



THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN  
GENERAL COUNCIL  
MINUTE OF THE 313<sup>rd</sup> STATUTORY MEETING

The 313th meeting of the General Council was held virtually on Thursday 6 August 2020. The Convener of the Business Committee, Dr Duncan Macniven, was in the Chair.

1 WELCOME

Duncan Macniven explained that, in accordance with the General Council's standing orders, he would chair the meeting as Convener of the General Council's Business Committee. He welcomed members - wherever they were - to the 313<sup>rd</sup> statutory meeting. The General Council's first meeting was in 1860 and this was the first occasion the Council had not met face-to-face. The meeting had been postponed from its normal date in May because of the coronavirus pandemic.

2 MINUTES OF THE 312<sup>nd</sup> MEETING

The minutes were approved.

3 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising, other than those covered later in the agenda.

4 REPORT FROM THE CONVENER OF THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Duncan Macniven reported that the Business Committee had met three times since January, most recently on 9 July, when the University Principal, Dr George Boyne, had given an update on the effect on the University of the coronavirus outbreak. The work of the Committee had been hindered by the outbreak but had focussed on supporting the University at this problematic time. He had written to the Principal on 5 June expressing the Committee's solidarity with the University and offering whatever assistance it could provide. That included helping fundraising from alumni and establishing useful contacts.

The Committee continued to pursue its interest in topics including increasing the engagement of members of the General Council; student recruitment and retention; and the future of the University's building at Marischal College. The Committee had also been considering how the General Council was best represented on the University Court, which was the subject of item 8 on the agenda. Dr Charles Calder continued to work on the history of the General Council from 1960 to 2020 and arrangements were in hand for its publication. The Committee welcomed any suggested new topics of concern to members.

Duncan Macniven expressed his gratitude to the members of the Business Committee and to members of the University staff who had helped its work, notably the Committee Clerk Nicole Cochrane, the Interim University Secretary Steve Cannon and the Principal.

5 UNIVERSITY UPDATE – PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Steve Cannon, Interim University Secretary, reported on the effect on the University of the pandemic. When the problem became apparent in March, the University had moved quickly to

suspend teaching and move to home working, before the UK lockdown. Traditional assessment and graduations had been suspended. The pandemic posed financial problems: the predicted surplus for 2020-21 was in jeopardy. The University had therefore suspended most building projects and other avoidable expenditure, in the face of a possible loss of £39 million income.

From June, the University had been planning for a resumption of activities in accordance with a Scottish Government “road map”. Over 1,800 staff had been brought back in person, either working in laboratories or preparing for classes to restart at the beginning of the autumn term (which had been deferred by two weeks). The plan had been for a blended combination of face-to-face and online learning. Though the 2 metre social distancing rule created problems of timetabling and capacity, preparations had been going well, with domestic and foreign student numbers holding up, until the announcement the previous day of a reimposed lockdown in Aberdeen due to the growing incidence of the virus in the city. The timing was very unfortunate, just at the moment when students were taking their final decisions on where to study. Depending on the duration of the new lockdown, it might not be possible to start the new term as planned in mid-September.

The Scottish Government had asked the Scottish Funding Council to review the provision and sustainability of further and higher education in the light of the coronavirus crisis and the University would be responding to the questions addressed by the review.

Members asked questions about the following topics:

- Accessibility of blended learning to students who were vulnerable to infection. Steve Cannon explained that no student would be obliged to attend campus: the aim was for online learning to be of the same standard as face-to-face tuition. David Watt, a member of staff and of the University Court, explained that all lectures would be recorded and made available to students, with captions for people who found it hard to hear. Tutorials would be conducted by Blackboard Collaborate, giving the option for students to attend in person or remotely. Field trips and laboratory work posed more challenges and individual solutions were being sought.
- Attendance requirements. David Watt explained that, where attendance was a requirement, a roll could be taken of students attending online. Students who did not meet the requirements would be offered support and, if necessary, would be subject to the normal disciplinary procedures.
- Government funding. Steve Cannon reported that small amounts of extra funding had been provided for Covid-related research and for reopening to students. The size of next year’s funding had been announced sooner than normal. But that did not make an impact on the £39 million funding gap to which he had referred, and there seemed little prospect of additional funding of that scale.
- More international students might be attracted if they did not have to attend on campus. Steve Cannon noted the point, which he would draw to the attention of the University’s student recruiters.

## 6 BUSINESS COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP – ELECTION UPDATE

Steve Cannon, Interim University Secretary, advised that under the terms of Standing Order 19, the following members were due to retire from the Business Committee on 30 September 2020, but were eligible for re-election:

Eric Crockart  
Duncan Macniven  
Euan Mackenzie  
Jan McRobbie  
Judith Taylor

At the closing date for nominations of candidates, which was Friday 27 March 2020, five nominations for seven vacancies had been received and so the following were duly elected to the Business Committee from 1 October 2020 to 30 September 2023:

Eric Crockart  
Duncan Macniven  
Euan Mackenzie  
Jan McRobbie  
Judith Taylor

The two remaining positions had been filled by the Committee co-opting:

Lisa Henderson  
Susan Strachan

## 7 DEVELOPMENT & ALUMNI UPDATE AND BLACKBAUD DATA BREACH

Rob Donelson, Executive Director of Advancement, provided an update on alumni and development activities at the University. All staff were working at home. Fundraising was continuing, albeit at a reduced level, and during the past year £7 million of gifts had been received, particularly in legacies. The database of actual and potential donors was being enlarged and refined and General Council members' assistance would be warmly welcomed. A Covid student bursary appeal, linked to the University's 525<sup>th</sup> anniversary and designed to help students encountering hardship as a result of the pandemic, had raised over £200,000 against a target of £150,000. There had been 225 applications for support so far and any further support from General Council members would be appreciated by the students concerned. The University had sought nominations of 525 "Alumni of Achievement" who had made a special impact on society during the University's history and the process of researching and vetting the nominations was in hand. Volunteers were sought to help with that task.

Rob Donelson briefed the meeting on a recent security breach affecting the database of donors to the University and the actions taken to reduce the impact and to inform the affected donors. The database was held on the servers of a US contractor working for many universities and other charities worldwide, which had been the victim of a cyberattack. The breach had taken place in May but the University was regrettably notified only in mid-July because the contractor had been working with the FBI and a forensic service to resolve the matter. The University had then acted quickly to brief the donors affected.

In discussion, members welcomed the efforts of the alumni team to provide interesting events online. On the data breach, there was serious concern about the ability of the contractor to safeguard the University's donor data and the impact on the reputation of the University – which should be seeking remedies from the contractor. Steve Cannon agreed that the breach was a matter of grave concern. The contractor worked for many clients in the university sector but there was now a question mark over client confidence. Rob Donelson was in touch with other universities about what action should be taken. The University was also reviewing its holding of data and the way in which the data was held.

Duncan Macniven summarised discussion by saying that the incident was regrettable and called into question the willingness of donors to support the University, which was so important to its prosperity. He asked that alumni be kept informed about progress with the safeguarding of data, to limit that damage.

## 8 PROPOSED CHANGES TO STANDING ORDERS

Eric Crockart, a member and former convener of the Business Committee, briefly explained what underlay the changes outlined in the paper. The change to Standing Order 29 was intended to maintain at approximately one year the period of advance notice before the General Council was asked to approve any Standing Order change. The current intervals between General Council meetings would otherwise mean a period of 18 months before any change in Standing Orders could be made. The proposed change to Standing Order 19 was intended to retain a membership link between Business Committee and Court after the forthcoming end of the period of appointment to Court of members who sat ex officio on the Business Committee by virtue of their former election as General Council Assessors on Court.

It was provisional and might need to be amended once the outcome of the University's governance review was known.

The proposals were noted and would be submitted for approval at a future meeting.

## 9 FUTURE STATUTORY MEETINGS

Duncan Macniven noted that the meeting was attended by over 50 geographically-diverse people – a higher attendance than normal for a General Council meeting. The Business Committee would be reviewing how the meetings should be held in the future, in the light of that welcome attendance. One possibility was to allow members to participate either in person (benefiting from personal interaction) or online (making it easier for more members to join the meeting). There would be an opportunity for those attending the present meeting to indicate their preference.

A member asked whether, post-coronavirus, the Business Committee was likely to continue to offer a similar choice for its meetings. Duncan Macniven responded that an earlier Business Committee meeting had incorporated remote audio participation and he hoped that future meetings would allow online or in-person attendance – with perhaps an occasional more reflective meeting to help building effective teamwork among Committee members.

## 10 AOCB

A member asked about the future plans for Marischal College. Professor Jenny Mordue, a member of the Business Committee who had led the Committee's work on the topic, explained that the University still owned key parts of the College buildings – in particular, the Mitchell Hall, the Picture Gallery, the Debater and the Anatomy Museum. The Business Committee felt strongly that the buildings could if redeveloped bring the University back into the heart of the city and could be used again for graduations and similar events. She had joined a University working group considering the future of the buildings and the Principal was a member of a local authority-led group looking at the redevelopment of the surrounding area. Although there was great interest in the topic, the coronavirus pandemic had paused that work.

A member quoted from an email sent by the Principal to University staff on 8 July on the topic of "Action against racism". The member's statement is annexed, to allow members to comment further if they wish. Following discussion, which highlighted the importance of respectful consideration of the multiple facets of the lives of the nominees, it was agreed to record that the meeting had considered the matter and that it be considered further by the Business Committee at its next meeting. It was noted that the point was distinct from concern which had been expressed, in an open letter from minority ethnic students, about the medical school curriculum.

A member pointed out that the Student Show would celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021 and a group had been working on how to mark the occasion. In addition to the 2020 Show, which had been postponed until April 2021, it was hoped to put on a revue later in the year which recreated memorable moments from past Shows.

In conclusion, Duncan Macniven asked Steve Cannon to convey to the University the support of the General Council at this difficult time, and its best wishes for the start of the 2020-21 Session, in whatever form it took.

## 11 NOTICE OF THE 314<sup>th</sup> STATUTORY MEETING

The 314<sup>th</sup> Statutory Meeting will be held in January 2021, date to be confirmed.

I beg to bring to the notice of the General Council a matter affecting the well-being and prosperity of the University.

On 8 July 2020 an e-mail addressed to “Dear Colleagues” was sent by the Principal and the President of AUSA. The message, on the topic of “Action Against Racism” begins:

“Like many other institutions we have our own story to tell and we will do so openly and honestly as we pledged in our statement in relation to Black Lives Matter. Part of that story is about our own historical connections to slavery and we are investing in a new research post investigating those links. It will shine a light on how the University and the North-east of Scotland benefited from the proceeds of the slave trade. It will also explain the role of those connected to the University who were involved in slavery or actively sought its abolition. Examples of this legacy remain with us – such as some of our campus architecture or financial endowment funds. These too will be highlighted.”

Members of the General Council will recall that on 19 June nominations had closed for the 525 Alumni of Achievement: “Aberdeen Alumni have built – and continue to build – a stronger Scotland and a better world. We want to tell the story [eloquent phrase] of the University of Aberdeen’s 525 years by highlighting the achievement of 525 of our most outstanding alumni from throughout our history.” How many of the 525 will emerge unscathed from the promised investigation? Contributing to a stronger Scotland and a better world would constitute no defence should a zealous investigator discover some “troubling” phrase, idiomatic expression or figure of speech which offends modern sensibilities. In Hamlet’s words: “be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny”.

The corrective measures deemed necessary include reform of the curriculum (“the content of the medical curriculum is being reviewed to make it more inclusive”); re-education (“equality and diversity training”); an enhanced reporting system (to enable students to lodge more easily and speedily allegations of micro-aggression). Buildings will be adorned by “explanatory” plaques.

The promulgation of the document is self-evidently an event of consequence. The General Council is, in H J Butchart’s superb phrase, “the watchdog of the University”. It guards the history and traditions of the College of St Mary of the Nativity and of Marischal College and University. It represents no special or sectional interest but the “Tota Universitas”. That is the reason I seek to bring this matter to the attention of the Council – our watchdog “semper vigilans”.