



THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTE OF THE 316th STATUTORY MEETING

The 316th meeting of the General Council was held on campus and online on 11 June 2022. The Convener of the Business Committee, Dr Duncan Macniven, was in the Chair.

1 WELCOME

Dr Duncan Macniven noted that this was the General Council's first meeting attended both in the King's College conference centre and online. He gave a special welcome to Principal Professor George Boyne, Tracey Slaven, Paul Gormley, and Claire Akparanta.

2 MINUTES OF THE 315th MEETING

The draft Minutes of the 315th Statutory Meeting were approved.

3 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

4 UNIVERSITY UPDATE FROM PRINCIPAL GEORGE BOYNE

Professor Boyne reintroduced the University's 2040 strategy of being Inclusive, Interdisciplinary, International, and Sustainable. The Interdisciplinary challenges the 2040 strategy faced were energy transition, social inclusion and cultural diversity, environment and biodiversity, data and artificial intelligence, and health, nutrition and wellbeing. A director had been appointed to lead on each of these closely-linked challenges.

Professor Boyne listed the recent highlights of the University's achievements:

- Second Queen's Anniversary Prize in four years, awarded for Soil Science.
- Fifth ranking in the UK for overall student satisfaction, the University's highest-ever in the National Student Survey.
- UK university rankings in the current academic year:
 - QS – 27th
 - Times Higher – 22nd
 - Guardian – 20th
 - Times and Sunday Times – 20th
- University's 2040 strategy awarded the UK University Strategy of the Year 2021 by Higher Education Strategic Planners Association.

Professor Boyne listed the challenges and priorities for the year ahead:

- Global economic & political uncertainty.

- Inflation, against flat-cash budget for the Scottish Funding Council for the next five years.
- International student recruitment.
- Rebuilding research capacity.
- Regional and global partnerships.
- Recruitment of extra academic and professional service staff.
- Investment in physical and digital infrastructure – of which the newest example was the £37m Science Teaching Hub on St Machar Drive.

Professor Boyne noted that the international student population had quadrupled in the past four years. Revenue growth had been interrupted by the pandemic, but still increased from £219.5 million in 2017/18 to £255.5 million in 2021/22 and was back on track.

A member asked what the positives arose out of the pandemic and which of these would the University want to continue for the future. Professor Boyne said working together as a university team had strengthened the culture; secondly digital education had developed which complemented on-campus teaching; thirdly, there was less reliance on pen and paper exams and more diverse forms of assessment suited lower economic background students better; and finally, research connections had been strengthened as Aberdeen was no longer at a geographic disadvantage. A member asked to what extent the pandemic had affected the implementation of the 2040 strategy. Professor Boyne stated that some items were slowed down and a revised timeline would be presented to the University Court in the autumn. The targets for 2025 and longer-term goals remained valid.

In response to a member's question, Professor Boyne confirmed that continued collaboration with other northern universities was still an important element in the 2040 strategy. To be considered academically outstanding, collaboration with other universities was imperative: the University wanted to collaborate with the best wherever they were.

A member encouraged other General Council members to visit the new Science Hub, which would attract students and which underpinned the 2040 strategy.

In response to a member's question about the University's (and in particular the Business School's) score in the recent Research Excellence Framework, Professor Boyne stated that the REF was unsurprisingly disappointing due to the University of Aberdeen cutting research staff by 25% since the previous REF while other universities had increased by 44% in 2013-2018. Professor Boyne noted that there had been pressure at the time to save money, but it had been a disappointing move that had reduced the REF score (and the funding which it attracted). The Business School had for the first time submitted a full range submission and was roughly halfway on the score table - a good first-time submission. Professor Boyne noted that the Business School was now scoring nearly in the top third in the quality of their academic publications and, with consistent support and funding, he was confident that the School would do better in the next REF. Meantime, REF successes, for instance in Divinity, were to be celebrated.

A member asked how the student demand had been for the humanities and whether the University expected to cut programmes. Professor Boyne was pleased to say that both the demand and funding for the humanities remained strong and that there was no desire or plan to cut programmes.

5 BUSINESS COMMITTEE REPORT

The Convener of the Business Committee, Dr Duncan Macniven, reported that there had been two Committee meetings since the last General Council meeting.

At the most recent meeting, the Vice-Principal Research, Marion Campbell, highlighted that the research submitted in the REF which was of world-leading or international excellent standard research rose from 76% to 79%, but that the scores of other universities had advanced more than that. The REF report had ranked Divinity 1st in the UK and Public Health 1st in Scotland and 8th in the UK. A plan was in hand to improve the next REF score. At the meeting in March, Vice-Principal for Regional Engagement and Recovery Pete Edwards, discussed with the Business Committee ideas for regional engagement and recovery.

The Convener noted that the link between Court and the Business Committee had been strengthened by the appointment of three independent Court members, who were also members of the General Council, to the Committee.

Another focus of the Business Committee's attention had been the future of Marischal College, especially the Mitchell Hall. A task force, including several Committee members, had reported to the University's Senior Management Team their ideas for the future use of the buildings. The Convener reported that Dr Charles Calder had finished his 1960-present history of the General Council and publication as least online and hopefully on paper was in sight.

Several members said that they had been disappointed by the graduation ceremonies held at The Event Centre Aberdeen rather than on campus. The Convener said he had been impressed with what the University provided with the graduations at the Centre. Tracey Slaven, University Secretary & Chief Operating Officer, said that the Elphinstone Hall was no longer capable of holding graduations with the number of graduates and family members attending the ceremonies. Additionally, the King's Quarter project would limit access to Elphinstone Hall, both undesirable for a large-scale event. The Centre had both flexibility and accessibility and for the time being was the best solution for graduations.

A member asked if there was an adequate fire suppression system at Marischal College. Paul Gormley said there was not a fire suppression system but there were sufficient fire safety measures in place.

5 MEMBERSHIP OF BUSINESS COMMITTEE – ELECTION

Tracey Slaven reported, as required by Standing Order 19, that the current terms of membership of Jenny Mordue, Dan Montgomery and Graeme Nicol would end on 30 September. All three were eligible for re-election. Nominations would close on 5th August. The Convener encouraged members of the General Council to put themselves forward for membership, to refresh the Committee.

6 KING'S QUARTER PROJECT

Claire Akparanta introduced the King's Quarter project which was one of the University's two major capital projects and due for delivery in 2025. The project was initiated to improve the capacity and quality of teaching and learning space on the King's College campus while enhancing and repurposing buildings. The Cromwell Tower, Bookstack and the old Senate wing would be renovated internally and the courtyard would be roofed to connect the buildings surrounding it. A new welcoming eastern entrance to the campus would be created and the observatory would be renovated and made accessible to visitors. A new memorial garden would be created behind College Bounds with trees planted at a ratio of 2:1 to replace the trees lost. The new construction would be discreet and would not disrupt the surrounding buildings.

Key benefits were:

- 3420 m² of new teaching, learning and social space.
- Enhanced teaching space.
- Bringing to life under-utilised space in the historic campus.
- A teaching environment supporting diversified approaches to pedagogy.
- Enhanced student experience and reputation.
- Ability to attract and retain staff and students.

Challenges were:

- Geo-political issues such as COVID-19.
- Project costs as there was a construction boom in Aberdeen.
- Avoiding disruption to historic buildings.

The project schedule was:

- Technical design stage commenced – May 2022
- Tender main contractor – Autumn 2022
- Commence construction – summer 2023
- Target building opening – start of 2025 academic year.

Martina Chukwuma-Ezike, Rector, noted how positively the King's Quarter project would impact the University.

7 ANY OTHER COMPETENT BUSINESS

An alumnus had emailed asking alumni to be more eco-friendly and at an organisational level, each discipline to compete to outdo each other on sustainability and have progress tracked yearly. Professor Boyne said that he was keenly aware of the University's responsibility to address environmental sustainability and that four of the twenty Aberdeen 2040 commitments addressed the topic. Claire Akparanta added that the King's Quarter project would re-use the buildings already on campus. Additionally, carbon and energy assessments would be taken at each stage.

A member asked what was being done with the fine artefacts in the University's collection which were not on display. The Convener agreed that the University had an exceptional collection, a fraction of which were displayed in the exhibition space in the Duncan Rice Library. Tracey Slaven agreed that the University should develop and share its collection but explained that much curation work was needed before it could be displayed to the public. A member agreed with the importance of displaying the University's vast collection and praised the University for the return of artefacts such as the Benin Bronze to their places of origin.

The Convener asked members of the General Council to bring to his attention topics which the Business Committee should explore. He thanked Principal Professor George Boyne, Tracey Slaven, and Claire Akparanta for their presentations.

8 NOTICE OF THE 317th STATUTORY MEETING

The date of the 317th Statutory Meeting was to be confirmed.