UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 4 JUNE 2020

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Mel Roberts (Vice-Convener), Nuala Booth, Eric Crockart, Jennie Gibson, Euan Mackenzie, Jan McRobbie, Alan Milne, Dan Montgomery, Jenny Mordue, Graeme Nicol, Iain Percival, Kathleen Preston, Patricia Pugh, Judith Taylor and Brian Wood, with Steve Cannon (Interim University Secretary) and Nicole Cochrane (Clerk).

Apologies: Maggie Chapman (Rector), Colin Duncan, Tom Lynch, Willie MacColl, Lynne Mennie, Jennifer Shirreffs, Mary Stephen and Mark Strange

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Convener welcomed those present – particularly Kathleen Preston and Lisa Henderson, who were attending their first meeting - and shared ‘house-keeping’ information for holding the first virtual Business Committee meeting.

Ms Cochrane shared the apologies received.

2. MINUTES

The minutes were noted and approved.

3. MATTERS ARISING

- MARISCHAL COLLEGE UPDATE

Professor Mordue confirmed that the University’s working group is paused for now. She was unsure about the Aberdeen Council side of the project but suspected this is also paused due to lockdown. She asked committee members to keep the project in mind and think about how alumni can become involved.

The Convener referenced the presentations at the March meeting, in Professor Mordue’s absence and confirmed that that the Committee had backed the plans in principle. He asked Professor Mordue to feedback further when timely.

Action: Professor Mordue

Ms Roberts noted that she had shared at the March meeting her misgivings on the direction the project was going. Ms Roberts felt there were serious omissions on how the project intended to celebrate the University in the city centre and not become just another arts space. Professor Mordue accepted these comments and agreed with this point.

Ms Henderson, being a new member, was unaware of this project and the Convener asked Ms Cochrane to share papers from previous meetings with Ms Henderson by way of background. Ms Roberts and Professor Mordue offered to speak with Ms Henderson separately to provide an update.

Action: Ms Cochrane / Ms Roberts / Professor Mordue
- **CO-OPTION OF NEW MEMBERS**

The Convener confirmed that there was one position available for co-option.

The Committee considered two candidates, based on the biographies they had provided, and voted to co-opt Sue Strachan. Ms Cochrane is to confirm the outcome directly with both candidates.

*Action: Ms Cochrane*

- **OTHER MATTERS ARISING**

Ms Pugh confirmed that she had reached out to Professor Ruth Taylor after her presentation at the March meeting, to offer any input which would be useful to the education strands of the 2040 Strategy. Professor Taylor responded welcoming the approach and confirmed a new Dean was now in place within the school. She suggested that he may wish to meet with Ms Pugh to discuss this further. This conversation occurred directly before lockdown began, therefore has not progressed further yet.

The Convener thanked Ms Pugh for this update and asked her to keep the committee updated.

*Action: Ms Pugh*

Ms Roberts noted that she had spoken with both Rob Donelson and Jenny Fernandes before lockdown regarding alumni communications and engagement as general council members. When possible, she will provide further update on this topic.

*Action: Ms Roberts*

4. **UNIVERSITY UPDATE – PANDEMIC RESPONSE**

The Convener welcomed Steve Cannon to the meeting.

Mr Cannon noted that the lockdown of the University had gone quickly and smoothly – but that bringing everyone back will be much harder. It is anticipated that blended learning will happening when students return and there is a great deal of pressure on staff to prepare for the different scenarios.

Mr Cannon explained there is a concern that if the University was to only provide online learning in September then it could mean students are less likely to come, instead deferring for a year. This would have financial implications on the University. The University is keeping in line with what other Scottish Universities are intending to offer, which looks to be a balance of on campus and online teaching. The University will be transparent in explaining to new students what the new teaching process will be and will ensure that teaching time is not reduced.

The biggest concern with a return to campus is that a uniform approach will not work; for example, the layout of MacRobert is less conducive to safe return than the buildings at Foresterhill, due to the layout. There is a lot of uncertainty and the plans must remain flexible to be viable. Staff were under significant stress trying to cope with increased workloads while working at home.

Mr Cannon welcomed any suggestions or questions from the committee.
Professor Booth said that she was pleased with the University’s decision regarding blended learning. She referenced Manchester and Cambridge Universities, which have both confirmed there will not be a return to campus in Autumn. Mr Cannon clarified the wording used by those universities, stating that they had shared there would be no lectures on campus, rather than there being no return to campus. All UK universities were taking very similar approaches.

Mr Percival asked Mr Cannon to provide an update on the campus redevelopment project. Mr Cannon confirmed that the financial gap is very significant due to Covid-19 and that there is a recruitment freeze across the University. The University is also making use of the government furlough scheme. The building projects have all been paused aside from the science teaching hub, as the cost of stopping the build would outweigh completing it.

Mr Cannon also highlighted the financial impact that a lower number of registrations from international students will have. Ms Preston asked if UK universities are going to have to rethink their reliance on international students as a main income source. Mr Cannon said that he believes a more fundamental approach to this issue will need to be taken across the sector, as currently there is a belief (which he considered mis-placed) that the ‘new normal’ will not be very different from the old.

Ms Pugh enquired about a cap on the number of English students attending institutions across the UK. Mr Cannon confirmed that there was little concern as it is unlikely the University would have exceeded the imposed cap.

Mr Montgomery asked for thoughts on student accommodation, regarding distancing measures and payment. Mr Cannon explained that the government instructed refunds for accommodation that was not used due to lockdown. New students will be entitled to shorter leases than in previous years, in case of a second lockdown. In terms of distancing the approach is that a floor/flat will be treated as a ‘household’, e.g. a flat of 8 will be counted as a single household.

Ms McRobbie raised the point of staff being under significant stress and asked about steps to provide support. Mr Cannon noted how impressed he has been with how genuine SMT have been in focusing on staff and the pressure they are under. A survey is being carried out shortly to find out what else needs to be done. There is however finite resource.

Mr Wood asked if there was any thought on how the Committee and alumni can provide support. Mr Cannon highlighted the 525 Covid-19 Bursary Appeal and the significant financial support alumni have shown so far. He welcomed the proposal that the Committee write a letter of support.

Professor Mordue asked if across Scottish Universities any alliances or amalgamations for the future are being discussed. Mr Cannon said that they are focused on the next 18 months ahead for now, but he would be surprised if there was no discussion on longer-term realignment.

Ms Roberts asked about the welfare of students who had to stay on campus throughout lockdown. Mr Cannon said originally there were around 200 and where possible the University have been assisting students to get home. This will become easier as restrictions are eased and borders open.

Mr Percival noted that he intends to share a piece from the Economist about the similar struggles facing Australian universities, which may be useful.
The Convener thanked Mr Cannon for his update.

5. DRAFT LETTER TO PRINCIPAL

The Convener invited comments on the draft letter to the Principal expressing its solidarity with and support for the University as it faced the challenge created by the coronavirus.

Mr Mackenzie spoke about a possible scholarship for law students from disadvantaged backgrounds, funded by alumni in that sector. He has raised this idea with Rob Donelson, who will do some research with the school on the viability of this idea. If successful it would be possible to roll it out in different schools (medicine, engineering etc.). It might be worthwhile including in the letter that the Committee can provide a different perspective and offer thoughts and ideas to help the University at this time.

Ms Roberts commented that she feels a follow-up conversation could be had about the idea put forward by Mr Mackenzie, though it would probably be better to find out more about its viability before advocating it. Ms Henderson agreed with Ms Roberts: the letter should be kept as a simple offer of support at this stage, without getting into specifics.

The Committee agreed minor adjustments to the draft and invited the Convener to send it. A working group on scholarship fundraising might be created after feedback is obtained from Rob Donelson.

Action: Convener

6. REPORT FROM THE CONVENER

The Convener prepared a written report, which was reviewed by the Committee.

The Convener highlighted that Dr Charles Calder is continuing to work on the History of the General Council book, which will be ready at the end of the year. Mr Cannon confirmed that there was money set aside previously for this publication and this should still be available. Ms McRobbie suggested that there could be an idea to share snippets on social media ahead of publication, to garner interest.

The Convener raised the point of reinstating General Council Assessors to Court, as suggested in the letter he had sent to Mr Cannon. Mr Cannon confirmed that he can raise the question of the representation of the General Council on Court in the report he is currently working on. Professor Booth and Mr Percival, members of Court, considered that the proposal will be well received.

Mr Crockart, noting that Aberdeen is the only ancient university that does not have General Council representation on Court, suggested that the Committee should endorse the letter sent by the Convener. The Committee agreed.

7. SUMMER STATUTORY MEETING

Ms Cochrane asked for feedback on how the Committee wishes to replace the postponed Summer Statutory Meeting of the General Council.

Ms McRobbie said that having a meeting virtually might make it more accessible to members who could not attend in the past. Mr Cannon said he would encourage the committee to hold the meeting and carry out business as usual as far as possible. Mr Crockart agreed with this, as the standing orders provide leeway regarding when the meetings are held but did not allow a meeting to be cancelled altogether. Ms Roberts commented that this is an excellent way of modernising communications.
The Convener asked Ms Cochrane to liaise with Mr Cannon and the Alumni Relations team to establish a suitable date for the meeting.

Action: Ms Cochrane

8. ALUMNI RELATIONS UPDATE

Ms Cochrane shared an update prepared by Katrina Allan, Head of Alumni Engagement & Regular Giving. Highlights included:

- The 525 Alumni of Achievement project is now live and gathering a significant number of nominations. The project aims to increase the profile of the University and that of the world-changing impact graduates have made over the last 525 years and continue to make today.
- The Covid-19 fundraising appeal is currently at £132,000 (excluding gift aid), raised from over 530 donors.
- Over 100 locally based alumni have volunteered to assist with the pastoral and emotional support the University is providing to students who remain in halls of residence.
- Digital alumni engagement through social media since the start of the pandemic has been very successful, with highlights being a virtual walk through Europe, a video with Scotland’s first deaf minister, Rev. Mary Whittaker, and the #ABDNHeroes series of posts featuring alumni contributions to the Covid-19 response.
- Engagement through virtual events has now begun, with tomorrow seeing the third such event in the guise of a virtual quiz. Further events are being planned to provide regular opportunities for alumni to connect with through events wherever they are in the world. These are likely to be at least monthly, potentially fortnightly.

Ms Cochrane also agreed to share the ‘keeping in touch’ webpage with the committee, which explains the benefits of staying in touch with the University and how to update personal details.

Action: Ms Cochrane

9. COURT MINUTES FROM 10 DECEMBER 2019 MEETING

The Committee noted the minutes.

10. AOCB

Mr Percival shared a discussion he had with the Principal regarding any concerns over a 2020 degree being devalued. The Principal confirmed that businesses he had been in touch with did not hold any such concern, which he was grateful to hear.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 3 September 2020, 4pm, Location TBC