



## **GENERAL COUNCIL**

### **MINUTE OF THE 323<sup>rd</sup> STATUTORY MEETING**

The 323<sup>rd</sup> statutory meeting of the General Council was held in King's College Conference Centre and online on Saturday, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2025. The Convener of the Business Committee, Professor Norman Hutchison, was in the Chair.

#### **1. WELCOME**

The Convener welcomed attendees and noted that the meeting was quorate with 20 people present at King's College Conference Centre, and 11 people attending online. The Convener also introduced himself and Daniel Montgomery, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee, who took up their new roles on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2025. He thanked Duncan Macniven and Jenny Mordue who had held those respective roles until 31<sup>st</sup> September 2025.

Congratulations were also expressed to Professor Peter Edwards who took up the role of Principal & Vice-Chancellor on 1 November following the retirement of Professor George Boyne on 31 October. Professor Edwards was unable to attend the meeting but will be invited to the next meeting of General Council in May 2026.

#### **2. MINUTES**

The minutes of the last General Council meeting on Saturday, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2025 were proposed by Iona Fyfe, University Rector, and seconded by Daniel Montgomery.

#### **3. CONVENER'S UPDATE**

The Convener reported that at the October meeting of the Business Committee the implications of artificial intelligence in higher education was discussed. The Business Committee has now established three sub-committees focusing on Commercialisation, Student Employability, and Alumni Engagement. It is intended that the outcomes of their work will be reported to the June 2026 meeting of University Court.

Disappointment was expressed regarding the current level of engagement with Court. The previous system of electing four General Council assessors has changed to the nomination of four independent members. While this arrangement initially worked well, it is no longer effective, and there are currently no Court members serving on the Business Committee. The Business Committee has agreed to propose a joint appointment process for independent members of Court and has requested that four

members join the Business Committee. As this request was made only recently, it is acknowledged that it is too early for a formal response.

The Convener emphasised that the General Council remains an important part of the University's governance structure. Members discussed the importance of ensuring diverse voices are represented in decision-making processes.

#### 4. UNIVERSITY UPDATE

Dr Hulda Sveinsdottir, Director of Strategic Planning, Project & Corporate Governance and Deputy University Secretary, provided an update on recent developments. She reported that Professor George Boyne retired at the end of October after leading the development of Aberdeen 2040 and steering the University through significant challenges, including Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis. Professor Peter Edwards has been appointed Principal and Vice-Chancellor, with further leadership changes in the Senior Management Team expected.

Julie Ashworth, Senior Governor of the University, recently announced her departure after five years of service. Court member Neil Calvert will assume the role on an interim basis.

The Council noted the University's strong performance in recent league tables. In the Guardian University Guide 2026, we ranked 18<sup>th</sup> in the UK and 3<sup>rd</sup> in Scotland. In the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2026, we were placed joint 23<sup>rd</sup> in the UK, and we were ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the devolved nations for Overall Student Satisfaction in the National Student Survey 2025.

Dr Sveinsdottir also highlighted the QS World University Rankings and confirmed that an email will be circulated with details on how members can contribute. Employers and academic staff are invited to provide feedback on the quality of universities and graduates globally, and members were encouraged to participate and promote engagement.

Finally, Dr Sveinsdottir outlined the University's change programme, Adapting for Continued Success, which will introduce a new operating model for the University in 2026. Proposals from the initiative will be shared at a future meeting of the Business Committee.

#### 5. RESEARCH UPDATE

Professor Ben Tatler, Dean for Research Culture, and John Wrighton, Head of Research Strategy & Policy & REF Manager, presented a research update highlighting key achievements and strategic priorities.

General Council noted the successful celebration of the University's 530th anniversary during Founders' Week, which showcased Aberdeen's heritage and global research impact. Events included a community-wide Discovery Day and an inaugural lecture delivered by Regius Professor Mirella Delibegovic.

Significant progress was reported in health research, particularly the development of the Field Cycling Imager in Aberdeen. This technology enables imaging of structures

previously undetectable by conventional MRI and has already contributed to breakthroughs in diagnosing and treating breast cancer and stroke.

Members were briefed on interdisciplinary research addressing climate challenges, notably the “Futures of Listening” project, which supports vulnerable communities in Jakarta and Istanbul facing water-related risks linked to climate change and poor policy frameworks.

General Council welcomed news of major funding successes, including over £10.5 million from UKRI for doctoral training programmes across diverse disciplines. The Celtic Crescent Creative Economy initiative was highlighted for its focus on bilingual, rural, and coastal communities within the UK’s creative sector.

The University’s commitment to sustainability was reaffirmed through the launch of its Net Zero 2024 Strategy and leadership of the £5.7 million JUST-Systems project, which places communities at the centre of the transition to Net Zero.

Aberdeen’s leadership in interdisciplinary research was emphasised, supported by newly appointed fellows, directors, and PhD students. Planned initiatives include a public lecture, a Scottish Parliament event, and the fourth annual North-East Culture Summit in 2026. The University’s strong performance was noted, ranking in the top 10% globally and second in the UK for interdisciplinary science.

Further updates included the renewal of the Technician Commitment, accompanied by a three-year action plan to enhance visibility, recognition, and career development for technical staff. Research income figures were presented, confirming continued financial strength.

The Council then considered preparations for REF2029. Members were advised of a three-month pause in the criteria-setting process announced by Research England, although the overall timetable remains unchanged. Key changes to the framework were outlined, including assessment at institutional and disciplinary levels, with three core elements: Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding, Engagement and Impact, and People, Culture and Environment. Additional adjustments include decoupling individuals from outputs, reliance on HESA data for volume measures, and simplified processes for staff circumstances.

During the discussion, members reflected on the REF2021 results, noting that while outputs performed well, impact and environment were areas of concern. This has prompted a significant change in approach for REF2029, including the appointment of three Deans with responsibility for different sections of the exercise, which is an innovation for the University. It was acknowledged that staff numbers have reduced from 698 in the previous cycle to approximately 660, representing a 5.5% decrease. The inclusion of technicians in the process was welcomed as a positive development.

Questions were raised regarding strategies to improve impact, engagement with alumni networks, and the implications of staff departures. The ability to travel and maintain external connections was also discussed. Professor Tatler highlighted that the University is undertaking work that is highly relevant and aligned with its strategic priorities.

## 6. STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY

Tracey Innes, Assistant Director and Head of Careers, presented an update on employability initiatives. She began by outlining the strategic priorities aligned with the Aberdeen 2040 vision, which emphasises preparing graduates for diverse future workplaces through challenge-led teaching, real-world problem solving, and increased opportunities for work-based learning via placements and volunteering. Tracey noted a significant improvement in graduate outcomes, with the University rising 20 and 23 places respectively in UK rankings for employability metrics, now positioned in the top quartile for Graduate Prospects Outcomes.

The Careers and Employability Service continue to deliver on its vision of inspiring and supporting career success through collaboration and innovation. Its mission centres on enabling students to explore career options, develop employability skills and confidence, and connect with employers regionally, nationally, and globally. This is achieved through a mix of curricular, co-curricular, and work-related activities. Performance highlights for 2024–25 included 3,127 careers appointments, 702 online queries answered, and strong engagement with digital tools such as CareerSet (1,532 sign-ups and 8,256 CV uploads) and Interview Success (570 users).

Co-curricular programmes remain a key feature, with 38 students participating in the *bp* Student Tutoring Programme and 108 in the Career Mentoring Programme. Careers fairs also attracted strong engagement: Term 1 events included Law, Energy & Engineering, Business & Finance, and Part-time Jobs fairs, collectively hosting 134 organisations and drawing 2,001 students. A Volunteering event is scheduled for 19 February 2026.

Work-based learning opportunities are expanding, with the successful launch of a team-based course involving 23 students across four projects. The Business School piloted work-based learning projects in its postgraduate programmes during summer 2025 and plans to scale this to 80 students between January and August 2026. Similarly, the ABDN Internships programme continues to grow, delivering 120 paid internships in 2024–25 and offering 48 paid part-time internships in Term 1 of the current academic year, which attracted over 1,200 applications.

Tracey also highlighted an emerging focus on artificial intelligence in the careers context, with a research project underway to explore its potential applications. Actions and next steps are being developed to integrate AI tools into careers support services.

Members of the General Council were encouraged to review the Careers Annual Report and Internships Report, both available online, and to contact the Careers Service for further information. The update concluded with an invitation for General Council members to engage with these initiatives and support ongoing efforts to enhance graduate employability.

During the discussion, it was noted that engaging students with employability remains a challenge, as many do not consider career planning until they are close to graduation. The question was raised on how to better reach those who are currently disengaged. It was suggested that employability skills should be embedded within the curriculum rather than treated as an additional activity, as these skills are closely linked to what students are already learning. Members agreed that lecturers and course coordinators have an important role in integrating these elements into teaching and assessment.

## 7. ALUMNI RELATIONS

Clare Livingston, Interim Director of Advancement, delivered an update on the work done by Alumni Relations, and its importance for the University. Clare emphasized that alumni engagement enhances the University's reputation, supports students and research, and ensures long-term sustainability. The General Council was acknowledged as a key partner in amplifying alumni engagement and acting as ambassadors.

The University has a global alumni community of over 148,000 graduates across 170 countries. Initiatives such as the alumni travel club, the launch of the second University of Aberdeen Gin, and the establishment of global chapters were highlighted as ways to keep alumni connected. Currently, there are 520 active volunteers and 260 career mentors contributing to these efforts.

The Development & Alumni Relations team manages alumni relations, events, communications, and philanthropy, working collaboratively with academic schools and professional services to align engagement with Aberdeen 2040 strategic priorities. Their work centres on three pillars: engaging alumni through events and digital communities, delivering tangible benefits such as improved employability, and sustaining relationships through philanthropy and stewardship.

Activities and impact were showcased through multichannel communications, including newsletters, social media, and LinkedIn communities, as well as flagship events like reunions and lectures. Alumni volunteering and mentoring programs were highlighted for their role in supporting students' career development. Additional benefits include campus discounts and postgraduate study incentives.

The University's global reach was underscored by hosting 61 events in 22 countries and launching five new alumni chapters in London, Bangalore, Guangzhou, Pakistan, and Singapore. Alumni contributions extend beyond networking, enriching student experiences through guest lectures, skills workshops, and research advocacy. Philanthropy was presented as a partnership approach, with targeted campaigns supporting student hardship, scholarships, and medical research.

Looking ahead, the General Council was invited to play an active role in expanding volunteering, mentoring, and digital engagement, as well as acting as ambassadors and supporting philanthropic initiatives. Members were encouraged to contribute in ways that align with their interests, reinforcing shared responsibility for the University's success.

Finally, alumni were reminded of opportunities to get involved through volunteering, mentoring, and giving, and of the range of benefits available to graduates, including campus-based discounts and postgraduate study offers. The presentation concluded with a call to stay connected through University communications and alumni networks.

## 8. BOOK LAUNCH

Dr Duncan Macniven highlighted the publication of a book detailing the history of the General Council of the University of Aberdeen, titled: "The General Council of the University of Aberdeen 1960 – 2020".

The new volume, authored by Dr Charles Calder, formerly Lecturer in English at the University, updates the history originally published in 1963, which covered the first century of the Council. Work on the book commenced in 2018, and the General Council expressed its appreciation to Dr Calder for his significant contribution, acknowledging that a round of applause was well deserved.

Dr Calder's work is described as a book about people and the University, focusing on the contributions of diverse alumni and reflecting the evolution of the University during a period of significant and unprecedented change.

The book will be of interest to readers concerned with the University and with university governance and is available to purchase from the University shop for £15. A £3 discount was offered to General Council members who attended the meeting.

#### 9. MEMBERSHIP OF GENERAL COUNCIL BUSINESS COMMITTEE: ELECTION TIMELINE AND PROCESS

The General Council considered a paper outlining the process and indicative timeline for nominations and elections to the Business Committee, in line with standing order number 20 and the Universities (Scotland) Act 1932.

The paper confirmed that nominations will open in the week commencing 9 March 2026 and close at noon on 30 March 2026. Should nominations exceed the number of vacancies, an election by ballot will be held at the statutory meeting on 16 May 2026, using the online single transferable vote system previously employed.

Successful candidates will take up their positions on 1 October 2026. The paper also noted that several current members of the Business Committee may seek re-election, while two members will retire after completing three terms. The exact number of vacancies will be confirmed when nominations are called.

The General Council approved the proposed timeline and noted the process for appointments to the Business Committee.

#### 10. NOTICE OF THE 324<sup>th</sup> STATUTORY MEETING

The Convener noted his thanks to all the speakers at the meeting and University staff who facilitated the event. The 324<sup>th</sup> Statutory Meeting of the General Council will be held on Saturday, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2026 at 11am in King's College Conference Centre.