



THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
GENERAL COUNCIL
MINUTE OF THE 319th STATUTORY MEETING

The 319th meeting of the General Council was held on campus and online on 23rd March 2024. The Convener of the Business Committee, Dr Duncan Macniven, was in the Chair.

1. Welcome

- 1.1 The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting. He thanked Katrina Allan and the alumni team for their work in supporting the General Council and its Business Committee over the years and introduced Ross Anderson and Louise Thomson from the Governance and Executive Support Team, who would be taking over responsibility.

2. Minutes of the 318th statutory meeting of the General Council (paper GC24:01)

- 2.1 The minutes of the 318th statutory meeting of General Council were **approved** as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

3. University update

- 3.1 The Convener invited Tracey Slaven (in her role as University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer) to provide an update on the University's activities.
- 3.2 Tracey Slaven's presentation highlighted:
- The University's purpose since 1495 - to be open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others - was still relevant and supported by the University's charitable aims of research and education.
 - The new branding 'Go Beyond Boundaries' had been launched last summer and reinforced the need to evolve in the face of established and new challenges and opportunities.
 - Recently, the University had continued to perform well in university league tables - notably being in the UK top 20 in The Times, The Sunday Times and The Guardian for three years running. The University had achieved good results in National Student Satisfaction surveys and the Medical School had been ranked the best in the UK.
 - The University faced a volatile financial environment. Postgraduate student intake in September had reduced across the university sector, notably because of changes in visa fees and permissions. Recent research undertaken by PWC into the state of the sector's finances and operating environment concluded that universities faced significant financial challenges.
 - The marking and assessment boycott referred to by the Principal at the last meeting had ended in September 2023.

- Aberdeen and Glasgow had been awarded Investment Zone status, and the University had a seat on the steering group for the development in Aberdeen. This linked to other activities including the Scottish Government's Blueprint for Entrepreneurial Campuses and the Just Transition Fund for the north-east.
- The next UK wide Research Excellence Framework assessment had been delayed from 2028 to 2029, with increased emphasis on support for researchers and research culture.
- The Business School had recently been awarded EQUIS accreditation – one of only 200 globally to have this recognition.

3.3 Tracey Slaven emphasised the priority which the University was giving to the financial sustainability necessary to deliver its the academic mission - by re-organising services and processes to reduce costs and workloads; restructuring finances; and seeking to reduce staff and associated costs by an enhanced retirement scheme. The financial recovery plan approved by Court in February 2024 aimed to continue to meet the needs of students and deliver quality research and educational activities.

3.4 Questions arising from the presentation included:

- The impact of the changes to modern language programmes. Tracey Slaven explained that, following the December meeting of Court, the University had committed to continue to offer modern languages as part of joint honours programmes. The Senior Management Team was working with colleagues in modern languages to ensure sustainable provision of modern language courses and to monitor the result of the changes. A 'lessons learned' exercise would inform future action to achieve financial savings.
- The impact of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC). Tracey Slaven replied that the University had been alert to the problem of RAAC early on and had been able to take pro-active steps in a timely manner that limited the impact. Five areas of the University had been identified with RAAC. The Foresterhill auditorium was the priority area with the aim of reopening before the new academic year.
- An update on the University's fundraising campaigns. Tracey Slaven highlighted the preparatory work underway to support a major campaign, which Court would be asked to approve at its June meeting.
- A request for more funds from the University to support the Gaudie student newspaper. Tracey Slaven suggested that, to ensure that editorial freedom was seen to be preserved, it was more appropriate for the Gaudie to be supported via the Development Trust.
- The potential for the University to generate more diverse income streams. Tracey Slaven confirmed that the Senior Management Team were keen to maximise the return on services and assets in order to diversify income streams and support the University's financial sustainability.

- 3.5 The Convener thanked the University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer for the update.

4. Enhancing graduate employability

- 4.1 The Convener introduced John Barrow, Dean for Employability and Entrepreneurship, who delivered a presentation on the work of the Careers and Employability Service. He highlighted the following:
- There was a growing desire by both students and employers for universities to equip graduates with the skills they needed for the working environment. The University supported graduate outcomes and career readiness activity with: a dedicated committee (Employability and Entrepreneurship Committee) working in particular with each School, AUSA, the Careers Service and the Centre of Academic Development; work-based learning programmes; and a new skills and attributes framework aligned to Aberdeen 2040.
 - The changing nature of recruitment and work placed more emphasis on work experience and psychometric testing, aptitude assessments and other skills-based exercises.
 - There was more demand for 'work-ready' individuals, with transferrable skills essential to modern work – resilience, self-awareness, and time management.
 - The Higher Education Statistics Authority collected information on employment of graduates 15 months after graduating. To support this, the University had launched a survey to monitor graduate employability and received over 12,000 responses.
 - Ultimately, the University aimed to prepare students to thrive in the modern working environment and 'MySkills' was a key component of delivering that ambition.
- 4.2 A member emphasised the willingness of the Business Committee to support the work of the Dean and the University by using its networks and contacts to support activities and opportunities. This was welcomed by the Dean.
- 4.3 The Convener thanked the Dean for Employability and Entrepreneurship for his presentation and remarked on the positive work being undertaken to support students and the wider economy.
- #### **5. Work of the University museums and special collections team**
- 5.1 The Convener welcomed Neil Curtis, Head of Museums and Special Collections.
- 5.2 Neil Curtis explained that the presentation would cover the work of the team and how it supported the wider academic aims of the University, rather than describing the internationally important collection. He identified as of particular interest:
- Engagement with the public, including exhibitions in the Sir Duncan Rice Library Gallery and the Zoology Museum, small displays in the Science

Teaching Hub and Confucius Institute, and a varied range of events and activities. The 'Legacy of Slavery' exhibition had been a particular success, supported by an events programme, and was a model which would be repeated.

- International loans continued to be important, with a current exhibition of Ancient Egyptian material in Shanghai, which was shortly to move to Hangzhou, then Chengdu and Beijing. As well as promoting awareness of the University's collections, it was generating income.
- The collections sat at the heart of activity, so the Collection Development Policy was being reviewed to ensure that it continued to be relevant and able to support the University's work, including acquisitions that would diversify the range of people's lives represented, collection reviews, disposals and repatriation. Work was also addressing historic legacies, including the legacies of slavery and colonial collecting.
- The team was increasingly contributing to the University's teaching and research activity, and this was properly recognised with transfer of income to his unit, in the same way as between Schools. The number of academic staff working with the collection was also increasing, including the appointment of Honorary Curatorial Fellows.

5.3 A member asked about the University's philosophy on the repatriation of artefacts to and by the University. In response, Neil Curtis emphasised that each artefact should be considered on its own specific situation. A standardised approach was not appropriate. A rigorous procedure was outlined in the Collection Development Policy. Another question related to the murals in the old student union building. The meeting was informed that, as the University no longer owned the building, it was not in a position to be able to provide any further information. Other questions related to the use of 3D scanning and printing to copy artefacts before repatriation and the viability of the Old Town House to host exhibitions. Neil Curtis replied that there were arguments for and against copies, but that they were costly to make, and that the Old Town House was not a good venue for exhibitions due to its space and accessibility.

5.4 The Convener thanked the Head of Museums and Special Collections for his stimulating presentation.

6. **General Council Business Committee report (paper GC24:02)**

6.1 The Convener introduced his report. He thanked members of the Business Committee, especially Vice-Convener Professor Jenny Mordue, for their contribution to its work. He invited comments and questions from attendees.

6.2 There were no questions and the meeting **noted** the paper.

7. **Membership of the General Council Business Committee – election timeline and process**

7.1 Tracey Slaven, Clerk and Registrar to the General Council, advised the

meeting that, under standing order 19, two members of the Business Committee were due to retire and were not eligible for re-election. These were Patricia Pugh and Mary Stephen. A further member of the Business Committee had indicated their intention to stand down from the Committee: Yafan Zhang. Tracey Slaven thanked the three individuals for their service - a sentiment supported by the Convener.

- 7.2 Expressions of interest in these three vacancies could be lodged with the Governance and Executive Support Team (gest@abdn.ac.uk) and nomination forms would be available from the end of March. Nominations would close at 12.00 noon on Friday 31 May. Should there be more nominations than vacancies, there would be an election at the December meeting of the General Council.

8. Any other business

- 8.1 There was no other business raised.

9. Notice of the 320th statutory meeting of the General Council

- 9.1 The Convener thanked everyone for their attendance and input and advised that the 320th statutory meeting would be held in hybrid form on 7 December 2024.