

CONFIRMED

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

**Minutes of the meeting held on 5 February 2025**

In person:

Waheed Afzal, Scott Allan, David Anderson, Euan Bain, Simon Bains, John Barrow, Siladitya Bhattacharya, David Blackburn, Jason Bohan, George Boyne, Alex Brasier, Marcus Campbell Bannerman, Ignacio Canales, Alessandra Cecolin, Chris Collins, David Cornwell, Irene Couzigou, Leone Craig, Sergio Dall'Angelo, Pete Edwards, Marie-Luise Ehrenscheidtner, Joshua Fernando, Nick Forsyth, Karin Friedrich, Greg Gordon, Ines Graca, Jean-Baptiste Gramain, Nathaniel Greene, Aravinda Meera Guntupalli, Astley Hastings, Peter Henderson, Faye Hendry, Richard Hepworth-Young, Karolin Hijazi, Babu John, Anne Kiltie, Nadia Kiwan, Seungho Lee, Karl Leydecker, Beth Lord, Colin Lumsden (from 2pm), Catriona Macdonald, Joanne McEvoy, Amy McFarlane, David McGloin, Michelle Macleod, David McLernon, Alan MacPherson, Mauro Manassi, Doug Martin, Sam Martin, Abigail Meissner, Oleksandr Menshykov, Jessica More, Heather Morgan, David Muirhead, Jo-Anne Murray, JP Mynott, Patricia Norwood, Nir Oren, Graeme Paton, Ekaterina Pavlovskaya, Stuart Piernie, Michelle Pinard, Amudha Poobalan, Ann Rajnicek, Miles Rothoerl, Agathe Rouaix, Thereza Raquel Sales de Aguiar, Joachim Schaper, Patience Schell, Nicholas Schofield, Karen Scott, Samuel Seymour, Diane Skåtun, John Skåtun, Srinivas Sriramula, Trevor Stack, Fiona Stoddard, Scott Styles, Ben Tatler, Asha Venkatesh, Nikolaos Vlassis, Gordon Waiter, Rebecca Walker, Jennifer Walklate, Samantha Waters, Ilia Xypolia, Roland Young, Alexandros Zangelidis, Phil Ziegler

Online:

Isla Callander, Andre Justin Carpio, Selma Carson, Brett Cochrane, Toni Gibson, Beatriz Goulao, Flora Gröning, Constanze Hesse, Thomas Muinzer, Sam Newington, Charla Simpson, Ursula Witte

Apologies:

William Barlow, Daniel Powell

*Minutes 26.1 to 30.16 relate to the first part of the meeting which was closed to non-members.*

**HONORARY DEGREE NOMINATIONS**

- 31.1 Senate voted by consensus to approve, in principle, the candidates proposed by the Honorary Degrees Committee. Candidate details were circulated confidentially by a separate process. Further due diligence was requested on one nominee which the Principal undertook to refer to the Honorary Degrees Committee if appropriate.

## **COURT REPORT**

- 32.1 Ilia Xypolia, School of Social Science updated Senate on the meeting of Court on 19 November 2024. She highlighted that Court had approved the University's Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 July 2024 and that Court also confirmed that it was satisfied that the 'material uncertainty' clause regarding the University's status as a going concern (which had been included in the 2022/23 accounts) was no longer required. Court had also approved the University's Net Zero Strategy.

## **CURRICULUM REVIEW UPDATE**

- 33.1 Jo-Anne Murray, Vice-Principal (Education) provided Senate with an update on the commencement of a process to review the taught curriculum at the University. She noted that work would be carried out proactively, in consultation with staff and students across the community and look to determine the current position and compare that, with the position the University was aspiring to.
- 33.2 Abigail Meissner, School Convener, School of Biological Sciences asked about how the Review would be conducted and how students would be involved in the process.
- 33.3 Jo-Anne confirmed that the first part of the process would be to determine exactly the answer to that question, but it would include face to face interactions and would include multiple touch points to enable students to input to the process.
- 33.4 Abigail also asked whether the review would look at the actual courses being delivered as part of the curriculum, or simply the structure of the curriculum. For example, whether creative writing students had sufficient access to appropriate courses.
- 33.5 Jo-Anne stated that the review would provide the opportunity to look at this as part of the consultation process. The main part of the process was to gather information on staff and students' views on the curriculum and then formulating a plan based on that consultation.
- 33.6 Jen Walklate, School of Social Science asked for clarification on who the 'we' in the review would be and how it would be returned to Senate for oversight.
- 33.7 Jo-Anne confirmed that 'we' was everyone. There would be a formal group with sub-groups but confirmed that everyone would have the opportunity to contribute. There would be touch-points along the way with Senate. For example one of the first issues would be to determine the nature and composition of the action group which would be brought to Senate for feedback and would form part of the updates to Senate along the way. This process would be refined as part of the ongoing exercise.
- 33.8 Jen noted the importance of ongoing discussions between the Group, when it was formed, and Senate. She also suggested that senate or its subcommittees might be included in the membership of the Group.
- 33.9 Patience Schell, LLMVC noted that one of the drivers for the process gave 'rationalising the offer' as part of the justification and noted that the use of the term rationalising raised alarm bells and therefore she was seeking to understand

exactly what was being rationalised she also expressed concern about 'reducing the assessment burden for students' if this was not underpinned by an appropriate pedagogy. Historically there had been efforts to reduce assessment as it was a time burden on staff rather than recognising that assessment was a core part of the role of educators. She suggested that there were other ways academic staff time was wasted that could be addressed, to create time for an important core part of the job.

- 33.10 Jo-Anne that this was an important point contributing to determination of whether the current curriculum was fit for purpose and that the review would be research led and based on evidence and that the review would be underpinned by pedagogy.
- 33.11 Patience sought clarification of whether the 'offer' was programmes or courses?
- 33.12 Jo-Anne noted that the 'offer' included anything and everything but that this would be clarified as part of the start of the process. The process was about determining what the University was seeking rather than being about an individual's perception of what the process was or should be.
- 33.13 Richard Hepworth-Young, School of Natural and Computing Sciences (NCS) asked what the nature of the outcomes of the process would be, were they expected to be recommendations or instructions and also asked what the feedback had been that informed the view that the current curriculum did not meet requirement.
- 33.14 Jo-Anne replied that the feedback thus far had been informal conversations with schools and students and that the organised consultation was due to be part of the review process. She also confirmed that there were no predetermined outcomes for the review process. She confirmed that anything coming out of the review process would be brought to Senate for discussion. There would be a communication plan and also a framework around any staff development requirements identified.
- 33.15 Scott Allen, Business School noted that the paper made a distinction between curriculum structure and the curriculum itself and asked if Jo-Anne might expand on the statement indicating that the curriculum structure did not achieve its intentions and what she saw as the barriers to this.
- 33.16 She exemplified structural differences as possibly being inconsistencies between schools in how credit structures worked and interacted to form interdisciplinary work while the curriculum itself was about how and what students were taught; together with how they were assessed. This had become apparent through discussions around facilitating interdisciplinary studies. And that some of the structures were not enabling the embedding of employability within the curriculum.
- 33.17 Euan Bain, School of Engineering noted that if there was a desire to offer true interdisciplinarity the barriers to it needed to be broken down. He suggested from his sixteen years of experience, the true barriers to interdisciplinarity were timetabling, cost centres and internal accounting and unless these issues were addressed properly true interdisciplinarity would not be achieved.
- 33.18 Jo-Anne agreed that this needed to be part of the conversation. There was a need to step back to identify what outcome was sought and then identifying the

challenges and barriers preventing this from happening in order that they might be removed.

- 33.19 Karin Friedrich, DHPA noted that while agreeing entirely with Euan's points about interdisciplinarity, she also stressed the importance of students finding their feet within their discipline first. To be truly interdisciplinary it was necessary to first establish what the various disciplines were particularly for undergraduate students.
- 33.20 Jo-Anne confirmed that this was something that would be fed into the process.
- 33.21 Ashley Hasting, School of Biological Sciences asked if, with the multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach the University was moving towards the American approach of general degrees with major and minor disciplines?
- 33.22 Jo-Anne confirmed that this initial stage was about establishing what was in the University's strategy in terms of interdisciplinary at Aberdeen and how the University was able to provide the structure to deliver those opportunities to students. There were currently no plans to make the type of changes Ashley was alluding to within the American university system.
- 33.23 The Principal confirmed, however, that if it was found that this was what students were seeking then this would be the direction the University would move in but to date this had not been evidenced.
- 33.24 Erin Campbell, School Convener, School of Social Science commented that one of the drivers for curriculum review was cited as being to address mental health challenges and asked if there were any concrete plans, perhaps involving the University Counselling Service or other mental health services offered on campus, to include these types of service personnel within the review.
- 33.25 Jo-Anne confirmed there was an acute awareness of the challenges within the University and the sector and hence this was in the review to determine what could be done to enhance these services.

### **PORTFOLIO REVIEW UPDATE**

- 34.1 JP Mynott, Dean for Portfolio and Programme Development noted that Senate had received the written update and agreed to answer any questions arising from it.
- 34.2 Nikolaos Vlassis, Business School noted an error in the paper and that the paper included details of paused programmes and asked what the process was to un-pause them.
- 34.3 JP apologised for the error and asked Nikolaos to send him details in order that it may be corrected. He noted that the auto-pausing process had been put in place the previous September in order to address the need not to run programmes without students. He highlighted that it was not a process that he anticipated would be repeated. He noted that one thing learned from the process that the meetings needed to be held regularly and within an appropriate timeframe. PGT portfolio review should not be happening in November/December but should be happening in May/June to permit informed decisions to be made about whether or not to run programmes at an appropriate point. In terms of the programmes identified as withdrawn in the paper he confirmed that the decision had been discussed with schools. The programmes had been identified for a variety of reasons, a lot of

which may be described as housekeeping, but JP confirmed that the process was not going to be repeated.

- 34.4 Jen Walklate, School of Social Science noted she was pleased to hear the auto-pausing would not be repeated. She noted that it was unclear from the paper where it had originated and also the paper detailed that on 6 September an email had been sent to schools, and she asked for clarification about to whom it had been sent as she had not been aware of any of the process despite being of the Social Science Education Committee. She also asked when the paper would be sent to QAC.
- 34.5 JP confirmed that the paper was ready to be submitted to the next round of committees and would be going to UEC and QAC.
- 34.6 Jo-Anne confirmed that the email had been sent to Heads of School and suggested that the communication issues maybe lay within schools. She noted that the process was about providing the information to schools to enable them to make informed decisions. She highlighted that this was the start of a process of conversation about multiple data sources which had been brought together to provide schools with the data to drive decisions.
- 34.7 Jen also confirmed the importance of clarity for Senate and that clear communication was vital to ensure there was no slippage in responsibilities. It was important to establish when things would be considered by Senate and what roles others were authorised to play in the process. She highlighted that Senate had the ultimate responsibility for degree programmes.
- 34.8 Jo-Anne emphasised the process was about providing schools with the data to consider decisions which would, as always, follow the correct governance processes.
- 34.9 Patience Schell, LLMVC noted that the minutes from the previous meeting (20.34 & 20.35) the Principal assured Senate the PMC would be part of the governance structure, and the Dean had also assured there would be clarification of where PMC sits but nothing had been included on the agenda for the current meeting. She asked, once again, for clarification about PMC sits within Senate's remit noting this was more pressing as this paper at 24.3 refers to a 'portfolio review' but there is nothing about when it would be considered by QAC, a Senate Committee, and it talks about decisions rather than recommendations. She further noted that the paper contained a list of PGT programmes that were either withdrawn or paused and noted that the options available to PMC were suspension or withdrawal not to pause. She highlighted that once again the processes for un-pausing were unknown and asked for an update on the discussion on the relationship between PMC and Senate.
- 34.10 Jo-Anne noted the importance of clarifying process in order to provide confidence on everyone in the decision-making process. She confirmed that the lists of programmes in the paper were based on decisions made by schools, albeit based on data provided through PMC. The process for a new programme starts with PMC looking to determine whether there was a market demand for the programme before the programme is designed and all the quality assurance around the curriculum is undertaken by QAC. When a programme is to be suspended or

paused or withdrawn the request comes from schools. The request is considered by PMC in order to determine whether the request is reasonable, from a student population and recruitment perspective, but the actual process for making that decision is through QAC. The programmes identified in the paper have all been through that process.

34.11 Patience confirmed that she understood the explanation but noted she would be more comfortable if PMC sat under QAC so there was a clear line of reporting to the Senate devolved committee.

34.12 The Principal confirmed that, as Samantha was relatively new in post, this process and the powers of the various bodies would be clarified at a future meeting.

**Action: SW**

34.13 Jo-Anne confirmed that the decision-making body was QAC not PMC.

34.14 JP also confirmed that PMC was a committee of which the Dean was just the Chair, and it was the Committee making recommendations to schools and not the Dean as an individual. He noted also that some alignment of terminology might be useful in clarifying the process.

34.15 Nadia Ki wan, LLMVC suggested that some of the confusion may arise from references to conversations with 'schools' without an indication of who in the school had been part of the discussion and this was also something that clarity was required on.

34.16 The Principal noted the need to move on with the agenda and asked for any further requests for clarification to be lodged for future response.

34.17 Trevor Stack, LLMVC agreed that clarification of roles and responsibilities would be helpful and asked for commitment to provide a paper for discussion at the March meeting of Senate.

**Action: JM/SW**

34.18 Once again Jo-Anne clarified that PMC was not making decisions and the conversations with schools were with Heads of Schools and Directors of Education, who were in turn able to discuss within the school. The initial discussions with PMC were simply to provide information for schools to base their decisions on.

### **RESEARCH IMPACT - REF2029 UPDATE**

35.1 Nick Forsyth Vice-Principal (Research) provided Senate with an update on engagement and impact which was an important pillar within REF2029. He stressed that he was presenting the paper to Senate on behalf of himself and also Michelle MacLeod, Dean for Impact and Engagement and the wider Impact team including its lead, Ruth Banks. He noted that he would highlight key elements from the paper which contained fuller details.

35.2 He noted that in REF2021 the University's Impact performance had been its weakest with the GPA having dropped from 3.19 in REF2021 to 2.93 compared with the sector average of 3.34. While acknowledging there was ground to make up, Nick noted that time was available to do this. He highlighted the early indications that Impact would be replaced by Engagement and Impact (E&I) and that impact case studies would be accompanied by discipline level statements detailing engagement activity. He noted that much of the detail on the process was

as yet unpublished by REF but this element would have a significant role in the overall process. The exact role of Engagement within E&I was not yet known but the key theme running through REF2029 was a shift from the individual to disciplinary activities. He highlighted the intention to draw together an Institutional Engagement Framework or high-quality engagement; an expansion in engagement training; and to bring together an engagement group to share good practise in this area.

- 35.3 He noted that it was predicted the University was likely to need around 65 case studies in the REF2029 submission with 99 impact projects having been identified as meeting or being on target to be complete for submission. He noted that there was a focus within the Institution for the provision of time, training and resources to facilitate the production of impact work. He highlighted the establishment of the Impact and Engagement Accelerator Fund (IEAF) to strengthen performance within this profile.
- 35.4 Richard Hepworth-Young, NCS asked as someone shortly due to run some impact outreach activity what should be done to make that as impactful as possible for REF and noted that this was covered in the paper. However, he raised concern about how these types of activities would feed into the final written submission and how such activities would be known about.
- 35.5 Nick suggested that, in terms of capturing engagement, the University was in a good place and highlighted the work of the Public Engagement with Research (PERU) team in doing this.
- 35.6 Michelle also noted that the Team had resisted capturing engagement in a unified way but had shared good practise with school leads on how engagement might be captured.
- 35.7 Trevor Stack, LLMVC returned to the earlier point about organising engagement and impact activity and noted that often researchers were too focused of organising the activity to think about who to evaluate and evidence it. He welcomed the guidance and funding available but noted that an Engagement Officer would be welcomed so that there was a clear person to be consulted.
- 35.8 Michelle noted that PERU should always be the first point of contact for this and also highlighted that the IEAF would support evaluation activity and that the 'agile' fund would remain open while there were available funds.
- 35.9 Karen Scott, MMSN noted that the 'agile' fund was still open and that approximately 19% of the funding might remain available and asked whether the other funds, 'major' and 'minor', would be reopened?
- 35.10 Michelle confirmed that these were not currently open, and this would be reviewed at the end of February to determine what funding remained available.
- 35.11 Closing the meeting, the Principal noted that the role of Senate was to oversee the quality of the University's education and research and being a successful university was quite simple: high quality education would attract students whether on campus, online, on an international campus and high quality research attracted funding from research grants, from philanthropy and REF and provided this was done the University was financially sustainable. These things were very tightly

connected within a virtuous cycle beginning with the quality of education and research.

### **SENATE BUSINESS COMMITTEE UPDATED TERMS OF REFERENCE**

- 36.1 On the recommendation of the Senate Business Committee Senate approved the updated terms of reference for the Committee.

### **ASSESSOR ELECTION TIMELINE**

- 37.1 Senate noted the timeline approved by the Senate Business Committee for an election for Senate Assessors on Court to replace Joachim Schaper and Diane Skåtun who's terms of office come to an end on 30 September 2025.

The timeline for the election would be:

- (a) Friday, 18 April 2025 - Nomination forms issued to all electors by the Secretary
- (b) Friday, 2 May 2025 - Latest date for return of nomination forms to the Secretary
- (c) Monday, 5 May 2025 - Voting papers issued to all electors by the Secretary
- (d) Friday, 16 May 2025 - Latest date for return of voting papers to the Secretary.

### **ASSESSOR ELECTION RESULT**

- 38.1 Senate noted that, following the election held in December 2024, Richard Hepworth-Young had been elected to replace Neil Vargesson as Senate Assessor on Court from 1 January 2025 until 30 September 2026.

### **UEC REPORT TO SENATE**

- 39.1 Senate noted the routine report from the University Education Committee.

### **URC REPORT TO SENATE**

- 40.1 Senate noted the routine report from the University Research Committee.

### **QAC REPORT TO SENATE**

- 41.1 Senate noted the routine report from the Quality Assurance Committee.

**Freedom of Information/Confidentiality Status:** Partially Closed [*Minutes 26.1 to 30.16 relate to the first part of the meeting which was closed to non-members*]