



THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTE OF THE 318th STATUTORY MEETING

The 318th meeting of the General Council was held on campus and online on 24th August 2023. The Convener of the Business Committee, Dr Duncan Macniven, was in the Chair.

1 WELCOME

Duncan Macniven welcomed those present and online, noting that the recording of the previous meeting had been accessed 216 times, which suggested a far larger participation that had been possible under traditional arrangements. The meeting was being held experimentally on the Foresterhill campus on a weekday in the early evening instead of at King's on a Saturday morning. He welcomed in particular Principal George Boyne and Louise Thomson, Head of Governance and Executive Support (standing in for Tracey Slaven, Clerk to the General Council, who was on holiday).

2 MINUTES OF THE 317th MEETING

The draft Minutes of the 317th Statutory Meeting, held on 18th February 2023, were approved.

3 UNIVERSITY UPDATE FROM PRINCIPAL GEORGE BOYNE

Professor Boyne spoke about:

- Progress with implementing the Aberdeen 2040 strategy. He highlighted in particular the Interdisciplinary strand of the strategy, in pursuit of which staff had been appointed and research students recruited in each of the five challenge topics: Energy Transition; Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity; Environment and Biodiversity; Data and Artificial Intelligence; and Health, Nutrition and Wellbeing. Investment of about £5 million in staffing had been made: it was now for each team to generate new research grants, connections in industry and the private sector and other impacts. He hoped that they would all be equally successful.
- Recent league tables. The University had been ranked 192nd in the world and 25th in the UK in 2023 by Times Higher Education – but it would be challenging to maintain the world ranking at a time when overseas governments were increasing spending on universities while the UK and Scottish governments were not. The 2023 National Student Survey had placed Aberdeen in 2nd position among universities in the 3 devolved nations and 10th in the UK.
- Priorities for academic year 2023/24. The University aimed to grow international tuition fees, research income and commercial income by £20m; to complete the plan for the next fundraising campaign; to review, and where necessary reconfigure, School and Professional Service structures and processes to ensure alignment with the University's objectives, and to reduce workload pressures; to update the research plan to meet the requirements of the 2028 Research Excellence Framework; to continue progress towards the medium-term objective of offering work experience

opportunities to every student; to complete the campus plan for inclusive and high quality physical and digital infrastructure; and to maintain progress towards the 2025 league table ranking target (consistently in the top 25 in the UK in all 5 major league tables).

- Student numbers. In 2018, 80% of students had been undergraduates and the University aimed to rebalance the proportion to 60%, more typical of UK universities. In the current academic year, the proportion was 65%, with 16% taught postgraduates and 12% research postgraduates. Changes in UK government visa rules threatened to make the recruitment of overseas students more difficult.
- Revenue. Likely out-turn for 2022/23 (£269m) seemed in line with the past trend of growth and a budget of £282m had been set for 2023/24. But the future was challenging because the likely income from the Scottish Funding Council was pegged at the current level in cash terms: the budget assumed growth in fees from non-Scottish students.

Questions from members were:

- Was student accommodation a problem at Aberdeen? George Boyne welcomed the fact that there was no shortage.
- What was the risk and impact of dropping below 200th in world rankings? George Boyne replied that, besides the loss of reputation, the recruitment of overseas students (especially those sponsored by their governments) would be hindered.
- Was the absence of a students' union and shop a handicap in the Student Satisfaction Survey? George Boyne explained that Aberdeen continued to perform relatively badly on that part of the Survey, but that the NSS ranking depended on the quality of the education where Aberdeen performed very well.
- To what extent did senior management see themselves as being in the service of the academic staff and how did they plan to promote good management/staff relations to overcome the hostility reported in the media? George Boyne emphasised that the foundational purpose to act "in the service of others" related first of all to students, followed by service to staff and to the local community to the maximum extent compatible with that objective. A relatively small minority (1½% of the University's 3,600 staff) had threatened the award of graduated degrees in pursuit of a pay dispute and management had taken action to counter that. He regarded the pay offer as reasonable (5-8%, or 8-11% for the 50% of staff who were entitled to increments) and was the maximum which the University could afford.
- Was international student income skewed towards particular countries? George Boyne stressed that the University was mindful that the geopolitical situation could threaten the recruitment of Chinese students, who currently accounted for 20% of international students – a proportion typical of UK universities. The University was trying to diversify from the reliance on Chinese students, for instance by seeking to recruit more Indian students. But the University was not over-dependent on any particular source of students.
- What was planned to replace the redevelopment of the King's Quarter and Johnston, which had been halted? George Boyne referred to current work on a masterplan aimed to ensure that the University had the right accommodation for future needs.
- Was medical student recruitment hampered by the relatively small number of scanners operated by the NHS? George Boyne said that there was no problem recruiting medical students, but that the University would be happy to recruit more, if the NHS could provide the right placements for them.
- To what extent were University buildings affected by problems with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete? George Boyne explained that, on close inspection, some buildings with the material were sound and had been reopened. The small

number of remaining affected buildings were not crucial to the operation of the University.

- Was there any progress to report on finding a new use for the east part of Marischal College? George Boyne regretted that no feasible proposal had come forward.

Duncan Macniven thanked the Principal for his report.

4 BUSINESS COMMITTEE REPORT (Paper GC23:02)

Duncan Macniven, the Convener of the Business Committee, spoke to his paper, underlining the opportunity for members of the General Council to help graduate employability by identifying employers willing to offer work experience and by acting as mentors for current students – and also to help with the publication of the history of the General Council.

The Convener's report was noted.

5 MEMBERSHIP OF BUSINESS COMMITTEE – ELECTION

Louise Thomson reported that, at the closing date for nominations of 14th April, 9 nominations had been received. Taking account of retirements and resignations, there were 9 vacancies for elected members, so she declared that the following members would join, or be re-appointed to, the Business Committee from 1st October:

Hugh Galbraith
Jan McRobbie
Dorsa Naderimehr
Ogutu Okudo
Arnab Paul
Stefan Pelev
Judith Taylor
John White
Haiyan Zhang

Duncan Macniven thanked the members who would be leaving the Committee on 30 September for their participation in its work – Eric Crockart (a long-serving member and past Convener), Lisa Henderson, Euan Mackenzie, Susan Strachan and Mark Strange. He welcomed the geographical diversity of the new membership, which better reflected recent alumni and which was made possible by the ability to join meetings online.

7 ANY OTHER COMPETENT BUSINESS

There was none.

8 NOTICE OF THE 319th STATUTORY MEETING

Duncan Macniven reported that it was intended to move towards a May/December cycle of meetings. That might not immediately be practicable because of the pressure of work on the secretariat in December. But the University intended that the Governance team should replace the Alumni Relations team as the secretariat for the General Council and Business Committee in early 2024, removing that difficulty. The 319th meeting would therefore be held in Spring 2024, with a view to arranging the 320th meeting in December 2024. That proposal was agreed.