UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 10 DECEMBER 2020

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Mel Roberts (Vice-Convener), Eric Crockart, Euan Mackenzie, 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), Katrina Allan (Head of Alumni Relations) and Nicole Cochrane (Clerk).


1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Convener welcomed the Committee to the virtual meeting. The Committee welcomed Nuala Booth’s appointment as acting Senior Governor. Ms Cochrane shared the apologies received.

2. ABERDEN 2040 PLANNING UPDATE

The Convener welcomed Dr Hulda Sveinsdottir (Director of Planning) and Iain Grant (Head of Strategic Planning) to the meeting. They spoke about the development of the 20-year strategy, its focus on the University’s original foundational purpose and the twin activities of Education and Research, and the 20 commitments to be a more inclusive, interdisciplinary, international and sustainable university. The strategy had been launched in February 2020 but the pandemic had interrupted the intention to underpin the strategy with a 5-year operational plan and rolling 1-year implementation plans. Instead, a 1-year operational plan had been drawn up and approved by Court in June, focussing on 9 of the 20 commitments – plus the University’s league table position - with actions and a key performance indicator for each commitment. Iain Grant displayed the full list of actions and indicators, which would be circulated to Committee members. The 9 selected commitments included the three topics of most interest to the Committee: widening access, collaboration especially with other institutions in the north-east, and meeting societal and particularly industrial needs. In addition to these institution-wide commitments, each school had a set of performance indicators under Education and Research.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- Information to feed the schools’ performance indicators was mostly centrally-provided, to achieve a common approach (eg on student satisfaction and employability).
- Much attention was being given to helping students from deprived areas and to narrowing the digital divide – for example, through scholarships funded by the Development Trust.
- Softer student skills such as good citizenship, and the University’s collaboration with stakeholders, were important to the strategy but harder to measure. Measurement was nonetheless possible – for instance, through survey data, and the opinions of members of the Regional Engagement Group chaired by the Senior Vice-Principal.

In conclusion, the Convener thanked Dr Sveinsdottir and Mr Grant for an interesting and encouraging account of progress. The published strategy was an impressive document and
the Committee welcomed the rigour of its implementation. He looked forward to hearing further progress in about a year.

3. MINUTES

The minutes were noted and approved.

4. UNIVERSITY UPDATE

Steve Cannon, Interim University Secretary, updated the Committee on the University’s work in the face of the pandemic. Difficulties continued, but his impression of the mood of staff and students was surprisingly positive – though the recent staff survey showed that many staff were under pressure. The immediate challenge was getting students home safely for Christmas, and back on campus thereafter. Tests had been made available to all students before they went home and 2,500 had been tested so far – fewer than expected. Normally, the new term would have started on 25 January, but the current plan was for a small number of research students to return on 4-6 January, most laboratory-based work to restart on 25 January, with the majority of students not returning until early February. The plan was for blended learning, mostly online, to continue – but that depended on further advice from the Scottish Government, with whom the University was working closely and constructively.

In response to questions from members, Steve Cannon said:

- Some students were considering whether it was sensible to return to Aberdeen after Christmas if there was to be no in-person learning. The University was sensitive to that viewpoint and was considering waiving accommodation fees. But the University’s view was strongly in favour of face-to-face learning, as soon as that was safe.
- After one unfortunate weekend early in term, student compliance with coronavirus measures seemed good – helped by the fact that Aberdeen had moved to Tier 2, where restrictions were fewer.
- Testing was voluntary and, though the reason for low uptake was unknown, it might be that students feared that a positive result would prevent them travelling home.

On the University’s financial position, Steve Cannon reported an improved outlook. Instead of the previously-forecast deficit of about £25 million in the current year, a shortfall of £3-5 million seemed likely. But great uncertainty remained, for instance on student recruitment.

Steve Cannon reported that the final version of the review of governance which he had undertaken had been considered at the recent meeting of Court and remitted to the Court’s Governance and Nominations Committee for implementation. The review had covered the composition of Court and had mentioned the Business Committee’s wish to have General Council elected membership restored. He noted that most Court members seemed content with the current composition but it was open to the Committee to engage again on the matter. The initial view of members was that that should be done. A copy of the report would be circulated and members were invited to pass views to the Convener, who would consider how best to reiterate the Committee’s view. Mel Roberts would re-activate the sub-group which was considering how to improve communications with General Council members.

Action: Convener and Vice-Convener

5. MATTERS ARISING

The Convener reported that Colin Duncan did not wish to be co-opted to the Committee.
Jennie Mordue and Mel Roberts spoke to the position paper on the revitalisation of Marischal College which they and Lisa Henderson had prepared. Chris Collins (Professor of Music) had taken over from Pete Stollery as the lead for the University’s interest in the project and Rob Donelson would convene a short-life group on which the Business Committee would be represented.

The Committee welcomed the paper’s clear summary of the present position and the invitation for the Committee to form part of the University’s further consideration. Early progress was hoped for, bearing in mind the problematic electrical wiring in the building. Funding would be crucial, the estimated cost of bringing the building up to standard and providing access for disabled people being £3.5 million. The Committee might be able to signpost sources of funding and identify further ideas for uses of the building, in particular restoring the University’s presence in the city centre. Members were invited to contact Jenny Mordue with ideas; she would meantime contact Rob Donelson about joining his group.

Action: Members; Jenny Mordue

6. REPORT FROM THE CONVENER

The Committee noted the paper. Dan Montgomery hoped shortly to photograph Bishop Elphinstone’s tomb.

Action: Dan Montgomery

7. STATUTORY MEETINGS 2021

The Convener, noting that the last statutory meeting had been held in August and that biannual meetings were required, asked the Committee for their views on continuing the practice of the past two years of linking the winter meeting to the University’s AGM. In discussion, the following points were made:

- The date of the approval of the University’s accounts, and hence of the AGM, was uncertain.
- The attendance at the linked meetings had been somewhat higher than before.
- Attendance at the August meeting, at about 50, was also higher and remote participation in the winter meeting was important.

The Committee agreed that the statutory meeting should be delayed to coincide with the University AGM, unless that would breach standing orders. Nicole Cochrane would keep in touch with the Secretary’s office to achieve that outcome.

Action: Clerk

8. ALUMINI RELATIONS UPDATE

Katrina Allen amplified her paper by noting her gratitude to her team for their work during the pandemic and in particular for organising an expanded programme of events for alumni. She thanked the Committee members for their various contributions to the University. On the Blackbaud data breach, she reported that the Information Commissioner did not intend to censure the University, but was continuing to investigate the firm’s security measures.

On the 525 Alumni of Achievement, Katrina Allen reported that biographies of about one-third of the over 800 nominees had been completed – a task which was taking longer than expected. Mel Roberts had been asked to join the selection panel and was hoping to be consulted on the selection criteria before the panel convened.

The Convener thanked Katrina Allen for her paper and for the work of Alumni Relations.
9. COURT MINUTES FROM SEPTEMBER 2020 MEETING

The Committee noted the minutes.

10. COURT DIGEST FOR NOVEMBER 2020 MEETING

The Committee noted the digest – a more useful document than the minutes because it was more concise.

11. AOCB

The Convener thanked Steve Cannon, whose period of office was about to end, for his support and wise counsel.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 4 March 2021, 4pm, MS Teams. It was planned to invite Duncan Stewart, whose attendance in March 2020 had been thwarted, to speak about the student experience survey, as well as Tracey Slavin who was starting in January as University Secretary.