UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY COURT

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 1 OCTOBER 2019

Present: Maggie Chapman (in the Chair), Eleanor Bentley, George Boyne, Nuala Booth, Mirela Delibegovic, Jenny Fernandes, Dariya Koleva, David MacFarlane, Iain Mackay, Gary McRae, Lyndsay Menzies, Martin Mills, Anne Minto, Brian Paterson, Iain Percival, Esther Roberton, Joachim Schaper, Jenny Shirreffs, David Steyn, Lindsay Tibbetts, Neil Vargesson, Cecilia Wallback and David Watts.

In attendance: David Beattie (except for minute 44), Debbie Dyker, Marion Campbell (except for minute 44), Karl Leydecker (except for minute 44), Peter McGeorge (for Minutes 16 to 20 only), Alan Speight (except for minute 44), Iain Torrance KCVO, Richard Wells (except for minute 44) and Bruce Purdon (Clerk- except for minute 44).

Apologies for absence were received from Colin Duncan and Lorna Jack.

NEW MEMBERS

1 The Court welcomed Eleanor Bentley, Gary McRae, Lindsay Tibbetts and Neil Vargesson to their first meeting as new members of Court.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2 Lindsay Tibbetts declared an interest in the agenda item regarding Qatar arising from her role as Deputy Dean of the Business School.

MINUTES

3 The minutes of the meeting held on 2 July 2019 were approved.

4 The Court noted the updated Action Log (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). The Court also received a tabled paper (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) with regard to the provision of a statement about the first report into the 2018 student occupation. At its previous meeting, the Court had agreed that a statement should be drafted to confirm the status of the report. Subsequent to the meeting and following consultation with UCU, a draft statement had been circulated to Court. The Court approved the text of the statement and also agreed that it should be made publicly available on the University’s website.

REMIT AND SCHEDULE OF BUSINESS FOR 2019/20

5 The Court received and noted its remit and primary responsibilities, its membership and periods of office for 2019-20, and a schedule of the regular items business anticipated for the year ahead (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).

6 In discussion, it was agreed that the successor to Brian Paterson as the non-academic trade union nominee on Court would be invited to attend the March 2020 and June 2020 meetings.

REPORT FROM THE SENIOR GOVERNOR

6 The Court noted and welcomed a report (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) from the Senior Governor which highlighted a range of meetings that she had undertaken both internal and external to the University. The report also looked ahead to forthcoming meetings and visits which had been scheduled.

7 The Court also welcomed a proposal from the Senior Governor that she provide a monthly bulletin to Court members to help enhance communication within Court.
SFC/OSCR REVIEWS

8 The Court received an oral report from the Senior Governor on the progress of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) reviews of the remuneration of the former Principal. The Court was advised that the OSCR review was not expected to conclude until 2020, but that it was hoped the SFC review would report before the end of 2019.

REPORT FROM THE PRINCIPAL

9 The Principal provided an oral report to Court in which he highlighted the University’s positive financial performance for the 2018/19 financial year (See Minutes 12 to 13). The achievement of a £0.614M surplus, was very encouraging, particularly as a £6M deficit had been forecast at the outset of the year. This position had been achieved in large part due to a £7M growth in tuition fee income but also due to a number of staff posts being as yet unfilled. The Court noted that while the University was committed to filling these posts, appointments would only be made to excellent candidates, who had a commitment to making a positive contribution to the values and academic culture of Aberdeen.

10 The Principal also highlighted the report on student admissions for 2019/20 which Court had received, noting in particular the 80% growth in the recruitment of Scottish students from the 20% most deprived postcodes. The Court noted that this was a significant achievement and congratulated those colleagues who had contributed to it. The Principal noted that the Doha campus had reported further growth in student recruitment. He noted that the University was also reviewing the governance arrangements for the campus following an internal audit report which had identified some low risk findings.

11 The Principal also reported on the recent announcement that the University is establishing a Centre for Energy Transition and developing a major funding bid to UKRI, in collaboration with Opportunity North East and The Robert Gordon University, to support this important area of research. The Principal emphasised the importance of bringing the University’s external reputation up to the same high level as the academic quality that is being achieved, given the influence this had on potential students, potential staff, donors, industry and other funders. He noted that there were many achievements to take pride in, such as the University’s global top 70 ranking for citations of research publications and top 30 ranking for international outlook.

DRAFT OUT-TURN – YEAR ENDED 31 JULY 2019

12 The Court received an update regarding the draft out-turn for the year ended 31 July 2019 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). The key points noted in the report, which were subject to external audit, were:

- an underlying surplus of £0.614M;
- £53M of adjustments for pension valuations which resulted in a bottom line FRS102 deficit of £54 million;
- a £4.3M improvement in cash and liquidity.

13 The Court discussed the impact that the valuation of pension schemes, in particular the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) at a national level, could have on the University’s reported results each year and to what extent the University was able to influence decisions regarding these being made by USS and others. It was noted that the issue facing Aberdeen was of concern to many universities and was due to be discussed by the Committee of Scottish Chairs.

REPORT ON STUDENT ADMISSIONS 2019/20

14 The Court received a paper (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) which reported on student admissions numbers. The key points of the report were noted as follows:
• The University was on target overall for all undergraduate fee categories except for PGDE Secondary Education, and was projected to exceed target for the rest of UK and international categories;
• The University was forecast to achieve between an 80% to 85% increase in the number of entrants from the Most Deprived 20% of Postcodes against a target of a 100% increase;
• International Postgraduate Taught was continuing to see encouraging growth in applications and acceptances, but strong conversion and continued growth in the January intake would be required to meet the full-year budget target for 2019/20, as the University was forecast to fall short of its September intake target.
• In postgraduate research students there had been growth in international students but a decline in UK/EU numbers. A Task and Finish Group had been established to consider how to address this decline.
• Applications to online programmes and to the Doha campus had, recorded encouraging growth.

The Court welcomed the report and the significant progress had been made over the past year in the area of student recruitment.

PRESENTATION ON LEAGUE TABLES AND NSS

The Court received a presentation (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) from the Senior Vice-Principal and Vice-Principal for Education on League Tables Performance and the National Students Survey. The Court noted that the presentation would be supplemented by a fuller written report at its next meeting.

The Court discussed the University’s position over time within the rankings, including where its strengths and weaknesses were and how the management team was seeking to address these. The Court also discussed the differing approaches that institutions could adopt towards achieving success in league tables and the importance both of a commitment to academic quality and the student experience in absolute terms, and to ensuring accurate reporting on the metrics that informed much of the rankings.

The Court discussed the impact of increasing international competition and noted that UK universities were losing ground in the global rankings to institutions in countries where significant investment in higher education had taken place such as Germany and China. As a result, sustaining a position in the Top 200 would become more challenging.

The significant reliance in global rankings on reputational surveys rather than metrics was also discussed and the Court noted how this underlined the need for external recognition of the University’s academic quality and its overall brand to be strengthened.

The Court also noted that it was Peter McGeorge’s last meeting as a Vice-Principal and expressed its thanks to him for his contribution to the University as a member of senior management over several years.

UPDATE ON KOREA CAMPUS PROJECT

The Court received a report (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) on the progress of the University’s withdrawal from the previously proposed campus in Hadong, South Korea. The Court noted that agreement with the partners had been reached and the University’s withdrawal from the project was expected to formally take effect imminently. The Court also noted that a lessons learnt review would now be taken forward.

BREXIT – PREPARATIONS FOR A NO-DEAL EXIT

The Court received and noted an update on the University’s preparations for a no-deal exit from the European Union on 31 October 2019 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). The report detailed the reviewing and testing that had been undertaken of the University’s no-deal mitigation plans to minimise disruptions to the University should the UK leave the EU on 31 October without a withdrawal agreement in place.
In discussion, it was noted that because employees were not required to notify the University that they have applied or obtained settled status, the University did not have full overview of the extent of uptake of the Settlement Scheme. The University was, however, working as closely as possible to support staff that it had been made aware of.

REF 2021 - UPDATE ON PREPARATIONS

The Court received and noted an update on progress of the preparations for the institutional submission to REF2021 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). The Court discussed the progress of the University’s investment campaign to recruit new academic staff, a key objective of which was to strengthen the institutional REF submission. The Court debated how the University could better promote the advantages of Aberdeen as a location and as a place to work, and the extent to which the University should focus future investment in early career academic staff over more senior academic staff. The Court also discussed the modelling that had been undertaken of the potential financial impact of the University’s expected REF profile on the research funding it would receive.

REPORT ON GOVERNOR: APPRAISAL QUESTIONNAIRE

The Court received a report (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) on responses to the Governor Appraisal Questionnaire which non-executive members of Court in office during 2018/19 had been asked to complete. Overall the responses indicated an increase in satisfaction with the operation of the Court and included significant improvements in the scores for a number of areas. The results also suggested, however, that further work was required to build upon an improvement in the communication with Court members and the Senior Governor had, as noted above, proposed to introduce a monthly update. The Senior Governor was also reflecting on approaches to governor development and the findings of the 2017 external review of Court effectiveness.

STRATEGY 2040

The Court received a first draft of the Strategy: Aberdeen 2040, (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) which, following the formal meeting of Court, it discussed in informal session.

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE REPORT

The Court received and noted a paper (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) which provided a report on the key items of business discussed by the Policy and Resources Committee (PaRC) at its meeting on 10 September 2019. The Court, on the recommendation of the Committee, approved amendments to its remit as follows:

1. To remove the formal role in respect of Risk Management from the remit of PaRC, noting that this was part of the formal remit of the Audit Committee;
2. To clarify the current composition of the Committee;
3. To designate the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee as a Sub-Committee of PaRC.

REPORTS FROM COURT COMMITTEES AND JOINT COMMITTEES OF COURT AND SENATE

Governance & Nominations Committee

The Court noted a report of the principal items of business considered by the Governance & Nominations Committee at its meeting on 10 September 2019 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). In addition, the Court agreed the following:

1) Following consideration by Court via circulation over the summer, to homologate the appointment of Keith Anderson as an independent member of Court with effect from 1 August 2020 for a period of three years.
2) To approve the appointment of the following individuals to committees:
   2.1 Governance and Nominations Committee: To appoint Colin Duncan to the vacancy for an independent member and to the role of Chair of the Committee.
2.2 Remuneration Committee: To appoint Iain Mackay to the vacancy for an independent member.
2.3 Research Policy Committee: To appoint Iain Percival to the vacancy for an independent member and to endorse a recommendation that Collete Backwell be co-opted by the Research Policy Committee as an external member.
2.4 Audit Committee: To endorse the Committee's decision to appoint Eleanor Bentley as of 10 September 2019 to the vacancy for an independent member of Court on the Audit Committee.
2.5 Policy and Resources Committee: To appoint Gary McRae to the vacancy for an independent member.

3) To approve the membership of Court sub-Committees and the Court's membership of Joint Committees of Court and Senate for 2019/20;
4) To note that the Senate Assessors had nominated Neil Vargesson as successor to Rachel Shanks on the Policy and Resources Committee (and that this would continue to be shared with Mirela Delilbegovic) and Lindsay Tibbetts as successor to Rachel Shanks on the Remuneration Committee.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE

29 The Court noted a report of the principal items of business considered by the Student Experience Committee at its meeting of 9 September 2019 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).

RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

30 The Court noted a report of the principal items of business considered by the Research Policy Committee at its meeting of 24 June 2019 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).

ROUTINE BUSINESS FOR APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OPERATIONAL PLAN FOR 2019/20

31 The Court noted and approved the University Operational Plan for 2019-20 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).

ANNUAL STATEMENT ON RESEARCH GOVERNANCE AND INTEGRITY

32 The Court noted and approved the Annual Research Governance and Integrity Statement (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) for publication.

ANNUAL REPORT TO SFC ON INSTITUTION-LED REVIEW OF TEACHING QUALITY

33 The Court noted and approved the Annual Report to SFC on Institution-Led Review of Quality, 2018/19 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).

ROUTINE BUSINESS FOR INFORMATION

QATAR CAMPUS UPDATE

34 The Court noted an update (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) on the Qatar Campus.

SRI LANKA PROJECT UPDATE

35 The Court noted an update (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) on the Project in Sri Lanka.

PAY NEGOTIATIONS 2019/20

36 The Court noted an update (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) on Pay Negotiations 2019/20. This reported that the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA) had been unable to reach agreement with higher education trade unions on the 2019/20 pay award
who were now balloting their respective memberships on industrial action. In the meantime, based on the advice of UCEA, the University had implemented the pay award in the August 2019 payroll.

**STRATEGIC INVESTMENT RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN**

37 The Court noted an update *copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes* on the Strategic Investment Recruitment Campaign. The Court discussed the progress of the campaign earlier in the agenda as part of the discussion of the Principal’s Report and the REF 2021 Update on Preparations items.

**HEALTH, WELLBEING & SAFETY UPDATE**

38 The Court noted an update *copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes* on Health, Wellbeing & Safety.

**REPORT ON DECISIONS UNDER VACATION POWERS**

39 The Court noted that no matters of urgent business had been required to be approved under delegated powers during the summer.

40 Following discussion, the Court agreed that the current wording of the procedure on decisions between meetings/vacation powers should be amended to require that any such decisions must be reported to Court by circulation as opposed to at the next meeting.

**ATTENDANCE RECORD OF COURT MEMBERS FOR DISCLOSURE IN ANNUAL REPORT**

41 The Court noted a paper *copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes* which provided a draft attendance record of Court members for disclosure in the Annual Report for the period 1 August 2018 to 31 July 2019.

**FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT REPORT**

42 The Court noted the Financial Management Reports for the period to 31 July 2019 *copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes*.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

43 The Court noted that the next scheduled meeting would be on Tuesday, 10 December 2019.

44 **STAFFING MATTER: CONFIDENTIAL MINUTE**
Note by Clerk: Circulated separately to Court.

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Maggie Chapman
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10/12/2019.

Date approved