

**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN**

**UNIVERSITY COURT**

**Minutes of Meeting held on 8 February 2000**

Present: Dr R Scott Brown (in the Chair), Principal, Mr A Cole Hamilton, Dr H Fullerton, Professor G Graham, Professor D Houlihan, Councillor P Johnston, Dr P Kinnear, Professor S Logan, Professor I Macdonald, Dr M Mackie, Miss M Main, Mr A Mair, Mr J Michie, Dr N Milne, Professor D Ogston, Dr G Roberts, Mr A Salvesen, Mrs A Skene, Professor P Sloane, Mr G Stevenson, Professor I Torrance, with Professor A Forrester, Professor J Sewel, Mr S Cannon, Mr R Taylor, Mr S Gordon, Mr M Ord, and Mr D Yule (Clerk).

Apologies for absence were received from the Rector, Mr J Grant, Professor Catto and Professor J Penman.

**MINUTES**

94 The Minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 1999 were approved.

**PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT**

95 The Principal expressed his appreciation of the painting which had recently been hung in the reception area of the University Office. The painting by Robin Philipson was one of two paintings generously donated to the University by Professor Ogston. This enhanced the fine collection of Scottish twentieth century art already provided by the Linklater Bequest.

96 Drawing attention to the formal report of gifts and benefactions, the Principal reminded the Court that a fund raising target of £40M had been set to be achieved by the end of 2001. It was pleasing to be able to report that, when committed bequests and deferred gifts were taken into account, close to £20M had been raised over the past three years. Hence, the University was half way towards achieving its first phase fund raising target.

97 At the Principal's invitation, Mr Cole-Hamilton reported on the publication of the Cubie Report and on developments since that time. Mr Cole-Hamilton said that the Report, when published on 21 December, had been widely and enthusiastically welcomed by all interested parties. Mr Cole-Hamilton expressed the regret of student leaders that the consideration of the report in the Scottish Parliament had resulted in a compromise, though he acknowledged that a considerable proportion of the original Cubie recommendations had survived. Student leaders had formed a covenant to seek to secure the implementation of the Cubie Report in full.

98 Councillor Johnston said that it was unrealistic to expect the full cost of the implementation of the Cubie Report to be met, but that the agreement to provide an extra £50M in the first year and £33M recurrent thereafter was to be welcomed as a first step. He argued that it was important to have a vision for the funding of higher education which extended beyond the Cubie Report and not to concentrate on immediate implementation of all its recommendations.

99 Professor Macdonald said that it was reliably reported that the Scottish Executive had given an undertaking privately that there would be no reduction in the higher education budget as a consequence of the reforms initiated by the Cubie Report.

- 100 The Principal referred to items in the Court folder which related to the University's growing role in public discussion and debate (the series of public lectures on Scotland), the University's involvement in collaborative high quality research (the ACERO project) and the achievements of individual researchers (Professor Ralston and Professor Priede, the second of whom had delivered an exciting and stimulating presentation at the Court Lunch).
- 101 Dr Scott Brown commended the increased scale of favourable press coverage of the University's activities.

#### NORTHERN COLLEGE

- 102 Lord Sewel reported that good progress continued to be made in preparation for the proposed merger with the Northern College, in as much as the required Resolutions were already receiving appropriate formal consideration, quality systems were being put in place, and discussions continued between the two institutions to ensure a smooth transitional period. It was unlikely, however, that the Funding Council would be in a position to recommend to the Scottish Executive and to Parliament that the merger proceed in time to meet the target vesting date of 1 August. In the meantime, however, Lord Sewel was continuing discussions with Northern College staff with a view to facilitating the merger at whatever date might ultimately be decided.

#### SECRETARY'S REPORT

- 103 Mr Cannon reported on action being taken with regard to retention and recruitment of undergraduate students.
- 104 Recently published national performance indicators had shown the University to perform reasonably well in a number of areas, but figures on the projected non-completion rates of entrants in 1996/97 indicated that the University was expected to perform less well than both the UK and the Scottish average. No obvious explanation had been identified, but the statistics behind the performance indicators were being examined, and analyses of the University's own data were being conducted with a view to explaining the University's relatively low position. It was already known that the University had difficulties with the retention of mature students, but further information was required. One of the key objectives within the strategy for the reorganising of University administration was to achieve a reduction in the non-progression rate of undergraduate students of 25%
- 105 In terms of recruitment, while the national trend in applications was downward, the University had received some 9,600 applications for entry in 2000 as compared with 9,500 the previous year. Applications for the degree of MA had increased by more than 6% and Engineering had risen by as much as 27%. Agriculture, Forestry and Divinity, however, continued to show a regrettable downward trend, and applications to Law and Land Economy, relatively popular areas of study, were not as strong as might be expected. Applications from within the city of Aberdeen continued to decline, but applications from almost all other areas from which the University customarily drew applications were stable or had risen. The University had a relatively good record of converting applications to admissions, and work on maintaining and improving this record was already well advanced, and would now be the most important factor in the drive to meet admissions targets for 2000.
- 106 In discussion, it was observed that there could be many individual reasons underlying poor progression rates, and that there was a need to strike a balance between maintaining high academic standards and increasing access. In this connection,

attention was drawn to the SHEFC intention to adjust the teaching funding system to encourage widened access but in a way which should be resisted, if it implied the redistribution of resources to Universities attracting poorer quality students.

- 107 The Court noted that procedures were already in place to make contact and consult with students at the point of withdrawal, and that the University had already agreed to benchmark its progression rate performance with the University of Edinburgh. The Court agreed that it would wish to have a further report on the outcome of the investigation of the reasons underlying the University's poor performance indicator and on further measures taken to address these.

## REPORTS FROM COMMITTEES

### **Nominating Committee**

- 108 The Court approved the recommendation of the Nominating Committee that Miss Anne C Harper be co-opted to be a member of the University Court for the period to 31 July 2003.

### **Joint Policy and Resource Committee**

- 109 The Court received a report from the Joint Policy and Resource Committee (19.1.00) including a report on undergraduate applications received as at 10 January 2000 (*see Minute 105 above*) and a statement of planning assumptions adopted by the Joint Policy and Resource Committee for the University's forward planning model 1999-2004.
- 110 The Court also received SHEFC Circular Letter 61/99, *Staff Restructuring Scheme* and a note of the developments within the University since the letter had been received.
- 111 The Court noted that a total of c£1M would be available to the University for staff restructuring, provided that the University contributed c£300K from its own resources to the total. It was further noted that the funding could be deployed in a variety of different ways, and that the opportunity was being taken to replace less productive resource with more productive resource wherever possible. Various forms of severance in addition to the early retirement option were being explored, and details would be brought to the Court for approval after discussion within the relevant Committees and consultation with the campus unions. It was emphasised that there was no question of compulsory severance, but that the available funding should be targeted and applied strictly to restructuring in the University's managerial interest.

- 112 It was noted that other Universities had already invested heavily in their own institutional restructuring schemes and that the sum available to the University through the SHEFC scheme was sufficient only for a limited degree of restructuring in an institution of the University's size. Court members said that it behoved the University to be proactive in its restructuring planning rather than prompted merely by the SHEFC initiative, and that the opportunity should be taken by management to identify the extent of desirable restructuring and to report its conclusions, with costs, to the Court.

### **Finance and Estates Committee**

- 113 The Court received a report from the Finance and Estates Committee (25.1.00) including updated information on the Foresterhill Site Transportation Policy and a record of accounts and other financial reports received by the Committee.

#### *QSP Finance System*

- 114 The Court noted that the Finance and Estates Committee had received a Project Closure Report confirming that the QSP project had been successful in attaining most of its principal objectives, and, in particular, the implementation of a new corporate management system by the beginning of the current financial year, but that a number of technical and managerial issues remained to be addressed to enable the University to achieve the full benefit of the system.
- 115 It was explained that the number of required users of the system was significantly higher than had been projected with a consequent strain on the provision of training, resulting in significant user problems. Problems had greatly diminished since the introduction of the system, but continued to be a cause of some dissatisfaction.
- 116 Mr Cannon reported that, since October 1999, he had formed a liaison between the Project Board and users, and that he would be reporting on the introduction of the system to senior management and ultimately to the Finance and Estates Committee. A formal audit of the effectiveness of the system would be undertaken by the University's internal auditors in the Spring, and the findings would be reported also to the Finance and Estates Committee.

#### *SHEFC Grant for Estate Infrastructure Improvement*

- 117 The Court received SHEFC Circular letter 65/99, *Grant to Support Teaching and Research Infrastructure Improvement*, allocating the University up to £770K to assist in improvements in teaching and research infrastructure. It was noted that the University's bid for the full amount had been submitted on the basis that half of the allocation would cover the cost of new improvements including disabled access, and the remainder would offset the cost of the capital programme for the current year. SHEFC required the funds to be expended by 31 July 2000.

#### *Land and Buildings Revaluation*

- 118 The Court noted that the Finance and Estates Committee had received the quinquennial statement of revaluation of the University's lands and buildings, which included reductions in valuation arising from the early Elphinstone Institute Project and from the limited planning approval for the modular building. It was noted that there was a reasonable prospect that the planning approval would be extended.
- 119 It was noted, however, that the outcome of the revaluation highlighted the University's continuing inability to apply sufficient resource to maintenance of the

estate and that it was important to develop alternative funding strategies wherever possible, so as to achieve a balance between maintaining the value and condition of the estate and investing for the future in the support of core academic activity.

#### *Marischal College*

- 120 The Court noted that discussions were continuing with regard to both office and hotel developments at Marischal College. A response had been sent to a developer interested in leasing parts of Marischal College for office development and, at the same time, Jarvis was seeking to identify different potential hotel operators and was currently in discussion with the holding company of one hotel operator with a view to agreeing Heads of Terms.

#### *Student Organisations Accounts*

- 121 Mr Mair commended the student organisations on the financial management displayed in the audited accounts from the three organisations, all of which had shown a satisfactory financial position.

### PLANNING GUIDELINES

- 122 The Court received a paper on planning guidelines which had been adopted by the Joint Policy and Resource Committee including a statement of six institutional principles as set out in the Appendix to this Minute. The Court noted that the institutional principles were the starting point for the Strategic Plan which the Court would ultimately consider in June, and that it was appropriate, therefore, that the Court should be involved at this early stage of the planning process.
- 123 Professor Macdonald explained that the planning guidelines had been drawn up to form a more strategic approach to planning, in which indicative budgets would be set for a four year period with a requirement that all areas should bring income and expenditure into balance no later than the end of that four year planning period. Basic funding assumptions included acknowledgement of SHEFC's funding intentions to increase the grant for teaching by 1.5% cash and to increase the research development grant by 20%. Transferring research resource from RAE based formula funding to special initiatives would reduce the level of flexibility to fund infrastructural and support costs.
- 124 The continuing emphasis within the institutional principles on developing excellence in research would create an environment of intellectual excitement equally important for teaching as for research itself. In Student Recruitment, it had to be acknowledged that there was a tension between the drive towards wider access and the University's commitment to recruiting and retaining students of the highest calibre. Recruitment, however, would also be highly sensitive to the programmes and supporting facilities which the University was able to offer. There was substantial potential for growth in Continuing Education, and the reorganisation of the continuing education function, providing a sharper focus for continuing professional development on the one hand, and Access, adult and liberal education on the other, was designed to exploit that potential. It was important that a strong emphasis on the concept of commercialisation was embedded within the University's aspirations to achieve international excellence in research.

- 125 The Court endorsed the institutional principles and, in discussion, agreed that the following points in amplification of the principles should be drawn to attention within the planning process and, as appropriate, included in the University's Strategic Plan. Attention should be drawn to the University's international role; possibilities for partnership in outreach should be explored and distance learning options should be pursued as appropriate, at least to protect the University's existing market.

RESOLUTION NO 219 OF 2000  
[CREATION OF FACULTY OF EDUCATION]

- 126 The Court, having noted that the draft Resolution had been approved by the Senate and by the Business Committee of the General Council, and that no other representations had been received, decided to pass the Resolution as set out in the Appendix to this Minute.

DRAFT RESOLUTION NO        OF 2000  
[SUPPLEMENTARY REGULATIONS TO THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF EDUCATION  
(BEd)]

- 127 The Court, having received the draft Resolution from the Senate, decided to forward it to the General Council and to make it generally available in terms of Section 6 of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966.

DRAFT RESOLUTION NO OF        2000  
[SUPPLEMENTARY REGULATIONS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (BA)  
IN THE FIELD OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION]

- 128 The Court, having received the draft Resolution from the Senate, decided to forward it to the General Council and to make it generally available in terms of Section 6 of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966.

DRAFT RESOLUTION NO OF        2000  
[CHANGES IN REGULATIONS FOR VARIOUS DEGREES]

- 129 The Court, having received the draft Resolution from the Senate, decided to forward it to the General Council and to make it generally available in terms of Section 6 of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966.

NORTHERN EUROPEAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH NETWORK:  
INTER-INSTITUTIONAL AGREEMENT

- 130 On the recommendation of the Senate, the Court decided to approve a draft Inter-Institutional Agreement to govern the University's participation in the Northern European Historical Research Network.

GIFTS, BENEFACTIONS AND CHARITABLE AWARDS

- 131 The Court received a report on gifts, benefactions and charitable awards received by the University in the quarter to 31 January 2000.