

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY COURT

Minutes of meeting held on 31 October 2000

Present: Mr A Mair (in the Chair), Principal, Mr D Cockburn, Dr A Dawson, Dr H Fullerton, Professor G Graham, Mr J Grant, Dr D Heddle, Councillor P Johnston, Dr P Kinnear, Professor S Logan, Professor I Macdonald, Dr M Mackie, Miss M Main, Dr N Milne, Professor D Ogston, Dr G Roberts, Professor T Salmon, Mrs A Skene, Professor P Sloane, Mr G Stevenson, Professor I Torrance, Mr S Varwell, with Professor A Forrester, Professor D Houlihan, Professor J Sewel, Mr S Cannon, Ms N Coghill, Mr S Gordon, Dr P Murray, Mr M Ord, Mr R Taylor and Mrs H Stephen (Clerk).

Apologies for absence were received from the Rector, Councillor D Clyne, Miss A Harper, Mr J Leiper and Mr A Salvesen.

MINUTES

28. The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2000 were approved.

PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT

29 The Principal referred to recent press reports about financial issues confronting higher education institutions and in particular the University of Edinburgh's decision to take out a £40m bond to cover future operating costs. While the University of Aberdeen did not have a problem of similar magnitude it was facing a period of constraint over the next few years. He drew attention to his recent presentation to the Senate on the University's budget situation, a copy of which had been made available to members of Court. For many years the University had suffered from declining State income at the same time as an increasing pay bill. As planned the University had invested considerable additional expenditure on academic staff in the run-up to the 2001 RAE. As a consequence the annual accounts for 1999/2000 which would be presented to Court at its next meeting would show a deficit of £1.7m. Clearly this exceptional situation could not continue and it would be essential to achieve the planned surpluses of £1.034m in the current financial year, £2.5m in 2001-02 and £3.3m in 2002-03. The University Management Group would shortly consider measures to achieve a smooth and controlled return to surplus. He would keep the Court informed of the position during the year.

30 In response to members' questions it was clarified that the Strategic Plan and indicative financial forecasts provided the framework for the setting of annual income and expenditure budgets for the year.

SECRETARY'S STATEMENT

31 Mr Cannon reported that institutions had been informed by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) that, with the exception of the AUT, the campus unions intended to undertake a statutory ballot for industrial action over the current year's pay offer. The ballot was likely to be taken in November, with any agreed industrial action to begin in December. The Court would be kept informed of developments in relation to potential national industrial action.

- 32 Mr Cannon, referring to a recent incident where a set of Court papers had been found in a supermarket recycling bin, reminded members of the confidentiality of Court papers and encouraged their careful disposal.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

Joint Planning, Finance & Estates Committee (10.10.00)

- 33 Mr Mair presented a report of the first meeting of the merged Joint Planning, Finance & Estates Committee.
- 34 The Court noted the remit and composition of two sub-committees established by the JPFEC, namely an Estates Sub Committee and an Earned Income Sub Committee.

Financial Reports for FY 1999-2000

- 35 The Court noted that, in light of concern that the financial outturn for the 1999/2000 financial year had proved to be a substantially greater deficit than previously anticipated, an independent investigation would be undertaken by the internal auditors at the request of the Audit Committee.

Occupation of places in University Residential Accommodation

- 36 The Committee noted that, as at 26 September 2000 there had been a serious shortfall in the take-up of University student residential accommodation. Every effort would be made to reduce expenditure and to seek to fill vacancies in order to minimise the consequential deficit.

Northern College

- 37 The Court received a position paper, forwarded by JPFEC, on negotiations with Northern College of Education and the University of Dundee regarding the disaggregation and merger of the Aberdeen and Dundee campuses of the College with the respective Universities. It also noted that a meeting would be held later that week between the three institutions and SHEFC when it was hoped that significant progress would be made.

Institute of Medical Sciences 2 and Medical Research Facility (MRF)

- 38 The Court was pleased to note that site work for IMS 2 had now begun and that it was anticipated that the building was expected to be complete around April 2002. The outcome of the planning application for the Medical Research Facility was awaited and, assuming planning approval, site-work would begin early in 2001.

Marischal College

- 39 The Court was informed that the University had now signed the Heads of Terms of a possible agreement with Jarvis plc for an hotel development at Marischal College; Jarvis hoped to secure by mid November a separate agreement between itself and the funder and thereafter the complex legal agreements would be drawn up. Once agreement on the redevelopment on the front part of Marischal College had been reached, the University would need to determine the use of the rear part of the building. It was also noted that the proposed deal with Jarvis would not generate funds to cover the refurbishment of the east end of Marischal College.

Pathfinder Project

- 40 The Court noted that Qualye Munro, the consultants appointed to progress the University's public private partnership initiative in residences and catering were currently undertaking an option analysis on the project.

Bridge of Don

- 41 The Court was informed that following refusal of planning permission for retail use a proposed change in focus towards obtaining residential consent for the Bridge of Don site was being explored and an approach had been made to the Ministry of Defence with a view to marketing the site jointly at the earliest opportunity.

Automated Marine Exploration Research Station (AutoMERS)

- 42 The Court was informed that construction work had started on the development of the AutoMERS facility at Culterty Field Station, funded from the University's Joint Infrastructure Fund Grant of £4.2M from the Natural Environmental Research Council (in association with the Universities of Bristol and St Andrews and the Scottish Association for Marine Science). It was anticipated that work would be completed by May 2001 for occupation during the summer of that year.

MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

- 43 The Court received a report from the University Secretary on *Management and Governance*. The paper, which was a revised version of that presented on the first Court Away Day, referred to progress achieved during the period since the 1998 PricewaterhouseCoopers Report on the University's management. The two key recommendations of the PwC report - to *remove the confusion between policy determination and operational delivery*, and to ensure that the *overall organisational structure grouped responsibilities and functions in a coherent and consistent manner* - had been implemented.
- 44 Action had been taken to refocus administrative effort, to introduce team-based working in faculties and to review organisational and committee structures. The most recent change which had now been agreed by senior management was the establishment of the University Management Group, chaired by the Principal and including in its membership the Senior Vice-Principal, two Vice-Principals, the University Secretary, the Deans, and senior officers, to take forward the operational management of the University.
- 45 In discussion it was stressed that the UMG would be advisory to the Principal and would work within the strategic policy frameworks established by the Court and Senate. It was also noted that the portfolios of the three central Vice-Principals were currently under discussion and would be reported to the Court in due course.
- 46 It was confirmed that the review of administrative and management arrangements had excluded any consideration of the organisation of Information Services, as no change had been envisaged in the present reporting structure for the Directorate. The Senate Assessors drew the Court's attention to widespread dissatisfaction among the academic community, about the level of service provision within constrained resources, particularly for the University Library and IT infrastructure. The Court noted that it had been reported at the recent meeting of Senate that the UMG had agreed to establish a Review Group chaired by Professor Macdonald to undertake a review of DISS. The review would address three issues: the needs of the community, the resource required to meet those needs,

and communications between DISS and the community, taking into account the University's overall financial resources.

- 47 It was also noted that the 'unitary' administrative structure under the University Secretary, was designed to integrate support services, and that such a model worked well in a number of other higher education institutions.

MECHANISM FOR THE REMOVAL OF COURT MEMBERS

- 48 The Court received a paper on the introduction of a mechanism for the removal of lay members of Court similar to that adopted by the University of Edinburgh. The paper had been prepared in the light of the University's non-compliance with the suggestion in the SHEFC *Good Practice Benchmarks* that Standing Orders should include a removal mechanism. It was agreed that the proposal be developed further to include a Code of Conduct for Court members and clarification of the basis on which a Court member might be judged to be failing in his/her responsibilities, and the arrangements for activating a removal mechanism.
- 49 In light of a suggestion from Dr Mackie it was also agreed that the wider issue of engendering a measured turnover in the lay membership of Court should be addressed. This matter would be referred to the Nominating Committee.

ADMISSIONS REPORT

- 50 Professor Macdonald presented a report on admissions to the University in September 2000. He drew particular attention to the critical importance of admissions for University funding, as 80% of the grant from SHEFC was in respect of teaching. Undergraduate admissions had significantly exceeded targets overall, with a notable overshoot in the MA and BSc Engineering in particular; however there had been a continued decline in smaller specialist areas. There had also been a significant fall in postgraduate taught admissions which were now below funded numbers; postgraduate research recruitment had done reasonably well but, due to the number of exits on completion there had been an overall fall in the postgraduate research population. These issues would need to be addressed, and a Working Party had just been set up to look at the area of postgraduate recruitment.

UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON TEACHING & LEARNING

- 51 The Court approved, on the Senate's recommendation a proposal from the Students' Association that its President be permitted to nominate an alternate to serve in his stead on the University Committee on Teaching and Learning for all meetings in 2000/01.

COURT AWAY-DAY

- 52 The Court received for information notes of the Court Away-Day held on 25 and 26 September 2000.

COURT MEMBERS' TERMS OF OFFICE

- 53 As requested at the Away-Day the Court received a list of current Court members with their dates of appointment.

MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES

Joint Planning, Finance & Estates Committee

- 54 The Court noted that Professor I Torrance had been elected as a Senate Assessor to the Joint Planning, Finance & Estates Committee for the duration of his assessorship to the Court.

Nominating Committee

- 55 The Court noted that Professor S Logan and Mrs A Skene had been appointed, by the Senate and General Council respectively, to serve on the Nominating Committee for session 2000/01.

SEVEN INCORPORATED TRADES OF ABERDEEN

- 56 The Court, noted that the Very Rev Dr Alan Main had been appointed the Twenty-seventh Patron of the Seven Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen, following in the footsteps of Dr William Guild, the first Patron and former Principal of King's College, and that Mr Ron Taylor had been appointed Deacon Convener in succession to Mr George Stevenson. It agreed that congratulations be sent on its behalf.