University of Aberdeen General Council Meeting – April 2021

There were 60 attendees at this unusual virtual General Council meeting

13 comments were made on a proposal to consider;

Replacing the Coat of Arms and Motto with a modern emblem and more inclusive motto, and as part of a re-branding and promotional campaign, changing the name to Aberdeen University

Proposer – Ben Jump, 1990 graduate

Meeting Chairman - Dr Duncan Macniven, introduced the proposal to attendees in an impartial way, subsequently summarising the 13 comments made as indicating;

1) Little support for the proposals
2) Some strong opposition
3) Agreement to discuss the proposal further at the next General Council meeting, which would be in October 2021 and hopefully involve personal attendances and live discussions, in contrast to this meeting's virtual and non-discussional meeting format

Comments made by attendees

1) I think the university's name should remain as is, the University of Aberdeen. I also find the motto is part of the university's heritage and should not be changed. The same is for the Coat of Arms should remain the same

2) Does anyone know how many applicants to the University look at the motto and the arms before submitting their application?

3) I would agree that this proposal should be carried forward for further debate at the next meeting

4) Sorry - I am not meaning to be anonymous This is an ill-conceived proposal and should be rejected today for 3 reasons;

4.1 There is limited challenge to diversity and inclusion associated with the university motto. As an atheist, I take no offence to the Latin or English wording. However the translation into Scots – the pun on the word “dominnie” also meaning teacher, as well as God
4.2 The Coat of Arms seems pleasant to me, but the matter cannot be decided in a meeting like this
4.3 Removing the word “of” from the title of the university is a very small change. It is hard to see how the enormous gains envisaged by the proposer can be accomplished by such a minor change. The cost of implementing the change would be significant. There should be no further discussion on this point

5) 5.1 The University has a beautiful Coat of Arms. It would be really regretful to see this changed. I would rather be the University of Aberdeen than Aberdeen University. The University of Aberdeen implies it is the superior one.
5.2 Also, in respect of the motto, this would need to be changed with the Court of the Lord Lyon as part of the Coat of Arms. The existing motto does reflect the institution's continuing position as a leading University in Divinity and Religious Studies in which it is internationally recognised. The University's Coat of Arms is highly distinctive, memorable and recognisable. The heritage of the University attracts a number of new students

6) The current motto etc have served well for some 500 years. How long might new ones last I wonder? I'd suggest we do not change

7) Me neither!

8) Happy with the coat of arms and name. The motto could possibly change however I'm not overly worried about it

9) I support carry forward for fuller consideration

10) I feel the Coat of Arm and the name of the University should remain as it is

11) Should keep the University name (it’s our brand and we are an Ancient - we don’t want to be confused with another Uni) and Coat of Arms should remain

12) I think it is worth discussing but would be interested in where the process of change rests. On name - agnostic - if asked I always say I was at Aberdeen University. On motto - yes needs looking at as it does not appear to represent our values. On crest - heraldic stuff is steeped in history - so I would not be up for change. So in summary I think it is good to discuss

13) Happy for a live discussion when that can take place, but there would need to be a much more persuasive argument for change than the those presented here

**Proposer’s response to the 13 attendees’ comments**

Many thanks to all who attended this General Council meeting and for considering the proposals to, ‘Replace the Coat of Arms and Motto with a modern emblem and more inclusive motto, and as part of a re-branding and promotional campaign, simultaneously change this institution’s name to Aberdeen University’.

I greatly appreciate your consideration of these proposals, and thank you for taking the time to share your – in some instances, very strongly felt and clearly expressed - thoughts, feelings and comments on the proposals.

My thanks too, go to Dr Duncan Macniven, as Chairman of this General Council meeting, for presenting the proposals in a neutral fashion, and for constructive comments given whilst I was developing the proposals for consideration. Similarly, thanks are extended to members of the University of Aberdeen Alumni administration team, especially Nicole Cochrane, who were/was and continue to be, very helpful in sharing technical advice with reference to General Council meeting procedures and how to make these proposals available for consideration and further development.
I should perhaps say, I was *not present* at the General Council meeting, having decided to allow all attendees to make comments and exchange ideas, without being tempted to interject myself and thus influence the comments or direction of interactions in any way. I hoped I would thus gain a ‘truer’ feel for General Council members’ current views on the proposals, providing a more meaningful basis from which to further develop or simply drop the proposals.

I have grouped a number of similar attendee comments together in my response, to avoid repetition, and responded to some comments individually where deemed useful;

**Responses to grouped and individual comments (using comment numbering system above)**

1, 6, 7, 10 and 11
All these comments effectively implied a strong feeling that all, or some combination of, the current university name, motto and Coat of Arms, should remain as they now are, mainly to reflect the University’s history and maintain ancient traditions. I fully understand this position, and during the development of the proposals, had considered this response might be both prevalent and perhaps felt with the most vigour, amongst attendees.

I gave great consideration to these factors, yet still, equally strongly, hold the view the Coat of Arms represents societal elements which are to some extent at least, elitist, exclusive and outdated from the perspective of many potential students and employees at the university.

Similarly, whilst acknowledging the University’s international status as a centre of theistic research and teaching, I do not hold the view this status ‘justifies’, in any way, conveying a central message to the world that the entire university is theistic in nature. Further, I strongly feel it might be deemed naive or offensive to ardent atheistic students, and/or, those of a non-theistic spiritual persuasion. The university has many well-regarded faculties and offers many teachings in addition to theism and religion. As such I find the inclusion of theistic matters as the *core and only message* within the motto, both *limiting and unnecessarily exclusive to this element of the university’s very broad-ranging academic expertise*. I wholeheartedly welcome your comments though, and would enjoy being able to debate these matters in person with you, at the next in-person General Council meeting later this year.

With reference to the university name, I am extremely concerned as to the future viability of all UK universities, at least in terms of current service provision and business models, as costs for many students for a 3 to 5 year degree programme, are leaving many with debts of well over £30,000 by the time they graduate. Saddling mainly young people with this level of debt before they even begin earning, and considering their real-terms incomes/spending power will probably diminish when compared with recent earlier generations of students (as the burden increases on them to pay for increasing social and health care costs for the elderly, and as housing costs increase as a proportion of income mainly) is of real concern. Only half of young people (16-24) in the UK are currently in paid employment and it is difficult to envisage how anything approaching 100% employment for this demographic group might evolve in current national and global circumstances. As such, I think UK universities, including Aberdeen’s, really *have* to look at innovative new business models, and ways of delivering high-quality education, better matched with current and future employment opportunities, and to be made available at much lower costs to students than they currently face.

In undergoing such reviews, there would be an opportunity to promote new, more efficient degree programme and research options (combining in-person attendance with remote learning, for example) and simultaneously, to promote a more inclusive, revised university philosophy to a global audience and potential future students, in accordance with our university values, as described in the *Aberdeen*
2040 strategy document. This then, is some of the reasoning behind looking closely at the societal messages conveyed by our historically interesting, yet perhaps outdated main emblem and motto. In considering there exists a very robust foundation for a need to modernise and change these representational items, it seemed to make sense too, to consider renaming the university to a simpler format, as part of a revisionist philosophical conveyance/re-branding programme and promotional campaign.

2 I certainly don’t have knowledge of these figures. A survey might be an interesting proposition for the university to consider, if such data isn’t already gathered and available.

3, (8), 9, (12) and 13 These comments all clearly express a degree of support for a fuller debate on the proposals. Comment 8 is bracketed, as it seems to convey a message of either/or i.e. the status quo is more or less acceptable, though perhaps revising the motto could at least be considered. Comment 12 is also bracketed, as it conveys strong support for revising some elements, whilst retaining some elements as they currently are.

4 and 5 I offer specific responses to these two comments as, whilst they could easily be merged with comments made by respondents numbered 1, 6, 7, 10 and 11, these two respondents both gave fuller reasons as to exactly why they thought the status quo should be maintained. As such, they invite a more complete response, given below. To make referencing easier for readers, the detailed comments are repeated here;

4) Sorry - I am not meaning to be anonymous This is an ill-conceived proposal and should be rejected today for 3 reasons;

4.1 There is limited challenge to diversity and inclusion associated with the university motto. As an atheist, I take no offence to the Latin or English wording. However the translation into Scots – the pun on the word “dominie” also meaning teacher, as well as God
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Response to comment 4

I applaud the respondent's apparent willingness to associate him/herself with the comments made. Attribution should be made easier when the next in-person General Council meeting takes place, hopefully later this year. I disagree however, with the suggestion the proposals are ‘ill-conceived’, as a
great deal of thought went into developing them, for perceived very ‘valid’ reasons. However, I see little merit in extending discussions on this moot point, and wish to develop any ensuing discussions on the proposals themselves. I hope the commenter accepts this point, suggested closure of its discussion, and the suggested direction of any future debate.

4.1 Perhaps the commenter is correct in his/her perception of there being limited challenge to diversity and inclusion. In developing these proposals, I gave considerable contemplation to the motto wording, and whilst trying to divorce my proposals from my own views and experiences in a theistic context, attempted to assess the motto’s content from a neutral point of view, and from the point of view of atheists, agnostics, and those who hold non-theistic spiritual beliefs. You might wonder how I might be able to accurately assess this motto from such varied viewpoints. In answering, I have at various stages in my life thus far, held or strongly empathised with all these philosophical positions. On considering those thoughts I had experienced whilst in these various theistic / atheistic / spiritual / non-spiritual / agnostic life-states, with reference to humans, our place in the world and universe, and our attitudes to those who are different from ourselves, I came to conclude the current motto does not apply to, nor accurately convey, the philosophical beliefs and attitudes of large numbers of global citizens. Nor does it convey the university’s core values, as stated in the Aberdeen 2040 strategy document. In giving further consideration to those who might have very different, or diametrically opposed beliefs, I concluded the current motto could be deemed exclusive/non-inclusive, philosophically limited and to some individuals, actively spiritually or intellectually offensive. Interestingly, I arrived at the same conclusion, when taking every potential philosophical mindset I have either personally experienced, or attempted to envisage on behalf of the many people who think differently to myself. I thank the commenter for sharing the play on the word, “dominie”, which can mean teacher in the Scots language, as well as God. It’s always interesting to learn by listening to different people. To my knowledge though, ‘God’ isn’t on the official university lecturing team. Church and state were separated in Great Britain/the UK many years ago, and I think it would be more inclusive and helpful, if our university took the same approach with reference to religion and the accurate conveyance of our current and common core values and philosophy towards our teaching and research service provision.

4.2 I would agree the Coat of Arms, at least aesthetically speaking, could be deemed as being anything from horrendously ugly to astonishingly beautiful. Aesthetic beauty is a very individual matter, and my main focus was/is on the societal (limited and socially elitist/conflict/royalty-based representational) elements of the university’s main current emblem, or pictorial representation of our core values and philosophy. Just as for the arguments I put forward with reference to the exclusive nature of the motto, I came to the conclusion the current Coat of Arms is in no way representative of many potential, past and present students’ social status or historical/political attitudes. Whilst I can and do see the value of maintaining various traditions in university life and rituals, this does not - to my thinking - either excuse or academically justify, the university clinging onto this elitist and perceptibly non-inclusive pictorial representation of our collective and common values.

4.3 I completely agree the renaming of the university is a small revision, and would not consider this proposal as worthy of furthering as an isolated suggestion. However, if the motto and pictorial emblem are to be revised, in conjunction with a modernising, re-branding and promotional exercise designed to convey our current core values, and to generate interest amongst potential students and employees to study and work at the university, it might make sense to consider changing the name to a version which is easier on the eye, and easier to refer to in conversation. The enormous gains I referred to are intended to apply to the revision of all elements – name, motto and emblem – coupled with a re-branding and promotional campaign, and these gains would probably only materialise after developing new university business/service provision operating models, and student study/fee payment options. I
hope these explanations and clarifications are helpful to the specific commenters, and in any broader discussions which might take place in the future.

Response to comment 5

5.1 Please refer to the response to comment 4.2, above, in terms of aesthetic appraisals of the Coat of Arms as a pictorial emblem. It might be helpful if future discussions on a name change, if such discussions take place, to consider why, as the commenter suggests, simple inclusion of the word ‘of’ in this institution’s name implies any superiority over a more simply named version, and exactly what ‘kind (of) superiority’ we might be talking about here.

5.2 Please refer to the third paragraph of my response to comments 1, 6, 7, 10 and 11, above, as this clearly explains why I think the motto is unhelpfully restrictive in conveying the much broader academic expertise at the university, and similarly, why it does not represent any of the current core university values, as stated in the Aberdeen 2040 strategy document. With reference to the “university’s heritage attracting new students” suggestion, do we have any data to support this suggestion, and if we do, is there any research data on any value associations directly attributed to the name format, Coat of Arms and motto? If not, perhaps a survey of some sort might be useful.

Summary

In conclusion, many thanks again to all who attended the most recent General Council meeting, and especially to those who took the time to clearly state initial views on the proposals to ‘Replace the Coat of Arms and Motto with a modern emblem and more inclusive motto, and as part of a re-branding and promotional campaign, simultaneously change this institution’s name to Aberdeen University’.

The proposals have clearly highlighted strong emotional feelings and invited varied and interesting intellectual considerations as to how our university conveys our central values to the world.

I largely concur with Dr Macniven’s summary of attendees’ responses, though dispute the suggestion “there is little support for the proposals”, as at least 5 of the 13 comments made refer to some degree of direct support and/or express perceived merit in holding further discussions at a future in-person General Council meeting.

I hope my responses to grouped and individual comments made at the April meeting are helpful to readers and help facilitate meaningful discussions at the next in-person General Council meeting, hopefully to be held in October 2021.

Thought for the day -

“Anyone considering themselves entirely self-taught is clearly an ineffective teacher”

Ben Jump (Proposer)
28 April 2021