pride flag from King's College. The University also signed up to the Stonewall No Bystanders Charge.
- In relation to disability, new Network co-chairs have been appointed, and the Network has been linked to Estates to provide feedback on projects. The Project Search initiative continues to be successful (25 interns have secured permanent work), and the University is in the process of becoming a *Disability Confident* organisation.
- With regards the Senior Women's Network, a Steering Group has been established for the Network, with the Network remit agreed.
- Under Mental Health, it has been a year since the launch of the institutional Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Examples of actions taken include launching an Employee Assistance Programme, launching a Staff Wellbeing Coordinators Service, appointing a Mental Health Adviser in Student Support, hosting Wellbeing Days for staff and students, and identifying Mental Health Champions across the University.
- Under Race, the University is in the process of establishing a race equality network, and it engaged well with Black History Month.
- The University has engaged in a network of eight other European universities (Aurora), working with partners on equality initiatives e.g. a project on gender budgeting.
- The Equality Research Group is collating data on the impact of equality issues in strategic areas of importance for the University such as the National Student Survey and the REF exercise.

## **Society and Culture**

The University remains committed to being a leading contributor to the cultural life of Aberdeen and the wider North East of Scotland. In line with the UK Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research, and commitments made in its Strategic Plan (2015-2020), the University retains its high-level strategic commitment to engage and empower local communities through research. As reported in its three-year OA in 2017, it hosts a diverse range of events, exhibitions and activities throughout the local region, led

primarily through PERU. Across 2016/17, attendance at University events collectively totalled over 100,000 people, with over 35,000 of those at initiatives directly delivered under the dedicated public engagement with research strategy. A range of events are planned across the year ahead, extending the breadth of its audiences further as a partner in a new Wellcome Funded project, 'Cellblock Science', aimed at delivering informal science learning to prisons in Scotland. Further funding applications will be taken forward for activities such as future European Researchers Night activities, extending activities across the whole of Scotland, and to external sponsors for the May Festival, with many of the events in 2018 created in collaboration with students and youth groups, following the Scottish Government 'Year of Young People' theme.

It should also be noted that the University both values and recognises academic staff for their involvement in public engagement – the annual Principal's Prize for Public Engagement with Research celebrates the quality and creativity of engagement by staff and students, recognising individuals who make outstanding contribution in the field of research-led public engagement. The University enables staff and student participation through training where required, and through support structures in place throughout the research lifecycle, from grant development to reporting and impact planning. In addition, to ensure ongoing best practice, the University also undertakes regular reviews of its public engagement activities, taking account of both its own programmes, and also those of the wider sector. This is enabled through sector wide engagement via different networks, for example: we work closely with the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) and are part of the SCOTPen public engagement network. We are also partners in public engagement research grants for example a European Commission grant, NUCLEUS (New Understanding of Communication; Learning and Engagement in Universities and Scientific Institutions), investigating how to make Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) a reality in universities and research institutions across Europe (Aberdeen share £180,000). The Public Engagement with Research Unit also share good practice at external conferences, presenting at both ARMA (June 2017) and Engage (December 2017).

## **Governance**

The University remains fully committed to achieving the highest standards of corporate governance. The governance arrangements outlined in the last OA remain in place (please [cross refer](#)); however, since publication of that document, it is worth noting that Court has undertaken an independent effectiveness review, led by the Good Governance Institute (CGI). The Scottish Code of Good HE Governance recommends that a governing body should undertake such an externally facilitated review of effectiveness every five years under best practice recommendations. The remit of the review was to evaluate against best practice the effectiveness of the Court as a governing body and to make recommendations to anticipate some of the future demands of governance. The report identified that Court and governance at Aberdeen had many strengths, in particular adherence to best practice as recommended by the current Scottish Code of Good HE Governance and the mix of skills and experience of its membership. The report offered a series of recommendations on how Court might further develop its governance practice in the future. The Court has considered these and agreed to prioritise the report's recommendations regarding the respective roles of Court and the Operating Board. It has since approved new articulations of the roles of both bodies which are intended to ensure the Court can have a greater focus on its role in developing and agreeing strategy, with the Operating Board monitoring the delivery of that strategy. Further consideration of the report's wider recommendations will be progressed over the coming year, while also taking into account the implications of the new Scottish Code of Good HE Governance which was published in October 2017. In addition, the Governance and Nominations Committee has a standing role to advise Court on matters of governance and to conduct, on its behalf, reviews of the University's governance. The Committee undertakes a review of effectiveness annually through benchmarking against the Scottish Code of Good HE Governance and through an annual appraisal questionnaire of governors.

## **Staff Wellbeing**

The University continues to place emphasis on staff wellbeing as a key strategic priority within its *People* theme. It takes part in the Scottish Government's Healthy Working Lives Awards initiative and actively encourages and supports staff wellbeing. The University retained its Healthy Working Lives Silver Accreditation in 2017 and will aim to continue that going forward.

As outlined in its three-year Outcome Agreement published in 2017, the University has introduced a number of new initiatives to support staff in maintaining a healthy work-life balance across the institution, from introduction of a 'nine-day fortnight' scheme for Professional Services staff, to free off-peak membership for all staff to the world class Aberdeen Sports Village (ASV) facility – over 55,000 staff trips are recorded to ASV each year. The University retains all commitments made under Staff Wellbeing in its three-year OA document, and flags the following as activities due to be taken forward over 2018/19: Student Health and Wellbeing Day was held in October 2017, to be repeated in 2018; online mandatory training for all first year students on Health and Safety and on Wellbeing; a review (ongoing) of the University's Policy on Stress Management in the Workplace; continuation of the University's Mental Health Strategy, following appointment of a Mental Health Advisor; online Wellbeing, Stress and Resilience training to be rolled out for all staff; Walk a Mile and Walking Meetings initiatives; the "Race to the North Pole" initiative, a staff team building initiative designed to encourage health and fitness related activities; mindfulness training courses will be open to all staff; health coaching will be rolled out, available to all staff; and, Britain's Healthiest Workplace Survey - the University again took part in this survey in 2017 and will do so again in 2018.

## **Sustainability**

The University continues to place emphasis on Sustainability as an institutional strategic priority, as stated in its Strategic Plan (2015-2020). In 2016/17 it revised its Carbon Management Plan and set a target to reduce emissions by 20% over the five-year period of 2016-2021. To support this ambition, the University identified an extensive and rolling programme of energy efficiency projects and mitigation initiatives through to 2021. The first full-year of results from that exercise have been very encouraging, with headline gross emissions down 3,532 tonnes (or 11.2%) significantly exceeding the 4% target of 1261 tonnes.

In terms of energy related emissions, a number of projects and initiatives resulted in a significant reduction in 2016/17. Scope 1 emissions (principally from natural gas use) were down just over 1% but Scope 2 emissions (principally from grid electricity) fell by 17.6%. While the latter was aided by a favourable shift in emissions factors, it also reflected considerable work to identify and implement energy savings projects. This included, as an example, optimisation of the efficiency of the University's Combined Heat & Power plant.

A substantial decrease in Scope 3 emissions (20.2%) was also identified, which relates in large part to business travel. While that Scope 3 data is inherently less reliable than Scope 1 and 2 (with sampling and other caveats meaning it is, in effect, a best estimate), this reflects a positive development in the face of continued efforts to enhance international profile and develop overseas ventures. Elsewhere in the Scope 3 return, it is also notable that a collaborative procurement exercise with Robert Gordon University (RGU) has transformed how the University's non-recyclable waste is treated (i.e. it is now segregated prior to being used in energy recovery rather than landfilled). This has resulted in a reduction of some 150 tonnes and this will reduce yet further with a full year of data in 2017/18.

The University continues to report comprehensively on progress against emissions and climate change commitments through the mandatory 'required' section of the Public Bodies Climate Change Duties reporting regime. In 2017/18 the University will work with the EAUC and SSN to assess how best to contribute to the 'Wider Influence' section. In terms of the wider sustainability agenda, the University took on leadership of the sustainability strand of the Aurora network in 2017. Aurora is a network of nine European universities explicitly established to work together to find solutions to globally relevant problems, in areas such as sustainability, climate and energy, digital technology and human life and health. Opportunities to enhance and share research, teaching and operational sustainability lessons will be developed as this partnership matures.

## 2. TEACHING AND LEARNING

The delivery of excellent research-led teaching, as part of a world class teaching and learning environment that provides the basis for all students to achieve their potential, is one of the key themes central to the University's Strategic Plan (2015-2020). The SFC strategic priority areas aligned to this theme are as follows:

- **SFC Priority 2:** High Quality Teaching and Learning.

### 2.1. STEM

Demonstrating an unwavering commitment to enhancing the recruitment and retention of students in STEM subjects, the University undertakes a diverse range of activities, which are threaded throughout this Outcome Agreement. This includes outreach work within the local community ranging from interaction with the early years group all the way through to engagement with senior year secondary pupils. Public engagement activities are broad ranging in their content and delivery, further detailed in section 1.3, several of which are specific events promoting and encouraging an interest in STEM.

As covered under section 1.1. on Widening Access and Articulation, various activities are designed to support access to Higher Education, and many of which are specifically designed to address STEM subjects. These include the bridging programmes for articulating students in Engineering and Psychology which are being offered, or piloted, the launch of the Access course in Maths, with consideration being given to Chemistry, and the participation in the Gateway to Medicine Programme.

The University is delighted to be participating once again in the Education Development Trust (EDT) [Go4SET](#) STEM Schools Programme (a 10 week project for 12-14 year olds), following positive feedback from across the programme that it is enhancing students' enjoyment of STEM subjects, and encouraging pupils to consider a STEM-related career. The University views initiatives such as this as critical in helping embed the link early on between STEM subjects and their application in industry, specifically when the projects demonstrate real-world problems in important economic areas such as environment, finance and technology.

Following the successful Girls in Engineering conference jointly hosted by the School of Engineering and a local school in 2016, several other events were organised by Engineering throughout 2017 to continue their efforts in promoting Engineering, but specifically to female pupils. To enhance the success of the 2016 conference, a rebadged conference, "Women in Engineering Summer Conference" has been organised for summer 2018, and is open to applicants from across the UK aged 15-17. The conference is a residential event at the University, hosted again with a local School and generously sponsored by Chevron. The conference will provide the opportunity to explore engineering in both a work and university setting, including the opportunity to visit the Integrated Operations Centre at Chevron Headquarters in Aberdeen. To help ensure fair access to the event a travel bursary will be offered.

Science staff across the University are dedicated to spreading their enthusiasm and knowledge out with the bounds of the lecture theatre. A barrier to the University's success, however, is capturing the diverse activity that is ongoing. The University's STEM Ambassador programme captures many activities, including staff delivering careers talks in local schools, hosting work experience within research labs and attending School Careers events. As part of the strategy mentioned above the University will work on identifying all of the activities undertaken to ensure appropriate support is provided, and resource is targeted at strategically important areas.

It is therefore disappointing that, as referenced in our 2016/17 Self-Evaluation, the University has seen a decrease in the percentage of students entering STEM courses, despite the significant enhancements in the University's activity's in this area. Given the evident decline, an internal analysis has been undertaken to determine the cause and effect on STEM numbers, to inform an appropriate strategy moving forward to address this. Throughout 2017/18, work will be undertaken on the strategy which will consider the conversion of STEM applicants, competitor analysis, ensuring an appropriate offering is marketed demonstrating successful future employability prospects, and significantly reviewing the undergraduate marketing, recruitment and admissions plan. Specifically, the University will be working on enhanced messaging surrounding the flexibility of sciences degrees, in particular the flexibility within

the Engineering programmes, as well as well focusing on demonstrating the possible employability opportunities that lie out with the Oil and Gas sector.

Despite the challenges above, the University is extremely proud of its engagement and outreach that helps contribute to the access and provision of the STEM subjects. The commitment and effort the University has invested in the local area, and further afield, cannot be quantified by the number of registered students alone at the University of Aberdeen. The University sees it as its civic and corporate responsibility to enhance provision and access to STEM, regardless of the institution in which the prospective student chooses to study.

## 2.2. Retention

The University is pleased to report that across the vast majority of its retention metrics for 2016/17 it performed ahead of target, with improvements year on year. This included, but was not limited to, the overarching retention rate for Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants, SIMD20 students, BME students and the proportion of students suffering a disability. This performance level is the result of both proactive and stringent measures taken to improve retention over the past few years, articulated in the previous OA. However, while results have been positive, the University is clear that there is no room for complacency; with an ever expanding and diverse population, it will continue to develop and implement new and enhanced retention strategies to address and reach the widest possible range of students. As such, non-continuation is integrated into the current Strategic Plan, with a KPI directly aligned to monitoring this metric. A report on this is taken to University Court bi-annually, with the expectation that Schools address this areas specifically within their annual School Plans.

Documented elsewhere, and reported upon in the 2016/17 Self-Evaluation (Section 2.1), the University has seen significant advances in the support services offered to students, through Student Support, as well as through improvements to the Personal Tutors system, in addition to the benefits of utilising enhanced data analytics.

Over the next few years the University will specifically be looking to develop its strategies to provide exceptional mental health and wellbeing support and advice to both students and staff. The importance of this area of support cannot be underestimated, and the University is acutely aware of the difficulties in identifying and encouraging those who may require access to support in utilising it. Feedback from academic and administrative staff suggests that retention issues related to mental health continue to be the most difficult to identify and appropriately address. The University will focus on ensuring services relating to these areas are accessible to all, and that all staff have adequate training and support in place, as well as access to resources, to support the trained services in providing the highest quality service possible. The University appointed the additional resource of a Mental Health Adviser, who took up post in August 2017. In addition to managing a caseload, the Adviser has given advice and guidance to colleagues in Student Support, other support services in the University, academic staff and those who support students in the Halls of Residence. This has been hugely beneficial in providing reassurance and/or strategies to dealing with specific circumstances. The Adviser will be developing workshops and training sessions for colleagues and is working closely with the Convener and Clerk of the Mental Health Working Group in the delivery of the University's Mental Health Strategy. Additionally, Mental Health First Aid training will be rolled out to staff to ensure as many staff as possible are in a position to help identify signs of difficulty that indicate that a fellow member of staff or student may require mental health and wellbeing support.

The University notes that a positive start and smooth transition into University life is a vital piece of the jigsaw leading to good retention and overall positive outcomes. After an initial pilot in September 2016 with the international student population, which was awarded the 2017 Silver HEIST award for "Best International Initiative", an enhanced orientation event was rolled out to all students in September 2017. It took place as a conference-style event where students chose their own schedule from sessions run at multiple times over two days. The sessions included workshops and presentations on everything from banking in the UK, NHS, Study Skills, Private accommodation, Cultural Adjustment and Library & IT. Almost 1500 students engaged in the activity. This has prompted a review of academic induction initiatives with the development of a 'Welcome Week Working Group' to include parties from across the University and an effort to standardize all induction and orientation activity.

*<Note: more text to follow>*

### 2.3. Enhanced Alignment of Skills Provision with the Needs of Employers

The University is fully committed to developing students with the skill sets required to meet the needs of industry and employers. Existing measures demonstrate that it continues to perform strongly in these areas: for example, in 2016/17, over 95% of its Scottish-domiciled graduates moved on to a positive destination. The University notes that the process of ensuring graduates are excellently prepared to undertake the responsibilities of the world beyond the lecture theatre is a long one, requiring flexibility and fast paced development. The University's high-level commitment to skills development is reflected via its Strategic Plan, under which it actively monitors positive destinations as a key performance indicator, reporting on this metric to the University Court bi-annually, as part of its strategic planning process.

Development of the curriculum to meet economic needs requires constant and continuous review of the provision of subjects that are on offer to ensure students have the right knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the economy that they are entering. For Aberdeen, this has certainly been challenging, given the changes to the energy sector, and overall impact this has had on the local economy. The University is rapidly developing its offerings to meet economic demand, including a focus on decommissioning and non-carbon related programmes at a post graduate level, and advancements in online and flexible learning enabling access to a wider audience of prospective students, looking to upskill or re-train in a highly competitive market. Provision of Access courses, see 1.1 Widening Access and Articulation, and the online BA Childhood Practice, as well as a review of the structure of the intercalating option within the MBChB programme and proposal to the SFC to offer a General Practice Enhanced Programme to address shortfalls in the numbers of GPs, are examples of the ongoing commitment to respond to sector requirements.

However, subject provision is only one aspect to preparing graduates for the world that awaits after graduation. Whilst DLHE results positively indicate a higher proportion of students entering further study, there is a decline in students entering professional occupations, from 68.3% to 63%. This is not just limited to the energy sector, with social sciences discipline graduates also particularly struggling to find employment that would benefit from their transferable skills and knowledge, in a locally challenged economy.

Whilst careers and employability enhancement services, both independent of and aligned to the academic curriculum, are second to none, and provision across the University has been excellent, there have been significant and notable developments over the last academic year, with further activities planned in the coming years, which are detailed below.

The appointment of dedicated staff within the School of Engineering has enabled the Careers Service to strengthen collaborations and to build capacity for a new curriculum-based work-related learning course designed to significantly enhance employability, *Engineering Work Experience*. Additionally, a new Work-Related Learning course is being piloted in the Schools of Biological Sciences and Psychology. This is structured for students to secure their own placement, part-time work or a personal development project which is approved by their academic School. Specifically, the course provides opportunities for the University to offer degree programmes with different forms of external engagement and for a wider range of students to have access to work-related learning opportunities during their studies, addressing the Universities Scotland's 'Making it Happen,' Strategy. Subsequent years will focus on rolling the course out more widely across the University. In addition, Research funding secured from the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) has enabled a piece of research, *Summer Vacation Activities: An Investigation of Students' Attitudes, Experiences & Perceptions* to be completed. The study has confirmed and identified the vast array of summer activities students undertake. One of the report's recommendations is to provide more structured reflection opportunities for students to analyse their summer activities.

The menu of employer engagement activities, initiatives and approaches also continue to further develop the quality and quantity of links with employers and organisations and to enhance students' employability. This activity is supported by the University's 20 Programme Advisory Boards/employer liaison groups; the Boards continue to provide a coherent forum across the University for employers, alumni, students and academic Schools and disciplines to share employability experiences and developments in a meaningful and impactful way. Each Board has a minimum remit of topics, namely:



Aberdeen Graduate Attributes, graduate destinations data, employability and the co-curriculum, other areas covered include curriculum content and design. To increase academic School/discipline engagement with the graduate destination data within the University's annual review processes, Boards are invited to discuss and comment on supplied graduate destinations data. Each academic School is required to comment on the split between graduate-level and non-graduate level employment and provide employability actions. That said, more detailed research is needed regarding how employer engagement impacts on the student experience and employability, which the Careers Service will aspire to undertake in the future.

The co-curriculum continues to complement the academic curriculum and provides opportunities for students to develop their skills and attributes. Opportunities include work placements, the BP Student Tutoring Scheme, career mentoring, Leadership Academy, enterprise & entrepreneurship opportunities and the STAR (Students Taking Active Roles) Award initiative. The Careers Services will be working to expand opportunities to work in partnership with the Santander Universities UK initiative to enhance internship provision and, to secure additional funding to support employability initiatives.

The Enhanced Transcript (the Institutional precursor to the HEAR, Higher Education Achievement Report) is a valuable tool which is helping the University to document the wider student experience. At the same time it also helps students themselves to demonstrate the skills and experiences sought by employers beyond those developed through the formal taught curriculum. 834 students received co-curricular Enhanced Transcript entries in the AY 2016-17, an increase of approximately 200 students compared to the previous academic year.

The Careers Service and the Student Learning Service continue to devise and provide resources to support our students in developing Aberdeen Graduate Attributes, new in the academic year 2016-17 is the Achieve+ site tailored for taught postgraduates and online learners. To raise student and staff awareness of the resource a new promotional [video](#) was commissioned. The video complements a new Careers Service [video](#) which has been designed to showcase to new and prospective students the University's careers and employability provision. To raise awareness of the range of services and showcase the wide-ranging careers provision offered by the University's Careers Service for postgraduate students, a new video is in production.

The newly established Positive Outcomes Task Force provides a vital channel for the Careers Service to connect with employability champions from each academic School, thereby strengthening the links between the Careers Service and academic Schools. A key aim for 2018-19 is to establish a baseline minimum undergraduate careers entitlement in each academic School. A School-level infographic which presents information and data regarding each School's student engagement with the available careers and co-curricular provision is under development, and designed to feed into School-level strategic plans, enhance the student learning experience and help the Service connect with academics to inform future employability decision making.

The InternPlus initiative was developed as a result of the success of the University's Aberdeen Internship Programme. InternPlus provides opportunities for second or third year undergraduates to undertake a part-time, paid internship within the University of Aberdeen on strategically important projects. Ending with an oral presentation, this provides an opportunity for students to summarise and present their internship learning and Aberdeen Graduate Attribute development.

## **2.4. Additional Areas of Strategic Importance under the Teaching and Learning Theme**

### **Language Skills, Gaelic and British Sign Language**

#### *Language Skills*

Growth in language skill provision continues at the University, largely as a consequence of its strategic goals around internationalisation. Whilst the University continues to offer Sustained Study options to students, as discussed in the three-year Outcome Agreement, new language provision is coming on stream from September 2018. New Honours options in Mandarin, enabling the expansion of Mandarin delivery, will be available, alongside a new MA degree in Modern Languages and Translation and Interpretation. Mandarin continues to be a popular choice for both students, and staff, with the Confucius Institute providing Chinese language teaching and culture classes and cultural events to the North East

Scotland community, including, schools, business and industry, and community organisations and individuals. It acts as a linguistic and cultural bridge, promoting knowledge exchange between China and the people of North East Scotland and serving as the first port of call for information on China.

Continuing a commitment to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), the Language Centre at the University is rapidly expanding, in part to support to the ambitious internationalisation strategy of the Business School and other priority areas, but also to enhance the support offered to current students. Currently an ongoing pilot is assessing whether unconditional offers including a compulsory pre-sessional language course, would enable more students to be eligible to commence study at the University, by way of a lower IELTS score. Specific and directed pre-sessional support is also being developed in collaboration to support students entering the Business School to ensure they are fully prepared to commence their studies, thus aiding their retention and successful completion of study.

The University is delighted to report that the Modern Language Placement Scheme continues to run, with good uptake from students. Due the success and demand the scheme has been expanded to qualified students in Level 1 and 2. Students undertake a ten-week placement in Aberdeen City Council primary schools, with options in secondary schools, helping to deliver language teaching. The scheme developed out of a range of initiatives that the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture has developed in partnership with Aberdeen City Council, SCILT (Scottish national centre for the promotion of language learning) and the University Council of Modern Languages Scotland. The development and enhancement of the scheme responds in part to interest amongst students for extended engagement with schools, with students specifically interested in pursuing a career in teaching via the PGDE. In recognition of the skills development and experience the scheme provides, the University is considering the possibility of making the primary placement a credit-bearing course for students, further reiterating the University's position on developing language skills for current students, as well as enhancing the provision of foreign language provision to the Early Years category. More information on the scheme is available in the three-year Outcome Agreement.

### *Gaelic*

The University's current Gaelic Language Plan (2013-2018) which sets out the University's commitment to the national effort to ensure that Gaelic has a sustainable future, is nearing its end. As such the University is drafting its second Gaelic Language Plan and reviewing achievements and challenges to inform the commitments being made. The University intends to produce a second plan where commitments are delivered sustainably, and to ensure that activities are embedded within existing services and procedures.

The University continues to work with partner agencies to promote and deliver the range of activities supported, and partnerships will be one of the priorities included in the second Gaelic Language Plan.

### *British Sign Language (BSL)*

The University acknowledges the requirements regarding BSL and will ensure work is undertaken to publish a BSL Plan by October 2018.

## **Internationalisation**

Enabling a diverse and international community remains a key strategic priority for the University and is embedded throughout its Strategic Plan. The University is pleased to highlight that it has risen to 33<sup>rd</sup> in the world for International Outlook according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE, September 2017 Ranking). New initiatives and developments under Internationalisation include:

- A move to a self-contained unit with a kitchen, meeting rooms, and main student-space.
- Close relationship with the PG Research School for Family Programming (Global Families), and PG focused activities.
- Development of pre-arrival online micro courses to help prepare students culturally and to manage their expectations about university life.
- Simply Living Workshop series working with Support Services around the university as well as external agencies to host workshops about budgeting, culture shock and private accommodation.

- Lifestyle video series including short themed YouTube videos on how to get to/from the airport and train station, spending time on campus at Christmas, practicing your faith in Aberdeen, and grocery shopping in a new city.
- Targeting International and Go Abroad students to participate in the A-Team Leadership Scheme which operates within the remits of the STAR Award scheme (two tiered programme run by paid ambassadors and volunteers to run all the programming and events within the International Centre).
- Continue to expand on the events to include: Discover Aberdeen (free events and activities around Aberdeen), Northeast Explorers (trips around the North-East of Scotland), Prime & Unwind (afternoons showcasing topical movie and TV), Taste of Aberdeen (celebrating the different cultures on campus through food).
- English Language Groups & Language Groups (Arabic, German, Spanish & Japanese) are run on a regular basis through the use of games, and volunteers to practice language skills learned in a more formal setting.
- Pre-start programmes were run in January and August to help students find their way around campus and to meet new people through the Advance into Autumn and January Jumpstart programmes.

The mobility of students continues to grow, both in relation to Erasmus+ and International Exchange. The summer internship option within Erasmus has also proved popular and has been a contributing factor. The upward trend has continued in 2017/18 with 379 students preparing to undertake Erasmus+ or International exchange (*note: these numbers are provisional and may change throughout the 2017/18 Academic Year*). Work over year ahead will focus on addressing the barriers in place for students, including improving curriculum mapping to partner institutions, and the financial barriers that international exchange student's face. Half year exchange options are now routinely offered where the curriculum permits, further expanding the accessibility of the programme.

Transnational Education projects continue to advance, with the opening of a campus in Doha, Qatar, in partnership with the Al Faleh Group for Educational Services (AFG). Teaching commenced in September 2017 and estimated student numbers for the academic year are c120. Presently the campus offers provision in Business with discussions are already underway with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education regarding additional undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for delivery in 2018. In addition, early discussions are being held with AFG regarding infrastructure requirements for phase two of the project that will involve the construction of a new dedicated campus in Doha at which a much broader range of subjects could be delivered.

The University's plans to open a South Korean Campus in 2017/18 remain under discussion with partners in Korea so as to ensure best fit with the current economic situation in the country. The University also remains committed to expanding its transnational reach through the appropriate and strategically located establishment of overseas campus operations elsewhere in the world with a particular focus on locating in eastern sub Saharan Africa. Such campuses offer scope for students at the main Aberdeen campus to travel and experience life and study at the remote campus whilst also potentially giving students at the remote campus the opportunity to spend time in Aberdeen itself.

The alliance established with Curtin University goes from strength to strength, with 12 students currently enrolled and a further 11 are expected to enrol in 2018. A joint MSc in Subsea Engineering has been created and, with it, a framework for the smooth expansion of Masters opportunities – for example in Project Management – that will see students starting at one university and spending a semester in the other before returning to complete a research project.

### 3. RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

The University's Strategic Plan (2015-2020) identifies Research and Knowledge Exchange as the third of its key strategic themes to support the University's commitment, as a research intensive University, to deliver world class research, with a focus on areas of excellence. It also articulates an ambition to increase the impact of institutional research by enhancing the portfolio of knowledge exchange activities with industry, business and society. These institutional commitments directly align with the following SFC priorities:

- **SFC Priority 3:** *World Leading Research* (covered under 3.1., below);
- **SFC Priority 4:** *Greater Innovation in the Economy* (covered under 3.2., below).

#### 3.1. Research Performance

##### *Growth in Research Income*

Under its institutional Strategic Plan for 2015-2020, and under milestones set via its Outcome Agreement, the University aims to increase research income from all sources to £65m by 2020. Research income from Research Councils UK is expected to increase to just over £16m over the same period. To achieve these ambitions, the University continues to pursue the strategies and processes outlined in its three-year OA, published in 2017 (please cross refer).

Results to this end have been mixed. For example, the University's total research income generation figure for 2016/17 was just under £61m, meaning a decline relative to the 2015/16 baseline. However, the University exceeded the OA milestone of £59.47m. At the same time, RCUK research income was £13.29m, meaning a slight reduction on the previous year, though still 22% of the overall institutional research income total. The overarching target set for 2017/18 is £62.07m, and committed research spend currently indicates that the University is on track to achieve this. The University would flag that performance under these measures should be set against a backdrop of organisational restructuring, and a strategic decision to refocus the institutional research agenda. In particular, it is notable that while total research income generated has declined slightly relative to previous years, the number of academic staff has fallen by 8% over the same period; conversely, research income per FTE has grown by 4% (from £89.5k per FTE in 2015/16 to £93k in 2016/17), meaning the University is improving performance, at least in proportional terms.

Internally, the University has taken a number of steps to help facilitate growth. It has recently completed a review, led by the Vice-Principal for Research and Knowledge Exchange, of the structures it has in place to support interdisciplinary research. The recommendations to emerge include an institutional pump priming fund for interdisciplinary research, and the recognition of interdisciplinary research activity in the institutional promotions criteria. The report recognised the importance of the institutional research facilities in enabling interdisciplinary research and proposed additional support for early career researchers who wish to use the facilities. In early 2017, the University also launched its new *Grants Academy*, to provide the underpinning infrastructure required to support the development and nurturing of the University's future leaders in research. The Grants Academy promotes a community of researchers providing constructive peer support, complemented by networking events, interdisciplinary sandpits and staff development. It is based on best practice in the sector and on the University's own experience with quality assurance and internal peer review of RCUK grant applications, which has seen a particular increase in NERC and BBSRC success rates. These activities will be supported by core funds and will be supplemented by enabling funds from external funders. Going forward, the University will also launch Phase II of the Grants Academy, focusing on networking, collaboration and inter-disciplinarity to further engagement in various initiatives, like the Aberdeen City Deal, Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), Horizon 2020 and others. Phase I of the Grants Academy focused on grant acquisition, and on support at the pre-award stage of the grant life cycle. The next step is to focus on the delivery of excellent outcomes and enabling their effective dissemination, knowledge exchange and follow on funding.

Externally, the main opportunities for growth of quality activity and income for research and knowledge exchange continue to arise from changes in the external funding landscape and development of external partnerships. The City Deal will offer opportunities within Aberdeen and the region, and reaching out further to industry nationally and internationally. The Government's White Paper, 'Higher

Education: Success as a Knowledge Economy', announced the creation of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) which will bring together all the research funding councils, research support currently located within HEFCE and Innovate UK. This, together with the stronger emphasis on interdisciplinary research recommended by Sir Nicholas Stern in his review of the Research Excellence Framework, will create funding opportunities for institutions whose research strengths and knowledge exchange activities are well aligned with government priorities.

The Aberdeen Region City Deal Innovation strand includes the Oil and Gas Technology Centre (OGTC), Innovation Hubs for Biopharmaceuticals, and Agri-Food and Drink, with Big Data being a component throughout each Hub. Near market Solutions Centres within OGTC are now operational and are engaging researchers developing proposals to meet industry needs. The University is working with Opportunity North East to deliver the new infrastructure for life science companies based in Aberdeen. Training for enterprise and entrepreneurship is embedded within each of the strands of the Innovations areas of the city deal and the University is working closely with partners to ensure the opportunities are available to staff and students to complement existing enterprise training within the Researcher Development Unit and Grants Academy. For example, ONE supported the delivery of boot camp for the life science researchers, with an accelerator programme planned for early 2018.

The RCUK GCRF has also offered opportunities for the University to achieve growth. The University currently has a grant portfolio of just under £5.5m, supported through RCUK GCRF and the Newton Fund. The bids were supported through the University's Grants Academy which facilitated workshops, sandpits and networking events to assist researchers in developing competitive bids. The University is planning to adopt a similar enabling approach to calls issued under the Government's Industry Challenge Strategy Fund. The SFC's enabling GCRF award has been extremely helpful in achieving engagement and supporting applications. It is also notable that the BBSRC has recognised the potential within the institution through an award to pump prime activities and applications to the GCRF. The University has attracted further enabling awards to support research excellence from the Wellcome Trust (Institutional Strategic Support Fund, £1.5m over 5 years) and the MRC (MRC Discovery Award) which provides development funding for research areas that have the potential to be recognised as MRC Centres of Excellence in the near future).

The main challenges for the University over the short to medium term include an increasingly competitive funding environment, and uncertainty over Brexit in terms of access to EU funding and retention of key staff, including those from EU countries and those who wish to continue their careers within the EU. The University is currently undertaking a high-level appraisal and risk assessment, to identify the adverse impacts likely to arise from Brexit, and in turn, strategies for mitigation. This will include strategies to address potential impacts linked to the institutional research agenda, including those aligned to funding and staff and just referenced.

#### *Research Staff Training and Development*

The University continues to invest in sustaining a high quality research environment for research training and development. Support for researchers at all levels is provided throughout the institution, within Schools and Institutes, and across Professional Services. Support and development services for research staff and (postgraduate research (PGR) students) includes both training and professional development initiatives, and is available to all researchers across the career spectrum, including research students, research-only (postdocs) and academic staff. Within Professional Services, this support is offered primarily via the Centre for Academic Development and the Postgraduate Research School (more on this below). For individuals - be they research staff or students - the intent is to enhance career development and progression by facilitating realisation of personal potential, with a view to optimising the quality of research outputs produced. In turn, as an institution, researcher development activities are designed to maximise research and teaching capacity at all levels, and to optimise the research quality at a collective level, within Schools and Institutes and within other organisational structures; for example, Units of Assessment.

Researcher development programmes are available through a variety of open and bespoke courses, workshops and individual interventions. Examples include grant writing workshops, peer review programmes for research grant development, and researcher mentoring schemes; noting such schemes are often led by Schools, tailored to disciplines and to the Schools unique research environment. Different offerings are made to research staff at different stages in their careers. For

example, under the banner of *Academic Leadership*, the University offers bespoke Principal Investigators (PI) development programmes promote excellence in leadership and management for PIs. These programmes are designed to support new and aspiring and also experienced PIs to ensure that they are equipped to reach their full potential by enhancing their understanding of the University environment. Since being introduced in 2007, the University has delivered over 17 programmes to 325 PIs across the University.

It should be noted that while training programmes and courses are designed for all researchers, it is recognised that not all of researchers will remain in an academic role, notably research students or early career researchers. To this end, a comprehensive programme of activities to support researchers to deliver societal and economic impact in a global environment is also provided. This covers areas like enterprise, entrepreneurship, creativity, commercialisation, teaching and self-management. The importance of engaging in skills development in a variety of ways and the importance of building a portfolio of evidence of skills and learning is thus promoted widely.

#### *Research Excellence Framework Preparations*

Throughout the REF assessment period, the University has focused on enabling and supporting excellent and impactful research, knowledge exchange and researcher development through a variety of means, most of which are covered in this section. Much of this activity is supported via institutional core grants, supplemented by external enabling funds. From these efforts, the University aims to deliver an enhanced institutional performance in the REF2021 as part of an ongoing drive for continuous improvement. Having now received the latest REF guidance, the University has intensified the process of identifying excellent research outputs and impacts that may be of requisite quality for submission to REF2021. This has been underpinned by establishing strong governance, management and support structures by Unit of Assessment, and through robust quality appraisal exercises, including internal and external peer review of selected outputs. Through such initiatives, the University aims to optimise the strength of its submission across each Unit to which it submits, looking to achieve critical mass and to maximise performance.

#### *Research Impact*

The REF2014 recognised 85% of the University's non-academic research impact as either 4\* (world-leading) or 3\* (internationally excellent). The drive to deliver world class non-academic impact is one of two strategic goals under the research theme in its Strategic Plan (2015-2020), and is central to both the University's research environment and its institutional research support arrangements. Researchers have access to support and advice about ways of engaging with research users, collaborating with non-academic partners and designing projects that are capable of delivering impact. Impact training and awareness is delivered through the Grants Academy which provides general as well as project specific impact support. The University has provided enabling funds for both developing and maximising impact through a University wide competitive process, providing additional examples to undertake a range of showcasing events.

The University's strategies for achieving impact are embedded in its priority research activities over the next five years. The University will continue to work closely with health authorities in clinical and health care research (which was awarded a Queen's Anniversary Prize recently); work with industry through the City Deal to support regional economic growth, engaging with industry parties to access Innovate UK funding and further strengthen our partnerships with charities, local and national government to inform policy and decision making. The University's research is internationally focused, with the majority of research publications co-authored with international partners. We have a strong track record of attracting overseas industrial income through a number of long standing industrial partnerships. Over the period of this Outcome Agreement, the University's focus on international impact activities will be on those delivered through the GCRF, where several projects are already supporting development activities in DAC countries.

#### *Support for Postgraduate Research Students*

The University remains fully committed to growing its PGR student population; the 2020 target of 1,100 students remains in place, despite increasing challenges across the recruitment environment,

enhanced by factors like Brexit. The scale of the challenge in place is illustrated by a recent drop in the PGR population; from 2015/16 to 2016/17 it declined marginally, from X to Y.

However, the University has strategies in place to mitigate these threats, and to facilitate growth in the PGR population. Most notably, it has created a new University-wide Postgraduate Research School, led by a specifically appointed Dean. This was introduced in September 2017, with a view to markedly improving the PGR experience, and in turn, underpinning growth in the PGR population. The School has a remit to provide strategic and operational leadership for research degrees, the research student experience and research training and development, for students and academic supervisors. The School supports PGR students and supervisors throughout the entire PhD journey from recruitment to alumni relations and supports researcher/personal skills development, with a strong emphasis on generic skills, employability, practitioner engagement and entrepreneurship. The School also supports supervisors through clearly signposted support services and clearly articulated expectations, complemented by a programme of supervisor training. Research methods and research specific skills are provided within schools and disciplines. Specifically, the PGR School provides strategic oversight and guidance on areas related (but not limited) to: recruitment and admissions; support, monitoring and progression; training and development; and funding and scholarships, which includes providing support for institutional funding applications, facilitating the development of external partnerships including overseas government bodies. Moving forward, the Postgraduate Research School will focus on defining essential research skills and will explore the formalisation of skills development as a core part of research training. At the current time, PGR students have access to skills development through workshops, individual writing advice sessions and online materials. All new PGR students are provided with the opportunity, via their own School, to undertake an introductory development session on demonstrating and/or tutoring. In tandem, Schools frequently offer discipline-specific support and development around marking and feedback provision.

Finally, as a general point, the University is using a range of mechanisms as a means of facilitating improvement in its PGR offering, and in turn, growth in its PGR population. For example, it is looking to gauge performance through the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). PRES gathers information about the experience of any research student on a doctoral or research master's course, focusing on the experiences of supervision, resources, research community, progress and assessment, skills and professional development. This year past the University achieved a response rate of 36% (compared to 20% previously), and an aggregate score was 79%, equal to the UK sector average. Based on this, the University acknowledges that there is scope for improving the research culture within disciplines and across the institution as a whole.

### *Diversity in Research*

As referenced under Sections 1.2. and 1.3. (Gender and Equality and Diversity) above, the University is currently implementing a range of initiatives and activities designed to enhance both gender equality, and equality and diversity more generally. Within the context of REF2021, the University is awaiting guidance from the E&D Advisory Panel (EDAP) on exact requirements specific to that exercise. However, the current expectation is to develop an institutional code of practice for the selection of outputs, taking care to ensure that the impact of selection decisions on all groups protected by the Equalities Act is monitored, with appropriate action taken where necessary to ensure that there is no disadvantage to those groups.

More generally, as noted already, all Athena SWAN action plans have a focus on ensuring gender balances where possible, including across research staff cohorts. This is a particular focus for STEM based subjects, notably those where there were significant gender imbalances in the REF2014 submission. Initiatives like Athena SWAN are complemented by the HR Excellence in Research Award (achieved in 2010, and successfully retained 2012, 2014 and 2016 – to be externally reviewed in 2018), awarded by the European Commission. This recognises the University's commitment to the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and aligns with alignment with the European Charter and Code for the Recruitment and Management of Researchers. It should also be noted that the University Court recently approved the Employee Engagement Strategy and Action Plan (available [here](#)), and this outlines a commitment to adhere to the values of trust, integrity, respect and inclusion. The strategy is designed to support the institutional values set out in the Strategic Plan 2015-2020 and to help create "A respectful and inclusive community, built on communication, trust and integrity".

Finally, in terms of more tangible actions, the University is also taking part in a Scottish Governance initiative to support female early career researchers, *Ingenious and Enterprising Women in Scotland* (2018).

#### *Enhanced Research Collaboration*

The University continues its commitment to collaborative research, as articulated in its 2017 OA. For example, it retains its membership of various Scottish Research Development Grant (SRDG) research pooling initiatives and national research partnerships. It also retains collaborative arrangements with different research institutes, Scottish Government and NHS Scotland, particularly through the James Hutton Research institute, the Marine Laboratory and Health Science Scotland. Internationally, the commitment to the Confucius Centre remains in place, a global alliance with Curtin University has grown in strength, and new opportunities continue to emerge for partnerships via the Newton and Global Challenge Research funds.

#### *Universities UK Concordat to Support Research Integrity*

The University has in place a comprehensive Research Governance Handbook [available here](#). The Handbook details institutional expectations and policies around research integrity and governance, and was designed in-part to meet the principals set out in the UUK Concordat to Support Research Integrity. In 2017, the Handbook was subject to major review as part of an ongoing continuous improvement process. It was updated in the light of changes made to organisational structures, and to take account of changes in the external research environment, including PREVENT, the Nagoya Protocol, funders' open access mandates. Over the coming period, the University will be working towards further improving and streamlining its processes around ethical approval of research applications and related governance arrangements, looking to ensure a robust and transparent institutional approach.

#### *Concordat on Open Research Data*

The University engaged in the consultation on the RCUK Concordat on Open Research Data in 2015 and welcomed the introduction of the concordat in 2016. In 2012, the University put in place a high level institutional policy on research data management which requires researchers to manage and secure their research data effectively, and which also supports the publication of data where possible.

The University also has in place infrastructure to enable researchers to generate, store securely, publish, archive and dispose of their data in accordance to data management plans. Researchers are able to publish datasets on our [institutional research portal](#) or on externally hosted sites such as UK DataArchive or Figshare. Over the period of this Outcome Agreement, the University will work with the academic community through staff development activities to further enhance compliance with open data requirements.

### **3.2. Knowledge Exchange (KE) – Contribution to Greater Innovation in the Economy**

As noted above, the delivery of excellent non-academic research impact is one of the two specific goals articulated in the University's institutional Strategic Plan (2015-2020). To strengthen its commitment and leadership for knowledge exchange, the University has recently appointed a new Vice-Principal with the combined role for research and KE, along with 3 Deans of Research and KE. The University has also undertaken a range of initiatives and activities to underpin its ambitions under KE, outlined below.

The University has continued to increase its Innovation Vouchers (IV) and retains the targets of having 10 by 2020. It continues to promote IVs and H2020 IVs to its SME partners as a first step for innovation and collaboration. The University is actively reviewing the Innovation Voucher project as part of the post referral process with Interface to continue to meet the needs of industry partners.

The University remains a committed member of the North East KTP centre, with new membership embedded. After a challenging year for the KTP centres, demand for KTPs has improved considerably and the University is targeting both researchers and companies to ensure awareness of the additional funds through Innovate UK. It continues to seek opportunities to secure matched funding from industry,



whether that is for KTP projects, Innovate UK, studentships, or for SFC funded Innovation Centre projects. Industry and overseas supported research income also remains strong at £11.4m for 16/17, remaining at 19% of the institutional total research grant income portfolio.

The University has continued to contribute to the innovation landscape in Scotland and remains committed to the delivery of the Innovation Scotland Action Plan. It has increased engagement with the Innovation centres and Interface along with increasing the demand for Innovation vouchers. It has also built on the collaborations with the Innovation Centres, with notable new relationships through the Oil and Gas Innovation Centre and the implementation of the association MSc programme. Additional programmes are being supported through Stratified Medicine Scotland Innovation Centre.

The University is on target for delivering its contribution to the nationally agreed University Innovation Fund (UIF) outcomes. In demonstrating our commitment the University of Aberdeen is leading Outcome 2 (Simplification /commercialisation) and participating fully in the development of an evaluation framework of the UIF with SFC and other stakeholders (*please cross refer to the attached University UIF plan, submitted with this OA for more detail on this (to follow in April)*). The University supports the newly created UIF Manager post and will engage with the individual, to ensure the collaborative actions are delivered. Through our Grants Academy programmes we are ensuring that enterprise training is being embedded in the programmes and enhancing the opportunities for academic staff to engage with industry, In 16/17, the University increased income from Innovate UK and the number of projects with industry, in particular with OGIC. This is being sustained and expanded through the opportunities presented by the Region City Deals.

The University remains committed to supporting sustained economic development for the North East of Scotland and beyond, as demonstrated through our partnership within with Aberdeen City Region Deal. As part of the engagement with the City Deal, the University is a member of Opportunity North East and the Oil and Gas Technology Centre (OGTC), along with the boards overseeing the delivery for Life Sciences/Food and Drink Agri-Tech. As noted above, researchers are responding to industry needs being presented through OGTC and supporting the accelerator programmes being developed in partnership with ONE, also ensuring that enterprise and entrepreneurship training is being embedded wherever possible. Industry placements and internships remain a key component of the University's industry engagement strategy. Through the Santander University support, we have grown the opportunities for industry internships and provided additional entrepreneurship opportunities with the launch a University Light Bulb week-long support programme and competition. The University has also created its own *InternPlus* placement to enhance the Light Bulb programme for 17/18, providing flexible work place skills development for our students.

The University continues to embed KE outcomes and non-academic impact in the activities offered through the Grant Academy; enabling funds to support KE activities are available through our UIF allocation and the BBSRC GCRF impact accelerator award. The University is also providing bespoke training to embed culture change in interactions with industry. The MRC Proximity to Discovery award supports KE and people exchange within the life science industrial sector and cluster development as part of ACRD.

In supporting the delivery of the Enterprise and Skills review actions on internationalisation, the University is using the Official Development Assistance to enhance the skills and capacity of researchers to address global challenges, through Grants Academy from focussed workshops, building upon existing partnerships and providing pump priming for pilot projects. Working with partners within the AURORA Network, the University is mapping its expertise and existing relationships across the sustainable development goals to provide a strategic approach to its support.

The University is a major contributor to the Aberdeen innovation ecosystem, through ABVenture Zone (for student start-ups), Life Science innovation and working with ONE, Elevator and others to enhance the support for company creation. The University continues to host 14 spin-outs across the institution along with the numerous individual industry projects, thus demonstrating its commitment to embedding innovation throughout the University. New spin-outs in 16/17 raised over £20m, whilst other portfolio spinouts raised additional funds of over £60m, contributing to the economic development of the Scottish industrial sector.

## APPENDIX 1

### DEMONSTRATING IMPACT: CASE STUDIES

*To note: this section will include a number of case studies, designed to showcase best practice or initiatives unique to Aberdeen where we can demonstrate tangible impact.*

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