

**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Minute of the meeting held on 21st February 2011

Present: Ms J Batty, Mr S Cannon, Mrs J Chalmers, Dr B Connolly, Mr A Donaldson, Mr L Forsyth, Dr L Foley, Mr G Hunter, Mr B Lockhart (Chair), Dr G Mackintosh, Ms M McHaney, Prof P McGeorge, Mr R Parker, Ms K Reader, Mr S Robertson, Mr A Ryan, Ms K Christie (Clerk), with Ms J Donald (Minutes).

Apologies: Mr D Leitch, Dr J Morrison, Ms C Ryan, Mr B Snelling

18. Matters arising from the minutes

18.1 The minutes from the meeting of 8th November 2010 were approved.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/18)

Appeals and Complaints (Minute 11.2 refers)

18.2 The Committee noted that the revised policy and procedures on academic appeals and student complaints were approved by Senate at its meeting of 9 February 2011. The Committee further noted that training sessions for staff and the Students' Association (SA) had taken place in the week commencing 14 February, and that the new procedures were being implemented with effect from Monday 21 February. The SA emphasised its full support to the new process.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/19 and SAC/210211/20)

Annual Local Survey of Postgraduate Research Students 2011 and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2011 (Minute 12 refers)

18.3 The Committee noted that the University Management Group (UMG) had agreed that the University should participate in the national surveys for postgraduate taught (PGT) and postgraduate research (PGR) students organised by the Higher Education Academy, as they provided the opportunity to benchmark our results against other Universities. The Committee also noted that in order to capture in-depth data at a local level, the Postgraduate Committee would add institution-specific questions to the PGT survey which will be drafted in consultation with student focus groups, facilitated by the SA. Colleges and the SA have also contributed institution-specific questions to the PGR survey. The Committee further noted that the University is increasing its efforts to increase participation from International students.

18.4 The Committee discussed the amplitude of Higher Education surveys documented in the press, noting in particular the Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey in which less than 100 University of Aberdeen students participated. The Committee noted that the University pays heed to all surveys involving University of Aberdeen participants and seeks to identify and address trends therein. It was suggested that staff should be advised of the official University responses to such surveys.

Action: Clerk

19. Peer Mentoring

19.1 The Committee noted that initial meetings have been held with the Vice-Principal (Learning & Teaching), Student Centre and SA to develop a peer-mentoring scheme aimed at supporting new undergraduate entrants transition to university life.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/21)

19.2 The Committee also noted the intention to pilot such a scheme from September 2011 within the School of Medical Sciences, that the scheme would be offered on a voluntary basis, and that mentors would be allocated at either programme or School level on a ratio of 1 mentor to 4-6 students.

19.3 The Committee welcomed the initiative, noting that in addition to the student experience advantages to be gained, and the potential impact for the retention of new students, the scheme would provide additional co-curricular activities (perhaps validated through the STAR Award) and hence opportunities for those acting as mentors to obtain some of the graduate attributes.

20. Rectorial Election

20.1 The Committee noted that the term of office of the current Rector, Stephen Robertson, comes to an end on 30 June 2011 and that in line with the procedures for Rectorial Elections, the election for a new Rector must be concluded in May 2011.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/22)

20.2 The Committee also noted that the Senate Business Committee, on behalf of the Senate, had approved the schedule for the election of the new Rector and that, as in 2008, the election will be conducted using electronic voting software used by SA for the sabbatical and other SA elections. Provision would be made for those students unable to vote electronically to submit paper votes by post.

21. Students' Association

AUSA Constitution

21.1 The Committee noted the draft of the new AUSA Constitution produced following the recent governance review, further noting that it was hoped to circulate the document for student consultation and ratification in the coming months with a view to the final document appearing at Court in June 2011. The Committee also noted that the model draws upon some aspects of the models in place at the Universities of Salford and Liverpool and, if ratified, would be the first of its kind at a Scottish University.

(copies filed as SAC/210211/23 and SAC/210211/24)

21.2 The SA drew to the attention of the Committee three aspects in particular of the draft Constitution namely:

- that a Board of Trustees will have the authority to manage the affairs of the SA, and as such will be the main decision-making body; the SA Spokesperson (see below) will Chair the Board and the SA General Manager will be secretary.
- changes to the roles of the Sabbatical Officers who, it is proposed, will now stand for office for one area of responsibility (sport / community, welfare, academic affairs or student activities) and then take on a second responsibility (Spokesperson, College of Arts & Social Science, College of Life Sciences & Medicine, College of Physical Science or Postgraduate) which will be agreed between those elected or possibly elected by the Student Parliament.
- an aim to increase student participation within the SA by reducing the need for some roles to be elected positions and instead be voluntary in nature.

21.3 The Committee welcomed the SA's intention to fully address issues of Equality, Diversity and Equal Opportunities, but noted that in some areas of the draft Constitution that it would be important to widen the categories of students listed; the SA were grateful to receive the offer of support in this matter from the Equality & Diversity Adviser.

Action: SA President

21.4 The Committee noted that the document had been prepared by an English firm of solicitors and was mindful of the need to ensure conformity with Scots Law; it was suggested that the SA consult with the University's legal advisers in this regard.

Action: SA President

21.5 The Committee asked to be kept abreast of developments at its next meeting.

Action: Clerk

Student-Led Teaching Awards

21.6 The Committee was informed that NUS Scotland had awarded the SA a £1000 grant to support the existing University's College-based Student-Led Teaching Awards scheme, whereby students nominate lecturers they believe to be excellent teachers. It was noted that the funds would be used to increase student participation by creating extra promotional material and to facilitate SA-organised focus groups to identify what students consider to be good teaching.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/25)

21.7 The Committee noted the value the scheme contributes to illustrating how much good practice occurs throughout the institution, but also that the scheme is potentially biased towards staff who teach large undergraduate classes; it was suggested that an award for teachers of postgraduate courses, which traditionally have smaller cohorts and would be greatly valued by staff should be introduced.

Action: President for Education & Employability & Colleges

Feedback on exams

21.8 The Committee received a brief report from the SA following their consultation with students regarding the January 2011 examination diet.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/26)

21.9 The Committee was pleased to note that the majority of the students who responded felt that they had been fully prepared for their exams and had a sound basis on which to do their exams.

21.10 It was also noted that some students (and staff) had experienced problems with WebCT during the exam period, but that DIT had worked with WebCT's technical team to resolve these difficulties as soon as possible, and that every effort had been made to inform users of progress and to reassure them staff were doing their utmost to quickly achieve a resolution. Where WebCT problems had disadvantaged students, cases would be considered on an individual basis. The Committee welcomed the news that the University's Virtual Learning Environment (currently WebCT) would be upgraded over the summer period.

21.11 The Committee was informed that there had been delays in the return of marks across some areas of the university, but that the SA, Vice-Principal (Learning & Teaching) and Academic Registrar were working with Schools to ensure the quick return of outstanding courses.

Aberdeen Students Charities Campaign (ASCC) International Campaign

21.12 The Committee noted that the University of Aberdeen has been working closely with the Edinburgh based charity 'Reusing IT' since January 2008, whereby computing equipment no longer required by the University has been given to Reusing IT as an in-kind

donation, helping the University work towards targets within our Corporate Social Responsibility Action Plan as well as those illustrated within the Waste Policy.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/27)

21.13 The Committee further noted that the ASCC team are hoping to develop this relationship further by having the ASCC, University staff and students undertake a more proactive role in the transfer of the computers to Sierra Leone by providing a workforce to efficiently install the computers and teach individuals in the communities how to use and maintain them.

21.14 The Committee praised the initiative and the work undertaken to date, noting that the campaign is still very much in the planning stages with respect to, budget, insurance and training. The Committee did sought clarification regarding the ownership of the project and stressed the importance of, and need for a comprehensive risk assessment. [Clerks note: The project steering group will be addressing the issue of ownership, risk assessment and project audit in the planning work taking place during summer 2011. The SAC will be kept abreast of plans in future meetings.]

Action: President for Charities

Student Work/Life Balance

21.15 The SA brought to the Committee's attention anecdotal evidence suggesting that increasing numbers of students are reporting mental health related issues, which it is felt arises in part from the demands placed upon students struggling to cope with academic study and working to support themselves financially. It was also noted that many students also struggle with the change in study demands from level 2 to level 3. The President for Welfare and Equal Opportunities brought the NUS "Silently Stressed" Campaign to the Committee's attention

(see

<http://www.nus.org.uk/Documents/NUS%20Scotland/Silently%20Stressed%20THINK%20OS%20REPORT%20Final.pdf>).

21.16 The Committee welcomed the work of the SA Welfare Committee to promote mental health awareness, which included the provision of a 'chillax' room for students to get a break from revision and to encourage students to take some time out to think about their wellbeing, hosting stalls in Refreshers' week looking at the connection between physical and mental health, and training student volunteers in mental health first aid (a NHS-recognised qualification). In addition a student society, SHRINK, has been set up with links to the Royal College of Psychiatry, based primarily at the Foresterhill campus and the SA is investigating how to link the work of its welfare campaign to SHRINK.

21.17 The Committee noted that a considerable amount of work had been carried out by the University's HR department relating to stress in the workplace as part of the University's Healthy Working Lives campaign. It was suggested that the SA may be able to link into this work and should approach the HR Training and Development Advisers in the first instance. It was also noted that the Peer Mentoring scheme to be piloted (minute 20 refers) could help alleviate some student stress-related issues.

Action: President for Welfare and Equal Opportunities

Reports from Sabbatical Officers

21.18 The Committee noted the SA Sabbatical Officers' reports on their recent activities, highlights of which included the organisation of Refreshers' Week, preparations for the annual Student Show, training second half session class representatives, a review of the SA welfare services currently offered to students and plans to promote the Aberdeen 'women's week' in collaboration with RGU, Aberdeen College and Aberdeen Women's Alliance.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/28)

22. Debater

22.1 The Committee noted the Debater's request to use the Old Senate Room for their weekly public debates as it felt the MacRobert rooms they were currently allocated were not suitable for such purpose. The Committee was informed that given current resourcing, all student society events and other events entitled to the use of venues free of charge have all been moved to the MacRobert Building to minimise expenditure on security staff costs and utilities. The Committee agreed that the University should ensure rooms provided for Debater's use should be of sufficient size, with the correct furniture and layout. It was agreed that the president of the Debater would liaise with Registry and Estates regarding specific needs.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/29)

Action: Debater/Director of Academic Affairs/Estates

23. Directorate of Student Affairs

23.1 The Director of Student Affairs briefly presented his report on recent activities within Campus Services, Student Support and University Sport, highlighting in particular the very pleasing results of the recent survey to University accommodation residents to assess the students' experience while living in Halls of Residences.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/30)

24. Directorate of Academic Affairs

24.1 The Director of Academic Affairs updated the Committee on recent activities within Registry, the Careers Service, the Centre for Learning & Teaching and the Student Centre. In particular, the Committee noted that having now been open for a full semester, the Infohub is attempting to elicit formal student feedback via a short online survey and suggestion boxes, to ensure that it offers, where possible, the services that are most important to students. Responses received to date have been overwhelmingly positive and discussion is already underway to address student suggestions for a 'Student Jobs' notice board and the delivery of Infohub services at the Foresterhill campus.

(copy filed as SAC/210211/31)

25. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Student Affairs Committee will be held on **Monday 30 May 2011 at 2 pm in Committee Room 2, University Office.**