The 305th meeting of the General Council was held in the KCC on 28 May 2016. The Convener of the Business Committee, Mr Eric Crockart, was in the Chair.

1 DRAFT MINUTES

The draft Minute of the 304th Statutory Meeting was approved.

2 REPORT FROM THE CONVENER OF THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE

2.1 The Convener of the Business Committee, Mr Eric Crockart, reported on the activities of the Business Committee during the past year.

2.2 The number of Assessors that can be elected to the University of Aberdeen Court is yet again at issue. The General Council has for a long time elected four Assessors to sit on the University Court. Each assessor is elected for a period of four years. They can stand again for election for another four years. But once they have served for a total of eight years, they have reached the lifetime limit of an individual Assessor on Court. The four Assessors not only sit on Court, they have the right to sit on the Business Committee, whose other members are elected separately by the General Council.

Three or four years ago the Court was faced with the problem of having to comply with the strictures of the Scottish Government's Higher Education Code of Good Governance. Among other things, the Code said that best practice was that the governing body of a Scottish Higher Education institution should consist of no more than 25 members. At that time the University Court had 28 members. So the Court proposed a reduction in its size. This included a recommendation that the number of General Council Assessors be reduced from four to two. The Business Committee and the Assessors successfully argued against this proposal.

In 2014 the Scottish Government published their Bill on Higher Education Governance. The Bill seemed to throw open again the whole issue of the number of our Assessors. This was because it proposed each governing body should have two graduate representatives.

The Business Committee and Assessors started an extensive programme of lobbying, making submissions to government about the Bill, and contacting various politicians. There was liaison with Business Committees at the other Ancient Scottish Universities, who were undertaking their own lobbying on various issues raised by the Bill.

Last December, the Business Committee received a letter from the then Education and Culture minister Angela Constance. This made clear that while the intention of the Bill was to have two graduate members of Court, among eight required posts, the University would then be free to decide the composition of the remainder of the governing body. It seemed there was absolutely nothing in the Bill to stop Aberdeen University continuing to have four General Council Assessor posts.

However, the issue of General Council Assessors has come back, thanks to a review of what is necessary to comply with the Scottish Higher Education Governance Bill. The Bill as passed into law does not require governing bodies to contain any graduate representatives. But it still incorporates the stricture of the earlier Code, that a maximum of 25 members is the benchmark of best practice. The Court has been discussing a number of proposals for its future makeup, in light of the Bill.

One proposal might see the Court reduced in size to as few as 17 members. The last Court meeting did not agree to this, but discussions are to continue.
The number of Assessors elected to Court is likely to continue to be scrutinised and the Business Committee will continue to involve themselves in dialogue and representations to Court on the value of having such a significant independent input from the General Council.

2.3 The Convenor reported that at the end of September he will reach the end of the 3 three year terms for Business Committee members, which was introduced a few years ago. The Standing Orders of the General Council state that the Convener and Vice Convener of the Business Committee are appointed for terms of four years. But when the changes to the Standing Orders were made to restrict the terms of committee members, a form of wording was agreed which means that anyone who has been on the Business Committee for at least six years before being elected to one of these posts cannot complete their four-year term of office. This is what has happened to the current Convenor.

The Convenor drew attention to a notice of motion to alter the Standing Orders of the General Council, still to be proposed to the next Business Committee meeting in June. If the committee accepts the suggestion, a formal motion to change Standing Orders can be brought to the General Council meeting in December. The aim would be to allow anyone who is elected as convener or vice convener to complete a full four-year term.

2.4 The four meetings of the Business Committee have been spread more evenly throughout the year. The Committee meeting in June will discuss how well this new pattern has worked, and whether any changes need to be made.

2.5 All Scottish higher education institutions face cuts of 3.3% in government funding this year. Aberdeen, because of its particular circumstances, actually has to cope with a cut of 3.9% - or £2.7m. The recent election campaign for the Scottish Parliament provided an opportunity to air the issue. At the suggestion of Business Committee member Nigel Lindsay, a number of members of the committee undertook a lobby of parties and candidates in the run up to polling day. It was pointed out that despite being a small country, Scotland has no fewer than four universities, including Aberdeen, in the Top 200 ranking of universities worldwide. Parties and candidates were challenged to explain how they thought universities like Aberdeen could maintain their position when competing against well-funded universities in England and elsewhere in the world.

The Business Committee received a number of replies. A number of members also had letters on the subject published in various newspapers, including The Scotsman, The Herald, and the Press & Journal. The Convenor also kept officials of the Business Committees of the General Councils of the other ancient Scottish universities informed of what Aberdeen were doing.

2.6 The Convenor remarked on the number of excellent presentations received throughout the year. Dr Ken Skeldon, head of Public Engagement with Research; Professor Jeremy Kilburn, Senior Vice-Principal and the Principal, who focussed attention on the thorny issue of finance when he spoke in March about the Spending Review and the University. The Convenor expressed gratitude to all of them for giving so generously of their time. He also expressed thanks to Secretary of the University, Caroline Inglis, for attending all meetings and helping when clarification or explanation is required. Clerk Karen Scaife, and fellow alumni relations colleague Grainne Ferrigan, were also thanked for providing the Convenor and the committee with administrative support.

2.7 Since the last meeting of the General Council, the Business Committee lost a valued member with the death of Christine Burgess. The Convenor described Christine as a doughty champion of Aberdeen University, and Old Aberdeen, and said she would be missed.

3 QUESTIONS

3.1 There were no questions.

4 NOTICE OF MOTION TO VARY STANDING ORDERS

4.1 A motion cannot be made on changing the standing orders today, but can be brought for discussion at the next statutory meeting.
The current terms of office of Mr Alex Arthur and Mrs Jenny Shirreffs as General Council Assessors to Court will conclude on 30 September 2016. Under the University's regulations governing the nomination and election process for the appointment of General Council Assessors to Court, a nominations deadline of 29 January 2016 for the two vacancies was agreed by the Business Committee of the General Council and announced at the December 2015 meeting of the General Council.

Following the conclusion of that process, nominations for the two vacancies were received from: Mrs Jenny Shirreffs; and Mr Iain Percival.

Under the University’s regulations, a ballot of the General Council is only required where there are more nominations than vacancies. The two candidates are, therefore, duly elected with effect from 1 October 2016 for a term of four years.

6. RESULTS OF BUSINESS COMMITTEE ELECTIONS

6.1 Convenor Election

As of 30 September 2016 Eric Crockart is due to retire from the Business Committee and his post as Convenor. Members of the Business Committee took part in an election. Nigel Lindsay was duly elected as Convenor of the Business Committee.

6.2 Election of Members to the Business Committee

Under the terms of Standing Order No 19, the following are due to retire from the Business Committee on 30 September 2016 but were eligible for re-election: Stephen Duggan, Paul Rorie, Tom Lynch and Alan Campbell.

At the closing date for nominations of candidates, five nominations for six vacancies had been received and so the following were duly elected to the Business Committee: Victoria Aston, Graeme Nicol, Steve Duggan, Tom Lynch and Jenny Mordue. They will all serve on the Business Committee from 1 October 2016 to 30 September 2019.

7. NOTICE OF THE 306TH STATUTORY MEETING

The meeting will be held on Wednesday 7 December 2016 at 6pm. Linklater Rooms. Members of the General Council will then be invited to attend the University Carol Service at St Machar’s Cathedral.