UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 7 NOVEMBER 2019

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Maggie Chapman (Rector), Eric Crockart, Colin Duncan, Jennie Gibson, Tom Lynch, Willie MacColl, Alan Milne, Dan Montgomery, Jenny Mordue, Graeme Nicol, Patricia Pugh and Judith Taylor, with Fiona Urquhart (Acting Head of Alumni Engagement), Nicole Cochrane (Clerk), Esther Robertson (Senior Governor), Jenny Fernandes (Acting Director of External Relations & Marketing, International Office), Angus Donaldson (Director of Estates & Facilities) and Karl Leydecker (Senior Vice-Principal).

Apologies: Nuala Booth, Euan Mackenzie, Lynne Mennie, Iain Percival, Mel Roberts (Vice-Convener), Jennifer Shirreffs, Mary Stephen, Mark Strange and Brian Wood

1. WELCOME

The Convener welcomed those present - particularly Esther Robertson, who was attending as an observer to learn about the Committee and its role.

2. PRESENTATION: MS JENNIFER FERNANDES, ACTING DIRECTOR OF EXTERNAL RELATIONS & MARKETING, INTERNATIONAL OFFICE

Ms Fernandes presented to the committee (slides attached) and took questions.

Ms Pugh asked if the University was doing anything with regards to the recent issues in the Chinese Government. Ms Fernandes confirmed that there is a weekly update on the situation in Hong Kong and individuals are told to follow local advice.

Mr Duncan asked about the steps being taken to tackle the effects of Brexit. Ms Fernandes confirmed that Brexit is a huge risk to the student population, given that 23% of undergraduates come from the EU. The University wants to maintain this figure and grow it, the message being the University is open to all and EU students are welcome. Mr Duncan asked what is expected to happen to these numbers should Brexit happen. Ms Fernandes confirmed that these numbers will fall, as students will go from paying a small amount to attend University in Scotland to looking at costs of around £50k (fees, visa costs, NHS surcharge etc.)

Ms Taylor asked how much cost comes into the decision making for new students. Ms Fernandes said it was a hugely influential factor. She noted there is currently a debate around tuition fees and low fees can suggest poor quality. She also explained that the weak pound has helped the UK from an international perspective, coupled with the 2-year working visa.

Mr Crockart raised that there could be an issue with EU students paying so much to attend the University and perhaps not having a positive experience. Ms Fernandes explained that expectation management is important, and students should understand the investment they’re making. She confirmed that feedback from students on their experience is largely positive.

Mr Nicol mentioned concerns around the quality of a degree being dependent on the quality of the academic staff, querying how this will be maintained after Brexit. Ms Fernandes confirmed the University remains committed to bringing in the best and brightest academic staff despite the effects of Brexit.

Ms McRobbie asked Ms Fernandes how the committee can help with ongoing work. Ms Fernandes said her team is looking at how to better communications and the relationship of the University with the city. They are also increasing engagement with Westminster and Holyrood. She noted they would welcome input and suggestions on how the University can better position itself with regards to these areas.

The Convener thanked Ms Fernandes for her presentation.
3. MINUTES

The minutes from the meeting held on 5 September 2019 were approved.

4. MATTERS ARISING

Marischal College – A Plan for the Future

The Convener welcomed Angus Donaldson, Director of Estates and Facilities, to the meeting and gave the committee some context with regards to the Queen Street redevelopment project.

Professor Mordue referenced the paper which the subgroup submitted for review. She noted an agreement in principle for the preservation and development of Marischal to be part of the University’s future investment plans. She highlighted some key points from the paper which included:

- Considering alumni views and opinions on plans for Marischal
- The cost associated with refurbishing
- When and how the views of the committee and General Council should be shared with Court

Mr Donaldson shared some slides on the plans Aberdeen Council are currently looking at (attached). He noted that the plans cover Broad Street, King Street, Union Street, Marischal College and the Police Station, noting that the Police are in negotiations to relocate.

Following brief discussion, the Convener confirmed that the committee are supportive of the general tenor of Professor Mordue’s paper and suggested that they should work in partnership with Mr Donaldson on this. He requested volunteers to reinforce the current sub-group numbers. Professor Mordue confirmed that Mr Percival had offered to assist the sub-group. The Convener asked Mr Donaldson to join the sub-group, to which he agreed. Mr Donaldson then offered to arrange a tour of Marischal for those interested in seeing the work that needs to be carried out. Ms Urquhart suggested that Duncan Stuart, Head of Student Experience, would be a good person to meet the sub-group. Professor Mordue agreed this would be helpful.

Mr Duncan explained that it would be better to delay putting a paper to Court. He confirmed that Court are focusing on the King’s regeneration project currently. Whilst this approach might take longer, he felt it would be better in the long run. The Convener suggested this be picked up at the March meeting and a possible timeline established then.

Aberdeen 2040 – Business Committee Comments

There were minor comments in relation to the paper submitted for review:

- Page 2 – Closer collaboration with the community of North East Scotland, especially through Opportunity North East.
- Page 7 – Change committee welcomes the plan to focus intention for genuine interdisciplinary work
- Ms Pugh noted there should be more focus on opportunity regardless of background

The Convener agreed to submit the comments, with these amendments, to the strategic planning team.

Action: Convener

Other Continuing Workstreams

The membership engagement group members were absent. The topic will be followed up in March.

5. REPORT FROM THE CONVENER

The Convener explained that, as he had been in post for a short time, he had not prepared a specific
report on this occasion. He instead highlighted the work he had been doing on Aberdeen 2040, which would be discussed with Professor Leydecker.

6. ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY INVOLVEMENT WITH THE COMMUNITY PLANNING ABERDEEN INITIATIVE: DISCUSSION WITH PROFESSOR KARL LEYDECKER, SENIOR VICE-PRINCIPAL

The Convener welcomed Professor Karl Leydecker to the meeting, to discuss the University’s strategic plan and community planning.

Aberdeen 2040

Mr Crockart raised some concern over wording and potential ambiguity of some statements in the text. Professor Leydecker confirmed that the first release of the document had triggered some alarm bells and since then there has been extensive work carried out on recrafting the text. This revised version will be shared soon. He explained that the original text had essentially been rewritten, with the assistance of Professors of English. Court feedback on the original document was that it was very academic, so the content has been simplified.

In terms of next steps, Professor Leydecker explained that there will be an initial 5-year action plan, setting out what will be done first. This is intended to secure buy in for the vision of the plan.

Ms McRobbie queried whether growth in student population will be on campus or more online. Professor Leydecker noted that online learning is growing, however the attraction should be to bring people on to campus and make them part of the community. Ms McRobbie agreed with this, commenting that meeting people of different backgrounds is part of the University experience.

Community planning

Professor Leydecker explained that he had been invited by Aberdeen City Council to join the planning group. The Scottish Government directed Councils to take forward social justice issues via these groups. Professor Leydecker commented that there are real benefits to having the University be part of this initiative. For example, malnutrition is an issue and the expertise of the Rowett matches with that. There is a growing momentum of people who want to be involved.

Dr Macniven confirmed this is very much in line with the thinking of the committee.

Mr Duncan commented that it is helpful that Professor Leydecker has experience of community planning from Dundee and can share his expertise here. Professor Leydecker noted that the University has strong relationships with Aberdeen Council and the work being discussed is of a bigger scale. Dr Macniven noted the importance of including Aberdeenshire Council with this planning as well.

Mr MacColl noted how positive it is for Professor Leydecker to have a ‘seat at the table’ on this topic and that the University being part of this journey is so important.

Ms McRobbie referenced her experience on the council, noting that communities fed into shaping plans and that they no longer contain top-down council initiatives. This ensures wider diversity and representation of interests.

Mr Crockart commented that it is clear that local communities know what needs to be done in their areas. Dr Macniven agreed with this, referencing Bishop Strange’s previous comment on his experience in Seaton.

The Convener thanked Professor Leydecker for attending the meeting.

7. CO-OPTION OF NEW MEMBERS

The committee were reminded that there are two vacancies still open for co-option.
Mr MacColl commented that he had one person in mind and would potentially be in touch on this.

8. ALUMNI RELATIONS UPDATE

Ms Urquhart, Acting Head of Alumni Relations, provided a comprehensive written report to the Committee on alumni relations activity. Highlights included:

- The creation of a student engagement plan, focusing on raising awareness of alumni relations among the student body. The plan will be reviewed by a group of current students and their input will be incorporated.
- A number of recent events took place in America, under the ‘Aberdeen in America’ banner. 8 events were held across the USA in 6 days, including a talk on the attempt on Hitler’s life by the grandson of Stauffenberg.
- Over 300 mentors have signed up for the Career Mentoring Programme

The committee welcomed the report.

9. AOCB

The Convener confirmed that the next Statutory Meeting will be held on Saturday 25 January.

Court Minutes will be included in the next set of papers.

It was queried if another away day should be scheduled, as the last one was in February 2018. The Convener suggested that now is perhaps not the right time for this but they committee should think about when it would be best to next arrange an away day.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 5 March 2020, 4.00pm, Court Room, University Office, Old Aberdeen