



THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN  
GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTE OF THE 317th STATUTORY MEETING

The 317th meeting of the General Council was held on campus and online on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2023. The Convener of the Business Committee, Dr Duncan Macniven, was in the Chair.

1 WELCOME

Duncan Macniven noted that this was the General Council's second hybrid meeting, held both in the King's College conference centre and online. The June meeting had been attended live by 22 people present and 28 online and also by 82 people who watched the recorded meeting – a much larger attendance than formerly. He welcomed those present and gave a special welcome to the platform party of Karl Leydecker, Tracey Slaven and Graeme Paton.

2 MINUTES OF THE 316<sup>th</sup> MEETING

The draft Minutes of the 316<sup>th</sup> Statutory Meeting, held on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2022, were approved.

3 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

4 UNIVERSITY UPDATE FROM SENIOR VICE PRINCIPAL KARL LEYDECKER

Speaking first about the general position of the University, Karl Leydecker highlighted:

- The challenge of achieving financial growth in a difficult climate.
- Two important building projects – the King's Project and the Business School – which were out to tender, and a wider review of the University's estate to reflect changes in the needs of study, teaching and research.
- Steps to build research capacity.
- An increased focus on the University's place in the life of North-East Scotland and its impact on the wider world.
- The wellbeing of the University community of people, which was the top commitment in the Aberdeen 2040 strategy.

Expanding on the final point, Karl Leydecker spoke about:

- The University's homeworking policy which had transformed the way people worked – over 1,000 staff having homeworking agreements.
- Reforming the academic promotion system, recognising contribution to Aberdeen 2040, clinical activity and regional and international impact.

- The recent staff survey which showed that staff were very satisfied with their working environment as well as pointing to scope for improvement.

Turning to the University's place in league tables, Karl Leydecker noted that:

- League tables had methodological shortcomings but were important to the University's external reputation and included important factors such as student satisfaction and employability.
- Taking the average of the five most important league tables nationally and internationally, the University had risen from 31<sup>st</sup> place in the UK in 2018 to 24<sup>th</sup> in 2022.
- In particular, in the Guardian league table which looked only at teaching, the University had risen from 51<sup>st</sup> place in 2018 to 13<sup>th</sup> in 2022 – a consequence of an outstanding performance in the National Student Survey where the University had achieved 5<sup>th</sup> position in 2021 and 4<sup>th</sup> in 2022.
- Student/staff ratio was particularly important and the strategy over the past 5 years of investing in staff had been reflected in an improvement from 75<sup>th</sup> in the UK in 2017-18 to 39<sup>th</sup> in 2021-21 (Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide) – a level typical of the Russell Group and the best of the research-intensive universities.
- Globally, it had been harder to hold the University's ranking and it had dropped from 158<sup>th</sup> in 2019 to 192<sup>nd</sup> in 2023 in the Times Higher Education table and from 172<sup>nd</sup> to 220<sup>th</sup> in the QS table. That was a problem, but it was more difficult to control and reflected higher investment by key countries in their university systems.
- A new Times Higher Education ranking, which measured contribution to the UN sustainability goals. Aberdeen had been among the first universities to submit data and was ranked highly. In 2022, by which time the table included many more universities, the University was in the 100<sup>th</sup>-200<sup>th</sup> band (and in the first quartile for all but two of the 17 goals). Another new league table relating to sustainability impact (QS) suggested that Aberdeen ranked 64<sup>th</sup> in the world (and 13<sup>th</sup> for sustainable education).

In line with the Aberdeen 2040 strategy, sustainability was increasingly important to the University and action included:

- Improvements in the environmental impact of the campuses.
- Research grant applications and publications, and teaching programmes, were scored against the UN sustainability goals.
- A published annual report on the University's performance.

Questions from members were:

- Why did the University have a campus in Wuhan, when the record of the Chinese government on human rights and freedom of speech was questionable? Karl Leydecker explained that the University did not actually have a campus in China but had a partnership with South China Normal University to teach (for example) computing science. In common with many UK universities, there was research collaboration and, in line with recent UK Government legislation, universities were required to evaluate their work in China to ensure that it did not endanger national security. The University sought to ensure that all its international work accorded with the values of Aberdeen 2040.

- What were the plans for the east end of Marischal College, which remained in the care of the University? Karl Leydecker reported that the University had recently commissioned reports on the condition of the building and options for its future use. It was hard to find an economically-viable future because a substantial expenditure would be needed. Discussions with the City Council continued in the context of the Council's proposals for the redevelopment of the area. Meantime, the University was ensuring the security of the fabric of the building against risks including fire and water penetration. There were no easy solutions but the University would not lose sight of the potential of the building.
- On league tables, was the large improvement in the Guardian rankings a consequence of methodological change and could it be maintained? Karl Leydecker thought that there had been no methodological change and he hoped that it would be sustained – although changes in the National Student Survey would require a change in the Guardian methodology.
- What action was the University taking to improve the international rankings? Karl Leydecker referred to work in hand to increase the number of citations of research and student/staff ratios - as well as lobbying government on levels of research funding.
- How did the University rank against other Scottish universities? Karl Leydecker said that he felt that the number of Scottish universities made such a comparison of limited value. Each university had different profiles: for example, St Andrews performed outstandingly for student experience but much more poorly for research and the reverse was true for Edinburgh. It was more important for Aberdeen to be in the top 20 or 25 at UK level.

#### 4 BUSINESS COMMITTEE REPORT (Paper GC23:01)

The Convener of the Business Committee, Dr Duncan Macniven, spoke to his paper, underlining the Committee's determination to keep the difficult question of the future use of Marischal College in the forefront of the University's mind. He thanked Nicole Cochrane for her 5 years' service as Assistant Clerk and welcomed Alease Coleman to the role. He thanked also members of the Business Committee, especially the Vice-Convener Jenny Mordue, for their energetic participation in its work.

The Convener's report was noted.

#### 5 MEMBERSHIP OF BUSINESS COMMITTEE – ELECTION

Tracey Slaven (Clerk to the General Council) reported, as required by Standing Order 19, that the current terms of membership of 6 members of the Business Committee would end on 30 September. Five were eligible for re-election: Eric Crockart, Lisa Henderson, Jan McRobbie, Susan Strachan and Judith Taylor. Euan Mackenzie, having served the maximum number of terms, was ineligible for re-election. Nominations would close on 14<sup>th</sup> April. If the number of nominations exceeded the number of vacancies, an election would be held. The Convener noted that there were in addition two current vacancies on the Committee and encouraged members of the General Council (which included current and former members of academic staff as well as alumni) to put themselves forward for nomination.

#### 6 SCIENCE TEACHING HUB PROJECT

Professor Graeme Paton, Head of the School of Biological Sciences, gave a presentation on the recently-opened Science Teaching hub.

Laboratory teaching was vital for education in the sciences. Historically, each discipline had developed its own laboratories with skilled staff. The pandemic had not demonstrated that skill-based learning was no longer required. But the existing laboratories were not fit for modern and future needs – IT and other equipment was dated, lighting was poor, health and safety could be improved, and space could be used more efficiently, accommodating more students. The student experience could be improved, with an impact on recruitment and employability. The aspiration for the project was to build state-of-the-art facilities, improving the scope for interdisciplinary working.

Wide consultation with users had been carried out and recent facilities elsewhere had been visited. The staff group were trained in the multi-disciplinary skills required. The laboratories were paper-free, with each student and researcher having an individual online account, founded on the accounts developed during the pandemic, which stored (for example) the results of experiments. Alongside the laboratories, there were spaces for discussion. The Hub was people-centric – including not only students from many different disciplines and the academic and technical staff but also outreach, notably to senior school pupils.

The project had taken 94 weeks to complete, under a fixed-price contract, overseen by a project board, a project management group of end-users and a series of sub-groups. In addition to the building, £1.8m was devoted to scientific equipment and a further £1.8m to IT and audio-visual equipment. The project had only been slightly delayed by the pandemic's requirement for the site to be closed and then operated with a very restricted labour force. The willingness to meet the cost implications was a tribute to the University's senior management and the resilience of the project's management.

The Hub had fully opened in September 2022, accommodating in 7 laboratories the work of 15 former laboratories. The Hub provided world-class facilities, underlining the University's commitment to this and future cohorts of students – as well as to outreach to the local schools and prospectively local communities. Feedback from staff and students had been excellent. Graeme Paton gave a virtual tour of the Hub and invited members to visit the Hub under arrangements made with the secretariat.

In discussion, members who had visited the Hub said how impressed they had been and paid tribute to the personal contribution made by Graeme Paton. Graeme Paton explained the design steps necessary to minimise the laboratories' environmental impact, although the working of the building had not yet settled to the point when firm energy consumption data were available. The superseded laboratories would be repurposed, for instance as large IT laboratories or by leasing to external bodies (thereby potentially improving inter-institution contact).

## 7 ANY OTHER COMPETENT BUSINESS

An alumnus, active in the North-East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership, asked what the University did on its own estate to address the biodiversity crisis. Karl Leydecker said that the University had done less on the subject than was ideal but now had dedicated staff resources and a Sustainability Committee which he chaired. He welcomed the opportunity to work with the Partnership on the topic.

An alumnus commented on the rise of the “woke” agenda and urged the University to stick to traditional matters and eschew politics and social engineering. The Convener noted that Bishop Elphinstone, a politician whose founding principles for the University included “open to all”, might disagree with the tenor of the question. He invited Karl Leydecker to comment on the media reports on the “woke” agenda and in

particular on trigger warnings about challenging literature. Karl Leydecker responded that the University was absolutely committed to inclusion – as witnessed by the recently-agreed anti-racism strategy. There was an awarding gap between white and minority ethnic students' degree classification, for students with equal entry qualifications, with which the University was uncomfortable and was trying to address. Trigger warnings were routine in society and the University, prompted by the student body, had published a thought-provoking report by a lecturer in English, explaining the purpose of trigger warnings. But there was no intention to prevent students engaging with challenging literature: the University was challenging all students to study such works, having been warned about the context.

## 8 NOTICE OF THE 318th STATUTORY MEETING

A member noted that Standing Orders required biannual meetings of the General Council, with the date of the next meeting specified at each meeting. The link between the winter meeting and the University's annual meeting over the past few years having been lost, he wondered if the General Council meetings might revert to December and May. The Convener responded that it was proposed to hold the next meeting (the 318<sup>th</sup> Statutory Meeting) in the late afternoon on Thursday 24 August, partly for diary reasons and partly as an experiment to see whether a weekday afternoon would be a more convenient time for members. That would restore the 6-monthly cycle, although not in the traditional months: December was a particularly busy time for the secretariat. He invited comment, not necessarily during the meeting.