THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

GENERAL COUNCIL

Agenda for the 314th Statutory Meeting, to be held on Tuesday 20 April 2021

1. MINUTES OF THE 313th MEETING

2. MATTERS ARISING

3. MEMBERSHIP OF BUSINESS COMMITTEE – ELECTION UPDATE

4. CHANGES TO STANDING ORDERS (GC21:01)

5. UNIVERSITY NAME, MOTTO AND EMBLEM (GC21:02)

6. NOTICE OF THE 315th STATUTORY MEETING – TO BE CONFIRMED
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 313rd 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 312nd 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 525th 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.

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.

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.

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 100th 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.

NOTICE OF THE 314th STATUTORY MEETING

The 314th Statutory Meeting will be held in 2021, date to be confirmed.

ANNEX

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”.

1. The General Council’s Business Committee, which acts on the Council’s behalf between meetings, proposes two amendments to the General Council’s Standing Orders. The first would reduce the period of forward notice to the General Council of proposed changes to the Standing Orders. The second aims to secure continued cross-representation between the University Court and the Business Committee.

Background

2. The timescale for proposed changes to Standing Orders is set out in Standing Order 29, which says that any changes or repeal shall be given in a notice of motion "at a meeting of Council, six months at the least" before the General Council meeting at which the changes are proposed. Notice of the two proposed amendments was given at the meeting of the General Council on 6 August 2020 and final approval is now sought.

Change in the period of notice of proposed changes to Standing Orders

3. The six month notice period related to the established pattern of General Council meetings in December and May. That pattern has been interrupted by the change from December to January (to coincide with the publication of the University’s annual report) and by the coronavirus (which led to the postponement of the Summer Statutory Meeting meeting to August 2020, and the Winter Statutory Meeting to April 2021). To ensure that the second proposed change (see below) could come into effect before July 2021, it was necessary to give notice of the proposal to the August 2020 meeting, 11 months before its effective date – because if the Winter Statutory Meeting had been held as planned in January 2021, the prescribed six month period would not have elapsed before the Summer Statutory Meeting which would normally have been held in May 2021.

4. A notice period of three months (instead of six months) seems adequate for the General Council to reflect on any proposed change in Standing Orders, while allowing for the recent flexibility in the interval between General Council meetings. Approval is therefore sought to the following change in Standing Order 29:

   “Notice of every motion for the alteration or repeal of any of the Standing Orders shall be given at a meeting of the Council, six three months at the least before the date of the meeting at which such motion is intended to be proposed.....”

Cross-representation between Court and the Business Committee

5. Standing Order 19 currently specifies that the members of the Business Committee should include:

   “.... Four independent members of Court who are members of Court by virtue of having been the last four elected General Council Assessors....”

6. That wording dates from the ending in 2017 of the election of General Council Assessors to the University Court and reflects the fact that the last four Assessors were then appointed to Court as independent members. It was always seen as a stop-gap and needs to be replaced before July 2021, when two of the four former Assessors finish their term on Court.
7. The Business Committee considers that cross-representation between Court and the Business Committee is desirable, because it keeps the two bodies better-informed of each other’s thinking. At the time of the General Council meeting in August 2020, there was in progress a review of the governance of the University, which considered the way that General Council members are represented on Court. That review did not in fact alter the post-2017 composition of Court, which requires at least four of its twelve independent members to be members of the General Council. Approval is therefore sought to the following change to Standing Order 19:

“The Business Committee shall consist of not more than twenty-seven members: The Principal, up to four independent members of Court who are members of Court by virtue of having been the last four elected General Council Assessors who are also members of the General Council, and the Clerk of Council (if a member of the General Council), ex officio, with not more than twenty-one elected members. The elected members shall select which independent members of Court may sit ex officio, if more than four are eligible.”

Recommendation

8. The General Council is invited to approve these amendments to Standing Orders, of which notice was given at the General Council meeting on 6 August 2020.

March 2021
ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY – New Name, New Motto, New Emblem
Proposal for General Council Consideration

It is proposed General Council members deliberate;

✓ Whether or not the Coat of Arms and motto accurately convey the current central philosophy and core values of the University of Aberdeen

✓ Whether or not the University - its employees, students, researchers, graduates - and society as a whole, could benefit from replacement of the university’s current motto and Coat of Arms, with a new motto and pictorial emblem. As part of a rebranding exercise designed to better represent and convey the university’s current core values, we could consider renaming the university, ‘Aberdeen University’

Wikipedia provides useful information on the evolution of the University of Aberdeen and its representative symbols. Briefly, the University of Aberdeen is a union of two former universities and a third college. The older and Catholic, King’s College, founded in 1495 by Bishop William Elphinstone, merged with the more recent Marischal College, founded in 1593 as a Protestant alternative. The third component part of the University of Aberdeen is Christ’s College. The two main Colleges had their own Arms, and the current combined Coat of Arms and motto both date from 1888, shortly after the union of the two main colleges.

In the Coat of Arms, the pot of lilies charged with three fishes are sometimes referred to as, ‘the old arms of Aberdeen’. In the second quarter are the arms of Keith, Earl Marischal, and in the third quarter, the arms of Elphinstone. The fourth quarter is probably taken from the arms of the city. Whilst some components - such as the open book, which could symbolise willingness to learn - have enduring relevance, some symbols might have little or no significance to the university today. The current Latin motto – Initium sapientiae timor domini - translates as, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” and the religious content reflects the culture of its time.

The proposal to replace the current motto with a non-theistic one, is neither intended as an attack on religion, nor on those with religious views. Our university’s status in theistic academia is highly regarded, though many global citizens today don’t have any religious beliefs. Some find theism at odds with logic and intellect, preferring instead to align themselves with scientifically proven elements of existence, such as evolutionary theory and the universal laws of physics. The university’s continued use of the current motto might deter rigorously discerning students - especially atheists, agnostics or non-Christian spiritualists - from electing to study or work at the university. The institution’s name, the ‘University of Aberdeen’, seems over-wordy when compared to a simplified, ‘Aberdeen University’.

It is considered the Coat of Arms, current motto and perhaps the name, don’t accurately represent our modern university. Aberdeen University is consistently ranked among the top 200 in the world and (according to ‘The Guardian’ newspaper’s index) within the top 20 UK Universities. We have nearly 15,000 students, many from overseas and in many disciplines, and we provide more than 500 undergraduate programmes. The university’s current aims and core values, as summarised in the strategy document, ‘Aberdeen 2040’, highlight the contemporary relevance of Bishop Elphinstone’s foundational purpose – “Open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others”.
‘Aberdeen 2040’ envisages an inclusive, interdisciplinary, international and sustainable university. It is thus considered essential to replace the Coat of Arms with a less combative emblem and a non-theistic, inclusive statement or motto, better representing these ‘Aberdeen 2040’ values and clearly conveying the university’s openness to all.

We could usefully deliberate how to replace these outdated symbols and core value statements. “Open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others” could serve us well as a new motto and could be associated with a modern, easily recognised and memorable pictorial emblem clearly conveying Aberdeen University’s core values. Our new emblem could allude to Aberdeen’s two main rivers, the Dee and the Don, as the city’s name, ‘Aberdeen’, is derived from ‘between the Dee and the Don’. We might consider alluding to granite as the city’s predominant building material, to the oil or fishing industries, and perhaps to gold. ‘Au’, the symbol for gold used in the periodic table of elements, shares the initial letters of “Aberdeen University” and gold often represents ‘value’.

A ‘collaborative competition’ to design a new pictorial emblem is proposed. If this is open to all General Council members it might encourage usually inactive Council members to become more actively involved in the university’s future development. Members could be invited to create designs for our new emblem and/or its component parts, and would then vote for preferred emblem ‘features’ from all designs put forward and circulated. A new emblem design commission could then be placed with a professional design company, tasked with creating our new emblem and incorporating those features receiving the most votes.

To summarise, it is proposed the General Council consider voting on a university ‘rebranding’ exercise centred towards conveying more accurately and appropriately, the university’s core philosophy towards education and inclusivity, as described in the long-term ‘Aberdeen 2040’ strategy document. Three key elements proposed for refinement or replacement are:

1. Renaming this institution ‘Aberdeen University’
2. Replacing the motto, ‘The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom’, with ‘Open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others’
3. Replacing the Coat of Arms, with a new, visually attractive and memorable Aberdeen University emblem, more accurately conveying the university’s character and core philosophy towards education and inclusivity

Ben Jump BSc
April 2021