

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 19 SEPTEMBER 2024

Present:

Duncan Macniven (Convener), Colin Duncan, Hugh Galbraith, Jenny Mordue (Vice-Convener), Ogutu Okudo, Arnab Paul, Pat Pugh, Mel Roberts, Heliang Shi, Judith Taylor, and Otto Thoresen.

Apologies:

George Boyne (Principal), John Campbell, Martina Chukwuma-Ezike (Rector), Mark Lindley-Highfield, Jan McRobbie, Dan Montgomery, Dorsa Naderimehr, Graeme Nicol, Stefan Pelev, Tracey Slaven (University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer), Mary Stephen, Robert Traynham, John White, and Haiyan Zhang.

In attendance:

Ross Anderson, Governance and Executive Support Officer, Nicholas Forsyth, Vice-Principal (Research), Louise Thomson, Head of Governance and Executive Support.

1. Welcome and apologies

The Convener noted the apologies received for the meeting. Robert Traynham was concluding his term on the University's Court, and thus his membership of the Business Committee. This was also the final meeting of two elected members, Pat Pugh and Mary Stephen, whom the Convener thanked for their work on a range of projects during their time on the Committee.

Apologies were also noted from Tracey Slaven, the University Secretary & Chief Operating Officer and Clerk to the General Council, who would be moving to a new role at the University of Cumbria in November.

2. Research / REF Update – Nick Forsyth, Vice-Principal (Research)

Professor Nicholas Forsyth delivered a presentation on the University's research activities, highlighting:

- Research income and award rates. In 2023/24, historically high figures were achieved. Targets had been set for each School, and large grant applications had been fostered without ignoring early-career researchers. Income had returned to desired levels. EU research income was reflected upon and now that the UK had rejoined the EU Horizon programme, there was scope to rebuild expertise in applying for grants. Care was being taken to support key researchers.
- Postgraduate research student numbers. A "postgraduate college" had been established. Applications in 2023/24 were healthy which translated into a good number of applicants starting studies. Efforts were being made to increase the conversion rates, but the numbers were generally satisfactory. There were

currently 874 FTE postgraduate research students, of whom just over half came from overseas.

- Preparation for the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The next REF had been postponed for a year, to 2029, which gave more time to prepare a recovery from the poor performance in REF21. The REF informed the disbursement of £2bn research funding per year. The University has appointed 3 Research Deans linked to the REF pillars; and was developing its impact studies with the aim of submitting the required number.

The Convener thanked the Vice-Principal (Research) for an exciting and comprehensive presentation. Discussion included the following points:

- The help given to researchers with EU networking;
- The importance of commercialisation as evidence of research impact, on which Aberdeen had ranked 82nd in REF21;
- Publication rules, which could be clearer;
- Raising the profile of the REF with academic staff;
- The desirability of increasing the number of research students per academic member of staff.

The Committee welcomed the University's strategic approach to preparation for the REF and commended the recent successful performance, especially an increase in funding from the Wellcome Trust.

3. Minutes of the last meeting and Matters Arising

The Minutes of the last meeting of the Business Committee on 6 June 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

The Committee discussed matters arising, including the potential for a skills audit and how that could be used to inform future appointments. Under the Committee's current standing orders there were no criteria for eligibility, other than General Council membership. That could be considered for revision under the current review of standing orders.

4. Alumni Relations update (Paper BC24 1909.3)

The Committee received and noted the latest Alumni Relations update, congratulating Katrina Allan, Head of Alumni Relations & Regular Giving, on having taken responsibility for Philanthropy. The Convener asked that the Committee be updated once a launch date had been agreed for the University's fundraising campaign.

Clerk's post meeting note: The fundraising campaign is due to be launched in early 2025.

5. Convener's Report (Paper BC24: 1909.3)

The Committee received and discussed the Convener's Report.

On the format and timing of meetings, only seven questionnaires had been returned

by members with a range of views, as well as comments on various IT problems members had been encountering. Members voiced support for a mix of meetings between online and hybrid. It was agreed to hold a hybrid meeting on 7 November, which would discuss members' preferences on format and timing.

It was noted that Jenny Mordue had agreed to step down as Vice-Convener, while remaining a member, to avoid the Convener and Vice-Convener both stepping down at the same time. The Committee agreed the arrangements for her replacement. Nominations for a new Vice-Convener were invited by the end of September.

The Committee noted the plan to hold a strategy day in March 2025. The Committee also noted that Court was in the process of making appointments and that, once that exercise had been concluded, the Governance and Nominations Committee would be asked to propose relevant individuals to join the Business Committee.

6. Reports from strategic groups

6.1 Marischal College (Paper BC24: 1909.5)

The Vice-Convener noted that the Business Committee had had an interest in Marischal College for many years and had been working to help find a new role for the part remaining in University occupation. However, the email from Professor Pete Edwards, Vice-Principal (Regional Engagement) made it clear that there was no role for teaching or learning in Marischal College going forward. Jenny Mordue would approach the Director of Estates & Facilities regarding further input to the Reimagining our Campuses project.

6.2 Commercialisation

The Vice-Convener noted that two dates had been identified for a "Meet the Entrepreneurs" workshop, in November/December 2024 and in March 2025. The University's Intellectual Property policy was due to be considered for approval by the Commercialisation Committee in the coming weeks.

6.3 Graduate employability

Judith Taylor provided an update and thanked outgoing member Patricia Pugh for her input into the group. Strong links had been established with the Careers and Employability team.

7. Review of the Business Committee Remit (Paper BC24: 1909.4)

The Committee agreed to defer discussion to the next meeting. Meantime, the Convener invited members to send written comments to him.

8. Court Digest June 2024 and University update

Louise Thomson, Head of Governance, provided an update on University news, including the recent excellent Guardian league table results. The Committee asked about the Enhanced Early Retirement and Voluntary Severance scheme which had

helped the University make savings for this financial year.

An update was also provided on student recruitment in September, though final numbers would not be known until October. The University had performed well against its deficit budget target for 2023/24.

The Head of Governance informed the Committee that Ross Anderson, who had been supporting the Committee since February 2024, was changing roles. He would support the next meeting of the Business Committee in November. Discussions were ongoing on what support will be provided thereafter.

9. AOCB

The Convener thanked Committee members who had contributed to the University's consultation on campus catering. Their comments had raised some strategic ideas about the role of the campus as a tourist venue, which he would distil and pass to Morag Beers, the Director of Estates and Facilities.

The Convener provided an update on the book on the history of the General Council since 1960. Editing of the text was at a late stage and illustrations had been chosen. He expected to meet a representative of Aberdeen University Press shortly, to discuss production options. A paper would be brought to the Committee once that work was complete.

Pat Pugh said how much she had enjoyed her time on the Committee and asked members to get in touch if she could help as a member of General Council.

The Convener noted that an additional meeting of General Council would be held on 26 September to elect three new members of the Committee, from the impressive 18 nominees.

10. Dates of next meetings

7 November 2024; 13 February 2025; 24 April 2025; 19 June 2025.