

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 6 May 2009

Present: Principal, Professors Logan, Houlihan, MacGregor, Morgan, Haites and Gane, Mrs M Ross, Professors Frost, Fynsk, Black, Secombes, Imrie, O'Donoghue, Salmon, Cotter, Walkden, Wallace and Naphy, Dr B Connelly, Dr P Edwards, Professor Long, Mrs L Johnson, Professor Burgess, Dr K Shennan, Ms C Banks, Dr J Lamb, Dr WD McCausland, Professor Schaper, Mr DC McMurtry, Mrs F Payne, Dr J Ravet, Mrs A Valyo, Dr H Hutchison, Professor Saunders, Dr J Stewart, Professor Duff, Dr A Arnason, Mr N Curtis, Dr D Galbreath, Dr AD King, Dr P Fraser, Dr L Hastie, Professor Robinson, Dr J Sternberg, Dr M Young, Dr I Greig, Dr A Jenkinson, Dr B Muller, Dr D Scott, Dr J Cleland, Professors de Bari and Liversidge, Dr M Psatha, Dr H Wallace, Dr P Benson, Dr L Williams, Professors Chandler, Guz and Reid, Dr T Thevar, Dr D Jolley, Dr T Mighall, Dr N Spedding, Dr T J F Norman, Dr J Skakle, Dr SP Townsend, Professor Webster, Mr D McKay, Ms J Elliott, Ms S Stevenson, Mr J Simpson, Mr K Naismith, Mr J Collins, Mr S McMenemy, Ms T Smith and Mr S Doolin with Mr N Edwards in attendance

Apologies: Professor Rodger, Ms M Pearson, Professors McCaig, Greaves, MacDonald and Nelson, Mr MJ Radford, Professors Ritchie and Hutchison, Dr P Mealar, Mr C Munro, Dr A Gordon, Dr A Campbell, Dr A Jack, Dr N Vargesson, Dr T MacFarlane, Dr G Shirriffs, Professor Smith, Dr ER van Teijlingen, Dr R Bull, Dr S Duthie, Professors Watson, Price and Anderson, Ms L Bruce

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

27. The minutes of the meeting held on 18 February 2009 were approved.

STATEMENT BY PRINCIPAL

- 28.1 At the start of the meeting, the Senate recorded its sadness at the recent death of Dr David Molyneux who had been a senator.
- 28.2 The Principal noted that the Senate had not met since receipt of the SFC Funding letter. He reminded members that the increase in funding to the University set out in this letter was largely due to the University's significant RAE success. He expressed his gratitude to all those who had contributed to this success.
- 28.3 He advised members that the recent Research Quarterly publication had included an essay from the Senior Vice-Principal. This essay described the University's RAE outcome. He encouraged members to read the article which would be made available on the University website.
- 28.4 The Principal also advised members that the University had been awarded £12.4 million of funding over five years for the Digital Hub which would investigate how advances in digital technologies can transform rural communities, society and business. This was a significant achievement for the University.
- 28.5 In regard to the Curriculum Reform, the Principal informed the Senate that the University continues to receive positive feedback about its plans for the new curriculum. In particular, he informed the Senate that Fiona Hyslop had recently spoken positively about the Reform in the Holyrood magazine.
- 28.6 The Principal informed the Senate that the University Secretary was handling the University's oversight of planning for a possible pandemic flu outbreak. The Secretary informed the Senate that the Pandemic Flu Management Team had met twice and had reviewed the University's preparedness. A website had been prepared and communications had been sent to staff and students. In case of unexpected developments, he asked that the Senate give delegated powers to the Principal, working in consultation with the Senate Business Committee, should any academic decisions (for example in regard to examinations) require to be taken before the next meeting of the Senate. The Senate gave its approval.

THE CURRICULUM REFORM: UPDATE

29. The Principal invited the Vice-Principal (Curriculum Reform) to update the Senate on progress in regard to the implementation of the Curriculum Reform recommendations (copy of report filed with the principal copy of the minutes). In doing so, he informed the Senate that 17 proposals for Sixth Century Courses had been submitted. Twelve of these would be developed into 6 page outlines. Meetings were being held with the staff leading the development of these courses. In regard to Sustained Study Programmes, he informed members that seven proposals had been received by the deadline of 30 April. In regard to Discipline Breadth courses, he informed the Senate that guidance had been issued to staff. The process of course and programme review was also progressing under the oversight of the UCTL.

SFC MAIN GRANT LETTER 2009/2010

- 30.1 The Principal invited the Senior Vice-Principal to present the paper on the SFC Main Grant Letter 2009/2010 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). In doing so, he reminded the Senate that this was the first time that the new funding model was used with two separate funds: the General Fund to support core business and the Horizons Fund to support special initiatives.
- 30.2 He highlighted to the Senate some of the main points as summarised below:
- The University had received an overall increase of 7.2% in funding compared to that in 2008/09;
 - In terms of Research Grant funding, the University's increase of 27% was the second highest in Scotland and compares favourably with the most successful institutions in England. This was a strong indicator of the University's research quality.
 - The increase in the Teaching Grant was not as large as would have been anticipated.
 - Horizon funding had been received in support of the new Dental School.
 - Overall, the University's core funding was robust and strong
- 30.3 Looking to the future, he advised the Senate that in terms of the research grant, RAE scores contribute approximately 50% with the other measures of research activity being drawn from measures such as student numbers, grants received and number of post-doctoral fellows. It would therefore be important, going forward, to look at ways to maintain the University's successes in the research agenda.
- 30.4 The Principal invited the Senior Vice-Principal to comment on the University's work in Knowledge Transfer and in the establishment of spinout companies. He explained that the majority of such companies had been established in the Colleges of Life Sciences & Medicine and Physical Sciences although work was ongoing in one area of the College of Arts & Social Sciences. The University had seen a growth in the number of patents and licences. Six new spin out companies were under development. In the past year, the University had sold Haptogen to one of the leading pharmaceutical companies, Wyeth. The merger with the Rowett Research Institute had also brought into the University's portfolio some of the Rowett's companies.
- 30.5 The Vice-Principal (Research & Commercialisation) further commented that the University was third in Scotland in regard to knowledge transfer which was an extraordinary achievement. He commented that it was difficult to separate blue skies thinking from research application though in terms of the Research Excellence Agenda, he stressed that there was no acknowledgement of commercial activities.

THE RESEARCH EXCELLENCE AGENDA

- 31.1 The Principal invited the Vice-Principal (Research & Commercialisation) to present the paper on the Research Excellence Agenda (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).
- 31.2 In introducing the paper, the Vice-Principal informed the Senate that the paper set out an agenda to further improve the University's research performance. He further informed the Senate that within the paper were a number of proposals seeking to help staff achieve their research potential, to strengthen the University's research environment and to support the improvement of quantitative indicators and overall research planning. These included proposals for priority areas of research, research leave, research excellence review and enhanced training and career development. He invited the Senate to comment on the recommendations proposed and the overall Research Excellence Agenda.

- 31.3 There followed a brief discussion where it was queried in regard to section 7.3 on peer review and support for grant applications whether a feedback loop and training could be embedded to assist staff in making applications. Furthermore, it was proposed that a mentoring rather than bureaucratic review process would be more valuable. In response, it was noted that the proposals were not intended to be bureaucratic but rather that they sought to balance the freedom to make applications with the need to ensure continued institutional success. The suggestion that supportive feedback and mentoring be incorporated was welcomed.
- 31.4 Following this debate, the Senate's broad support for the Research Excellence Agenda approach was noted. It was noted that the Research Leave proposals would be taken forward with a view to being in place for September 2009. More detailed proposals in regard to the other recommendations would be brought forward in due course.

STUDENT RETENTION

- 32.1 The Principal invited the University Secretary to present the paper on Student Retention (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).
- 32.2 In introducing the paper, the Secretary informed the Senate that the paper sought to present an overview of the key issues the institution is facing in regard to the retention of full-time undergraduate students and a summary of the action taken to day and that being planned. In doing so, he reminded Senate that given the nature of student retention, there was a lag effect in terms of being able to tell whether the actions taken were effective. He invited the Senate to comment on the actions planned.
- 32.3 There followed a short discussion, the main points of which are summarised below:
- It was proposed that consideration should be given to the use of smartcards to monitor lecture attendance. It was suggested that this would provide an early indicator of students who may be having difficulties. In response, it was noted that the use of smartcard technology to monitor attendance was currently under consideration in the context of both student retention and the changes to immigration legislation. It was further commented that such a system could be open to abuse. In response, it was noted that any system could be open to abuse but the introduction of such a system would enable patterns of attendance to be better monitored and thereby enable more effective support to be provided.
 - The balance of retention versus compulsion was queried. Students are told lectures are not compulsory and therefore they do not feel the need to attend. It was suggested that perhaps the University should look to making lecture attendance compulsory.
 - It was proposed that more should be done to highlight support mechanisms available to students. In response, it was noted that the planned One-Stop-Shop arising from the Curriculum Reform recommendations would hopefully help address this issue.
 - It was commented that 10% of students who leave do so in the first month. In these cases, monitoring interventions would have little impact.
 - It was suggested that the move to give students the opportunity to repeat each year introduced a few years ago may not be helping retention. It was proposed that this approach does not encourage students to focus on their work. If the progression rules were tightened up, it was suggested that this might improve retention.
 - It was commented that students have a wide range of pressures e.g. holding down a job and that as a result support systems need to be flexible and responsive.
 - The strong correlation between students entering via clearing and withdrawal was noted. It was queried whether there was any plan to review the correlation between entry qualifications through clearing and student retention. In response, it was noted that entry through clearing need not mean a dilution in standards. Other reasons such as the University not being the student's first choice may be contributory factors. It was further commented by another senator that care should be taken not to label clearing entrants as being of a lower standard. Many students entering through this route are doing so for good reason.

- Given the recent success in the RAE exercise, it was queried whether the University should take the opportunity to increase its admissions criteria. It was further queried whether it was known if the decision by some other universities to increase their entry criteria had been successful. In response, it was noted that the University's entry criteria generally map those of our competitors. It was noted that any change in entry criteria would require careful thought and risk management given the changing agenda with demographic changes and the introduction of the Curriculum Reform proposals.
- The resource issues of monitoring student attendance were stressed. It was noted that the current system is time-consuming and open to abuse. In response, it was noted that the use of technology would hopefully help this process.
- It was commented that any review of retention should consider who is admitted, how and when. In doing so, more focus should be given to student backgrounds rather than simply looking at statistics. Student experience, particularly in the early stages of a student's career is vital in ensuring their success.
- It was stressed that the University needs to better understand why students leave the University. It was proposed that resource needs to be focused on talking to students to gain this understanding. It was further proposed that while much effort is being focused on actions to address retention, time also needs spent on evaluating their effectiveness. In response, it was agreed that this was a key issue.
- It was queried whether the reasons for high drop-out amongst local students was understood. It was queried whether this might be due to issues related to social networking or difficulties with transport. It was proposed it might be worthwhile doing some further research in this area.

32.4 In drawing the debate to a close, the Principal thanked the Senate for their contributions.

REVIEW OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR

- 33.1 The Principal invited the University Secretary to introduce the paper setting out proposals for a Review of the Academic Year (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).
- 33.2 In doing so, the Secretary informed the Senate that the shape of the academic year, in particular the timing of first half-session exams, had been identified as being a possible contributory factor to the problem of student retention. He stressed to the Senate that the proposals being presented were suggestions of ways in which the academic year might be revised. He informed the Senate that if changes were to be introduced for September 2010, it would be important to develop clear plans by the start of the new academic year. He highlighted to the Senate the key proposals being made: a reduction in the late registration period, the move of first half-session exams to before Christmas, a change to the timing of the resit diet and the possible introduction of a February Fresher's week.
- 33.3 He invited comment from the Senate. The main comments made are summarised below:
- It was commented that the move of August resits from August to June would not provide sufficient time for students who had been unable to take the first attempt in May due to ill health or other reasons to have recovered in time to take the resit attempt. It was further commented that the August resits can be a very valuable safety net for students.
 - Support was expressed for the proposed reduction in the late registration period.
 - A student member of the Senate indicated that polls of student views had indicated widespread support for moving exams before Christmas and decreasing the late registration period. It was further commented that some students did not support the change in timing of the resit diet. Students were also of the view that a revision week was important especially for Honours students and that care would also need to be taken to ensure that the start of exams did not clash with other key deadlines such as dissertation submission. The students were also not opposed to a reduction in Easter vacation to two weeks but did note that it may restrict the opportunity for students to undertake co-curricular activities. The introduction of a February Fresher's week was welcomed for new PgT entrants. Caution was also expressed about the possible reduction from 12 to 11

teaching weeks and the impact this might have in terms of contact time. It was suggested that this might be an issue for international students in particular.

- In regard to the reduction from 12 to 11 teaching weeks, it was commented that this would mean effectively a move to a 48 hour teaching week. It was further noted that there may be knock-on implications in terms of revising curriculum should the teaching period decrease from 12 to 11 weeks.
- It was commented that the loss of revision weeks might reduce the opportunity for international students to have time to assimilate information in advance of exams.
- A case for the removal of the August resit diet altogether was proposed. It was suggested that this would free up time for students to undertake internships and for staff to do research. Given the relatively relaxed approach in regard to progression, it was suggested that this would be worth consideration. It was further proposed that it would enable students to retake course work as well as the examination. It was further commented that some students use the August resits to spread out their exams. By dropping this diet, it would focus attention on the main exam diet. Students could retake examinations at the next normal diet thereby enabling them the opportunity to attend lectures.
- It was commented that moving exams to before Christmas might leave little opportunity for reflection.
- The proposed Fresher's week in February was suggested to be only of value for new entrants, primarily postgraduate. In this regard, it was suggested that it might be possible to have a different academic year for undergraduates and postgraduates.

33.4 In drawing the discussion to a close, it was noted that no major concerns to the broad principle of reviewing the academic year had been raised and that there was general support, in principle, for the proposals. It was agreed that the proposals would be further refined in the light of the Senate debate and following further discussion at UCTL would be brought back to the June meeting of the Senate.

REVIEW OF COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

34.1 The Principal invited the University Secretary to introduce the paper from the Operating Board setting out recommendations arising from their review of the committee structure (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).

34.2 In introducing the paper, the University Secretary reminded the Senate that they had previously endorsed the Court's proposal to establish an Operating Board. He drew member's attention to the composition of the Operating Board which had increased academic membership compared to that of the former Joint Policy, Finance and Estates Committee. He informed the Senate that the Operating Board had undertaken a review of the committee structure to determine what committees the Court needed in order to be able to fulfil its governance responsibilities. He invited the Senate to approve the recommendation as set out in the paper.

34.3 There followed a wide ranging discussion, the main points of which are summarised below:

- There was much debate about the reporting line for those committees that it was proposed to remove from the Governance Structure. It was queried if these 'orphan' committees were removed from the Governance structure of Senate and Court where they would then report and get their authority. It was stressed that it would be important to ensure that transparency in regard to their operation and composition was maintained in the future.

In response, it was noted that the main focus of the proposed changes was to distinguish between governance and management bodies and that, in regard to those committees it was proposed to remove from the Governance structure, managers responsible for these areas would report directly to the Operating Board as required. It would be for those individuals responsible for these areas to determine the structures required to enable them to ensure the effective oversight. For example, in regard to the Student Recruitment & Admissions Committee, while one individual would hold responsibility for this area, it would be important for there to be appropriate links with Colleges and other relevant stakeholders to ensure the effective management of this aspect of University business.

- The issue of accountability was queried. It was stressed in some areas such as student recruitment that it would be difficult to envisage these areas operating without effective academic oversight, for example in regard to the setting of going rates for admission.

In response, it was noted that it would be for those responsible for each area to satisfy the Senate or Court that decisions were being taken by the appropriate body. It was stressed that the proposals were intended to enhance rather than dilute accountability.

- One member of the Senate welcomed the proposals move to endorse modern governance approaches. She however proposed that her reservations came because there was no clarity in the proposals in regard to the management structure which would support the revised committee structure. It was further proposed by another member that it might be appropriate for the 'orphan' committees to have a defined reporting relationship to one of the Senate or Court committees.

In response, it was agreed that information in regard to the supporting management structure was missing and might help clarify the proposals.

- 34.4 In drawing the debate to a close, it was agreed that it would be appropriate for further clarity on the position of the committees being removed from the Governance structure to be provided. It was agreed that the points raised by the Senate would be reported to the Court with a view to further clarity on the issues raised being provided at the next meeting.

REPORT FROM THE ACADEMIC STANDARDS COMMITTEE (POSTGRADUATE)

- 35.1 The Senate, for its part, on the recommendation of the Academic Standards Committee (Postgraduate), approved that the UHI Millennium Institute academic area in Marine Science be validated under the terms of the accreditation agreement currently in force between the University and UHI to deliver the research degree programmes of MSc, MPhil and PhD.
- 35.2 The validation would remain in force for five years from the start of the 2009/10 academic year under the terms of the accreditation agreement between the University and UHI. The validation proposal was subject to the academic area meeting recommendations specified in the relevant report by a stipulated date. The report from the validation panel is available at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/registry/internal/>.

REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COURT

The Senate noted the actions taken by the University Court at its meeting on 10 February and 24 March 2009, as under:

1.1 Draft Resolution No of 2009 [Changes in Regulations for Various Degrees]

- 36.1 The Court received the draft Resolution No of 2009 (Changes in Regulations for Various Degrees) from the Senate and agreed to forward it to the General Council and to make it generally available in terms of Section 6 of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966.

1.2 Draft Resolution No of 2009 [Regulations for the Degree of Master in Science (MSci)]

- 36.2 The Court received the draft Resolution No of 2009 [Regulations for the Degree of Master in Science (MSci)] from the Senate and agreed to forward it to the General Council and to make it generally available in terms of Section 6 of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966.

1.3 Validation Agreement: UHI/Sustainability

- 36.3 The Court approved a proposal that the research degree programmes of MSc, MLitt, MPhil and PhD: Archaeology of the Highlands and Islands; Archaeological Geophysics and Archaeological Resource Management be validated under the terms of the accreditation agreement currently in force between the University and UHI.

1.4 Amendment to the Policy on Student Complaints

- 36.4 The Court approved an amendment to the Policy on Student Complaints, to insert a new paragraph:
“Students who submit a complaint will not suffer any disadvantage as a result of doing so, irrespective of the outcome.”

1.5 Annual Report from the University Committee on Teaching and Learning

- 36.5 The Court noted the Annual Report from the Committee on Teaching and Learning.

REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Senate noted the actions taken by the University Committee on Teaching and Learning at its meeting on 25 March 2009, as under:

1. Curriculum Reform

- 37.1 The Committee received updates on the work undertaken in connection with the recommendations assigned to the Committee by the Implementation Board of Curriculum Reform. Following discussions it was agreed that drafts of the *Statement of Rights* and the *Feedback Framework* would be considered at the next meeting on 20 May 2009.

2. Report from the Working Group on Joint and Combined Examiners' Meetings

- 37.2 The Committee considered the report from the Working Group on Joint and Combined Examiners' Meetings. The Committee agreed that the revised process proposed by the Working Group, whilst addressing the issues identified with the current process, did not necessarily represent the most workable solution. It was, therefore, agreed that the process proposed by the Group be reviewed and a revised proposal brought to a future meeting.

REPORT FROM THE ACADEMIC STANDARDS COMMITTEES – COURSE AND PROGRAMME CHANGES

38. The Senate noted the changes to the list of courses and programmes approved by the Academic Standards Committees at their recent meetings, available at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/senastracking/report>

SENATE APPOINTMENTS

39. The Senate noted that the Senate Business Committee approved the following appointments:
- the appointment of Dr K Shennan as Director of Undergraduate Programmes (Science) *vice* Professor WF Long;
 - the re-appointment of Mr S Cannon as a nominated Governor of Strathallan School;
 - the appointment of Ms M Pearson as the Senate representative on the Kincardineshire Educational Trust Board *vice* Ms C Macaslan;
 - the appointment of Professor S Reid as a nominated member of the Committee on Research, Income Generation and Commercialisation *vice* Professor K Edwards;
 - the appointment of Professor R Segal as a member of the Gifford Committee.