

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 1 JUNE 2023

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Jenny Mordue (Vice-Convener), Eric Crockart, Colin Duncan, John Campbell, Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, Euan Mackenzie, Jan McRobbie, Anne Minto, Dan Montgomery, Iain Percival, Pat Pugh, Judith Taylor, Otto Thoreson, Robert Traynam and Yafan Zhang, with Tracey Innes (Head of Careers and Employability), Liam Dyker (Assistant Registrar), Nicole Cochrane (Alumni Relations), Louise Thomson (Head of Governance), Liza Boffen-Yordanov (Director of Development and Alumni Relations), Vanessa Nzolo (Student President) and Alease Coleman (Assistant Clerk & Registrar).

Apologies: Katrina Allan (Head of Alumni Relations), Mark Strange, Martina Chukwuma-Zike (Rector), Tracey Slaven (University Secretary), Fiona Urquhart (Alumni Relations), Mel Roberts, Mary Stephen, Susan Strachan

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Convener gave a warm welcome to Anne Minto, who had joined the Committee as the fourth of the independent members of Court. There were apologies from Lisa Henderson, Mel Roberts, Heliang Shi, Susan Strachan, Mark Strange and Tracey Slaven (Clerk & Registrar).

2. GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

Judith Taylor introduced a discussion on Graduate Employability, which was one of the topics identified at the Committee's strategy session in October 2022. The small group of members who had explored the topic (herself, Dan Montgomery and Pat Pugh) had been impressed by what the University was achieving. The Committee was keen to identify practical ways it could assist.

Tracey Innes explained that, in pursuit of Commitment 12 in *Aberdeen 2040*, the University aimed to include employability in all curricula, offering all undergraduate and taught postgraduate students a menu of opportunities for workbased learning, both to inform their choice of future careers and to develop employability skills. The number of participating students had increased from 1,282 in 2017/18 to 1,662 currently – mostly medical and other professional students, but with an increasing number from other disciplines. Growing the network of potential employers was critical: other universities had better employer links. A team of 3 (each linked to 4 Schools) had therefore been allocated to the task instead of a single staff member.

Tracey Innes noted that consultation was in hand on a simpler list of graduate attributes and a self-assessment tool had been developed to allow students to record their skills and attributes. A career-readiness survey was about to be introduced, asking all students to record annually their employability development plans and degree of confidence in their readiness for employment.

It was hard to gather data on graduate employment. The HESA Graduate Outcomes survey sought information 15 months after graduation, tracking destinations of graduates and qualitative reflections by graduates. Career readiness data would provide more immediate indications of students' own assessment of their career readiness.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- The Committee was welcome to contribute to the consultation on graduate attributes, which would close in September.
- The HESA Graduate Outcomes survey was completed by about 50% of graduates, varying widely by subject. The previous survey mechanism (Destinations of Higher Education Leavers Survey) had achieved 80% response rates. The response rate was higher than the generality of universities but the information, though allowing a measure of comparison between universities, was imperfect in a number of ways.
- Early years students were generally unprepared to think about careers, although that varied by subject area. Interest tended to increase during the period of study. The proposed inclusion of employability in the curriculum should encourage engagement.
- Covid had had a negative effect both on students' engagement with the careers service and on the availability of work placements. The current picture was better, and the market for graduates was buoyant.
- Mentoring was important and new mentors (for whom the activity was often beneficial) were always welcome. There would be a recruitment drive in the late summer.
- The AUSA had close links with the careers service, having for instance contributed to the skills and attributes consultation.
- The service played its part in reducing student discontinuance, being accessible at the point of need as well as being part of undergraduate courses.
- The University's Schools also had a part to play, and there were employability champions in each School.

The Committee expressed its gratitude to Tracey Innes. By way of follow-up:

- Judith Taylor would arrange for the small group to discuss, in the light of the discussion, how the Committee might help reinforce the work on employability.
- In particular, the small group would respond to the consultation on graduate attributes, and individual members were invited to do the same.
- Members were encouraged to offer their services as mentors, and to recruit others.
- Members were also encouraged to identify suitable employers prepared to offer work experience.

3. REGULATORY CHANGES (Paper BC23:09)

Liam Dyker, Assistant Registrar, spoke briefly to the paper, which sought the Committee's comments on a draft resolution proposing miscellaneous changes in Degree Regulations. In response to a question, he explained that the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) was a standardised and commonly-used arrangement for measuring proficiency in the language. The Committee noted the proposed changes.

4. HONORARY DEGREES (Paper BC23:10)

The Committee noted the proposed changes to the Resolution governing the award of Honorary Degrees.

5. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting on 2 March 2023 were approved.

6. MATTERS ARISING

On **Marischal College**, Jenny Mordue reported that there was a degree of frustration in the small group which she chaired, which had contributed to the report to the Senior Management Team, about the lack of action. Eric Crockart considered that the response to the report – to do nothing, but retain the building – was inadequate. If the University, for understandable financial reasons, could not act, it should seek to dispose of the property to a buyer who could give the building a new life. Jan McRobbie and Colin Duncan suggested that the University should be asked for a clear commitment to maintaining the building and its contents, for an assessment of the scale of expenditure required to restore and operate it, for its view on the non-financial aspects of the proposals in the report and for a statement on the future of the building if funding continued to be unavailable. The Convener agreed to write to Peter Edwards, Vice-Principal Regional Engagement, seeking feedback on his recent contacts with the local authority and his views on these points.

Detailed arrangements for the **next General Council meeting**, on 24 August, had yet to be finalised. There was regret that it fell during the holiday period and it was agreed to work towards a return so far as possible to the former pattern of meetings in May and December.

7. CONVENER'S REPORT (Paper BC23:11)

The Committee discussed ways of building a team spirit following the changes in membership after 1 October, when many members were unlikely to attend meetings in person because of their remoteness from Aberdeen. It agreed the concept of setting up a forum for informal contact between meetings (subject to checking with the University that the forum would be sufficiently secure) and suggested that occasional informal online meetings might also help. The Convener agreed to explore these possibilities.

8. STRATEGY SESSION FOLLOW UP

The Committee discussed progress on the **Commercialisation of Research** theme identified at the strategy session in October. Otto Thoreson, who chaired the Court's Commercialisation Committee, stressed the importance of the topic and the need for the University to improve its performance. There was scope to improve the support to researchers and to create a culture which fostered commercialisation. There were many initiatives in hand, overseen by Peter Edwards (Vice-Principal Regional Engagement) and it was possible for the University to do much internally. Externally, the Commercialisation Committee had had an encouraging presentation from Jennifer Crow, CEO of Opportunity North East (ONE). There was scope for collaboration between the various members of ONE, and for comments from the Business Committee. Otto Thoreson agreed to draft a paper for the next meeting of the Business Committee, to which Peter Edwards and Jennifer Crow might be invited.

Work on the **Leadership role of the University in North-east Scotland** had not yet started. Progress on **Raising the Profile of the General Council and Business Committee** continued as resources permitted.

9. **UNIVERSITY REPORT**

Louise Thomson highlighted:

- Recruitment for 6 independent Court members was in hand. There had been over 50 applications, thanks in part to publicity given by Alumni Relations. New nominated and staff members were also sought.
- The financial position remained challenging, although there was no question of covenants being put at risk. Work was in hand to keep the 2022/23 deficit within bounds and to budget for 2023/24.
- Student recruitment remained below planned levels, partly because of problems obtaining visas.
- An estates master plan was in preparation, which would include Marischal East.
- The King's Quarter and Johnston Business School projects were out to tender, the tender period having been extended.
- Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete had been identified by inspections in Regent Building, and parts of Polwarth Building and Hillhead. The buildings had meantime been taken out of use, with alternative accommodation being found for users.

10. **ALUMNI RELATIONS UPDATE**

Nicole Cochrane offered to email her current report to members.

11. **COURT DIGEST (Paper BC23:12)**

The paper was noted.

12. **AOCB**

At the suggestion of Mark Lindley-Highfield, the Convener agreed to write to Professor Paul Mealor congratulating him on his musical contribution to the Coronation.