

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 3 NOVEMBER 2022

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Jenny Mordue (Vice-Convener), Dan Montgomery, Eric Crockart, Euan Mackenzie, Graeme Nicol, Iain Percival, Judith Taylor, Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, Mary Stephen, Mel Roberts, Otto Thoresen, Susan Strachan, with Mark White (Chief Financial Officer), Nicole Cochrane (Alumni Relations), Tracey Slaven (Clerk & Registrar) and Louise Thomson (Head of Governance).

Apologies: John Campbell, Colin Duncan, Lisa Henderson, Jan McRobbie, Pat Pugh, Mark Strange, Robert Traynham and Alease Coleman (Assistant Clerk & Registrar)

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Convener welcomed Otto Thoresen, Louise Thomson, and Mark White, who were attending their first Committee meeting.

2. MARK WHITE, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

Mark White briefed the Committee on the current financial position and outlook:

Financial Outcome 2021/22

- The University had predicted a £3m deficit but out-turn was a £6.9m surplus.
- The forecast cash balance had been £51m but the yearend balance was £61m.
- Income had been £3m higher than expected due to increases in tuition fees.
- Expenditure had been £7.8m less than budget, although that was largely attributable to underspends which would require to be spent in 2022/23.

Budget 2022/23

- The Court had approved a £1.9m deficit budget, reflecting the REF outcome – reduction of £1.9m in year, then £4.7m – and taking (some) account of the wider inflationary pressures.
- The SFC settlement for the next 5 years was ‘flat cash’.
- The budget assumed tuition fee growth of 22%, research income growth of 10% and pay bill growth of 14% - including a pay award of 3.2% (average) plus increments.
- Allowance had been made for investments of £20m on Estates and circa £7m on IT and Digital.

Budget 2022/23 – Current Position

- September / October student intake was up £8m (9%) from 2021 but this was less than budget and a significant increase in the January 2023 intake was required to meet the projected annual growth of £22.4m (22%).
- Also experiencing a range of inflationary cost pressures.
- Currently reviewing investment plans to ensure budget is achieved.

In response to questions from members:

- Mark White confirmed that the overseas student intake was coming from the EU and from the wider world. The requirement for EU research students to pay fees had not reduced applications; the main decline had been for online study.
- Mark White said that the intake of Chinese students was on target but that it was an area of concern – though less than for many other universities. Tracey Slaven noted that the strategy of diversifying student recruitment inevitably brought risks but that the University was positive about its relationship with China and with the Confucius Institute.
- Tracey Slaven agreed that the cost-of-living crisis was inevitably having an effect on students. The University was helping in various ways: for instance, breakfast was being served twice a week across campuses and low-cost soup every day; clothes horses had been provided for students to save money on using tumble dryers; the AUSA food swap was being supported. The University was constantly listening out for concerns from students.
- Mark White stated that the 2022/23 budget had made adequate allowance for inflation but the 2023/24 budget would be a challenge and might affect the timing of the King's Quarter project and the new Business School.

3. UNIVERSITY UPDATE

Tracey Slaven reported:

- There was a great buzz with students back on campus.
- The number of overseas students was lower, due to a mix of external issues: delays in issuing student visas; reduced air travel due to Covid; the post-Brexit requirement for a visa for the cheaper routes through Dublin and Amsterdam; and cost of living and financial uncertainty
- The University was ranked 13th in the UK by the Guardian: an important achievement.
- The QS Sustainability ranking, based on external research rather than submissions from the institutions, had placed the University 7th in the UK and 34th in the world for environmental impact.
- The Aberdeen 2040 interdisciplinary plan was being implemented with the advertisement for 20 new interdisciplinary research fellow positions.
- The Scottish Government's recent emergency budget review had not reduced SFC's funding.
- A few days of strikes were expected from the UCU, with more following the Christmas period. Ballots by the Unite union did not however reach the threshold in Aberdeen for industrial action.
- Principal George Boyne had taken over as the chair of the Universities & Colleges Employers Association.
- Mental health support remained a serious commitment for the University, and more counsellors were being hired to support both staff and students.

4. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The Minutes were noted and approved.

5. MATTERS ARISING

The Convener highlighted the two vacant committee seats.

6. CONVENER'S REPORT

The Convener reported that:

- He had followed up the concern about the lack of a fire suppression system at Marischal College. The Estates department had emphasised that the University attached great importance to the building. They had reported that the building had had a recent fire safety assessment and they were considering whether any further measures were required. The risk did not feature specifically on the University's risk register, which however included the general risk of failure to comply with health and safety requirements. The General Council's concern had been reported to the Court's Finance and Resources Committee.
- He had met Julie Ashworth, the Senior Governor, and had a helpful discussion including about the focus of the Strategy Session in October.
- He had attended an event for alumni in Edinburgh, addressed by Rector Martina Chukwuma-Ezike and attended by a refreshingly mixed age range of graduates.
- In response to the Strategy Session's concern that the Business Committee should be more visible in the University, he had arranged that a member of the Committee would be processing at each of the four graduations. No one from the Committee was however currently planning to attend the Remembrance Day service and members were also invited to the Court's meeting with stakeholders on 21 November and the Carol Service.
- He and his predecessor Nigel Lindsay continued to work closely with Charles Calder to finish the edits of the history of the General Council since 1960.

7. STRATEGY SESSION FOLLOW-UP (Paper GC22:09)

The Convener thanked those that attended the strategy session. As regards follow-up, it was agreed that:

- The Marischal College group would consist of Eric Crockart, Jenny Mordue and Mel Roberts.
- The commercialisation of research group would consist of Otto Thoresen, Jenny Mordue, Iain Percival, John Campbell, Susan Strachan, and Graeme Nicol.
- The graduate employability group would consist of Judith Taylor, Pat Pugh, and Dan Montgomery, who would link up with Ruth Taylor to explore the topic further.
- It was agreed that the topic of the leadership role of the University within North-east Scotland would be picked up at the next meeting when Robert Traynham was present. Meantime, the Committee agreed Euan Mackenzie, Eric Crockart, and Mel Roberts would work as a group on this topic.

On the topic of raising the profile of the Business Committee, the actions in the annex to the paper were agreed. The Convener would take them forward, in collaboration as necessary with the Vice-Convener and other members.

8. DATES OF GENERAL COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Committee agreed that the General Council should meet on Saturday 18 February (with a report on the Science Teaching Hub with a tour and Senior Vice Principal Karl Leydecker to be in attendance to discuss the league tables) and Saturday 24 June (with a potential report on developments at Foresterhill and Principal George Boyne to be in attendance).

At a later Business Committee meeting, the attendance of the new Vice Principal Research would be welcome.

9. ALUMNI RELATIONS UPDATE

Nicole Cochrane presented the following Alumni Relations team update:

- Since September there had been alumni events across Europe in Athens, Paris, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Luxembourg with further events taking place tonight in Warsaw and Brussels. The first event for over 5 years had been held in Beijing, attended by almost 60 graduates. An alumni event, combined with student recruitment, had been held in Ghana.
- The New York chapter had held their first AGM and planned to hold several events throughout the year. The Mexican chapter were about to start working on several initiatives to recruit students in the country.
- A St Andrew's Day event, jointly with University of Glasgow, was planned in Vancouver.
- More international events were planned for next year, particularly in Southeast Asia.
- Domestically, there had been alumni events in Portsoy, Edinburgh and Shetland and it seemed possible that an Edinburgh alumni group would be forming.
- The online event series continued to do well, attended by alumni globally and local in-person events had been a huge success.
- Carol concerts were being held in London (after a 2 year gap) and at St Machar's Cathedral. The Christmas appeal would start soon, raising money for the General Medical Research Fund.
- A new Director of Advancement joining, Liza Boffen-Yardanov, would be joining the University shortly.

10. REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COURT (Paper GC22:10)

The report was noted by the Committee.

11. AOCB

The Convener reported correspondence from an alumnus proposing that the toga should be brought back, particularly for PR purposes. Mary Stephen noted that those welcoming students at the airport still wear red to stand out and hold tradition. Eric Crockhart recalled a similar proposal which had been politely received by the General Council and equally politely rejected. The Committee agreed that approach. The Convener would respond to the alumnus.

12. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Thursday 02 March 2023, Craig Suite, Sir Duncan Rice Library.