

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 18 February 2009

Present: Principal, Professors Logan, Houlihan, MacGregor, Rodger, Gane, Frost, Fynsk, Ms M Pearson, Professors Black, Secombes, Imrie, MacDonald, O'Donoghue, Salmon, Cotter, Walkden, Wallace, Mr MJ Radford, Professor Long, Dr J Geddes, Professor Burgess, Ms C Banks, Mr A Arthur, Dr J Lamb, Dr WD McCausland, Dr B Marsden, Mr C Munro, Dr A Gordon, Dr H Hutchison, Professor Saunders, Dr J Stewart, Professors Carty, Duff, Mr S Styles, Dr A Arnason, Dr D Galbreath, Dr AD King, Dr M Delibegovic, Dr P Fraser, Dr L Hastie, Professor Robinson, Dr J Sternberg, Dr M Young, Dr I Greig, Dr A Jenkinson, Dr K Shennan, Dr N Vargesson, Professor Heys, Dr D Pearson, Dr S Duthie, Dr L Williams, Professors Chandler, Guz, Reid, Dr T Thevar, Professor Watson, Dr D Jolley, Dr N Spedding, Professor Anderson, Dr J Skakle, Dr SP Townsend, Mr D McKay, Ms S Stevenson, Mr J Simpson, Ms C Allnutt, Mr K Naismith, Ms T Smith and Mr S Doolin with Mr N Edwards in attendance

Apologies: Professor Morgan, Haites, Mrs M Ross, Professors Ingold, McCaig, Greaves, Nelson, Naphy, Dr P Edwards, Professor Schaper, Mr DC McMurtry, Dr P Mealor, Mrs F Payne, Mrs A Valyo, Dr A Campbell, Mr N Curtis, Dr T MacFarlane, Professor N'Dow, Dr M Psatha, Professor Smith, Dr ER van Teijlingen, Dr H Wallace, Professor Price, Dr TJF Norman, Mr J Collins and Mr S Qureshi

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

16. The minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2008 were approved.

STATEMENT BY PRINCIPAL

- 17.1 In opening the meeting, the Principal informed the Senate that the recent visit by the Scottish Funding Council had been very successful. The SFC had been very complimentary about Curriculum Reform and had also commented that they had received positive feedback from the staff and student groups they had met. They had also been supportive about the University's approach to collaborations with other institutions and had commented positively on the University's new governance arrangements.
- 17.2 In regard to Curriculum Reform, the Principal also informed the Senate that Fiona Hyslop had also been positive about the Curriculum Reform and in particular had welcomed the flexibility that the new curriculum would provide and the proposed seamless transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study.
- 17.3 The Principal drew to the Senate's attention, the recent announcement that the National Subsea Research Institute would be located at the University. It was noted that this would provide a huge opportunity for engagement with industry.
- 17.4 The Principal expressed his congratulations to all staff for the recent positive RAE outcome. He informed the Senate that it was clear that the University had done much better than in previous reviews with 90% of staff submitted ranked as international or better. In terms of the next steps, he suggested to the Senate that there would be much to do with the aim of achieving 1/3 of staff ranked as world leading. To make that shift, he informed the Senate that the Court would be looking to future investment.

- 17.5 In regard to the current recession, he suggested that the University should see this as an opportunity. He indicated that this would be a good time for staff recruitment from overseas and from those institutions in the UK where the RAE outcome had not been as successful. He also noted that the current economic climate would provide opportunities for infrastructure developments.

REPORT ON THE OUTCOME FROM THE RESEARCH ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

- 18.1 The Vice-Principal (Research & Commercialisation) briefly presented the report on the outcome of the RAE exercise (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). He indicated that the University had done very well and that the outcome had placed the University in a good position within the sector. He stressed however that it would not be until the publication of the funding letter in early April that the University's success would be confirmed. He stressed that the University's positive outcome had been achieved through much planning for which he expressed his sincere thanks to all involved.
- 18.2 Looking to the future, he stressed that the move to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) would be a challenge. Work was ongoing to establish a University-wide publications database which would then enable citation analysis to be undertaken.
- 18.3 He invited comment from the Senate, the main points of which are summarised below:
- The RAE outcome would provide a valuable marketing opportunity. It was queried how best this opportunity could be exploited. In response, it was noted that high level messages had been included on the University's website. It would be for individual disciplines to choose how best to comment on their own performance.
 - The length of time until the publication of the funding letter was queried. It was noted that the SFC had moved the publication from late March to early April. This was an SFC decision.
 - It was commented that the move to seek new appointments following the outcome of the RAE should be carefully handled to avoid there being one rule for new appointees and one for established staff in regard to level of appointment and resources. In response, it was noted the point made was a valid one but it was however stressed that there was a need to be mindful of the need to ensure appropriate workload balance for all staff (new and established).
- 18.4 In concluding, it was noted that the further reports would be brought to the Senate in regard to progress with the work towards the new REF and the new publications database.

REPORT FROM THE SENATE WORKING GROUP ON ACADEMIC AND PASTORAL SUPPORT

- 19.1 The Principal invited the Convener of the Senate Working Group to introduce the Working Group's Report on Academic and Pastoral Support (copy of report filed with the principal copy of the minutes). In doing so, he reminded the Senate that the report was written by the Senate Working Group and as such was being brought to the Senate for its consideration.
- 19.2 In introducing the report, the Convener informed the Senate that the group had taken as a premise the view that student support was an essential mainstream activity of the University. Given this, it was vital for the students, Schools and Colleges that the matter

was addressed as a priority. He drew attention to the Group's view that the role of Adviser of Studies was currently perceived as being a 'bolt-on' largely due to the provision of an honorarium to those undertaking this role. This approach he suggested was not conducive to the establishment of a strong student support system.

- 19.3 He drew the Senate's attention to recommendation one in the report which was core to the Group's proposals. He reminded the Senate that the current role profiles include reference to academic staff providing support, pastoral care and referral to support services. He further noted that in many other universities it was accepted that such a role would form part of an academic's core duties.
- 19.4 In drawing the introduction of the paper to a close, he further stressed that the Group's review of the existing approach to advising within the University, while indicating that enhanced levels of support were required, had also identified a number of areas of good practice.
- 19.5 There then followed a wide-ranging discussion in regard to the proposals set out in the report from the Working Group, the main points of which are summarised below:
- One member of the Senate queried what the Senate was being invited to approve and suggested that consideration of recommendations one and two be postponed until they had been considered by JNCC. He stated that if implemented, these recommendations would lead to a pay-cut for many members of staff. In response, it was stressed that the Senate Working Group was reporting back to the Senate. It was noted that some of the recommendations were matters for consideration by bodies other than the Senate. It was however stressed that in regard to recommendation two, there was no explicit reference to the removal of pay.
 - It was further proposed that the Senate should consider the report as a paper setting out the principles of a proposed system for an enhanced system of academic and pastoral support. In doing so, the Senate was being invited to debate the recommendations and not the detail of implementation which would be a matter for appropriate bodies such as JNCC. It was further stressed that recommendation one was central to the recommendations being proposed. If this were agreed, it would then be appropriate to debate the future of the honorarium.
 - In regard to the issue of the honorarium, it was further proposed that the current system is ambiguous in regard to the line management of the advising role which is further confused by the provision of the honorarium. It was proposed that it would be more appropriate for this role to fall within the core duties of an academic and for it to be appropriately recognised through the annual promotion and contribution award exercise.
 - The UCU representative from the Senate Working Group commented that there was no doubt in principle that the provision of honoraria does not fit with the framework agreement. Rather, roles should be properly assessed and appropriately recognised and rewarded. As previously noted, the future of the honoraria would be a matter for consideration by JNCC. He further commented that there would be ways to handle the transitional arrangements and to reward staff appropriately for their roles. In response to this comment, it was further stressed that the proposals would only be effective if the Adviser role was properly recognized as valuable and appropriately acknowledged within the workload model.
 - It was commented that it would be unfortunate to dismantle the Working Group's report solely on the grounds of the issue of the honoraria. It was proposed that the report should be considered as a whole.

- It was commented in regard to the statement in recommendation two that 'the funds that finance the system should be devoted to other areas of student support' suggested a reduction in the money available and therefore could be perceived as implying a pay-cut. In response, it was stressed that the Working Group's recommendations were not driven by an intention to save money. Rather, it was simply being suggested that if any money were saved it should be used to further enhance student support.
- One member of Senate commented that Advisers of Studies are encouraged to act autonomously and not on behalf of their School. This approach was important to ensure that Advisers work to ensure the interests of their advisees rather than their own School.
- As an Adviser, one member of Senate commented that they welcomed the idea of there being additional Advisers of Studies appointed to spread the load. They however expressed concern that an 'us and them' culture might develop and queried the interpretation of the phrase 'may be called upon' in recommendation one. In response, it was noted that the Working Group had not made any recommendations in regard to the number of Advisers which would be required. It would be a matter for Heads of School to consider the workload profile of staff when asking them to undertake the role as Adviser of Studies. Furthermore, it was stressed that it would also be important for Heads of School to balance staff aptitudes for the role against school/university requirements.
- One member of the Senate stressed that it would be important that the spirit of the recommendations was not lost in technical discussions. The proposals would increase the status of Advisers and, as such, would hopefully encourage more to take up such a role. The move to enhance the support provided to students was an important element of the Curriculum Reform recommendations.
- A student member of the Senate stated that he strongly supported the recommendations and their underlying objective to enhance the support provided to students. He stated that the proposals could only be beneficial for students.
- It was commented that there are some staff who undertake an advising role but do not receive an honorarium. Furthermore, the level of payment to Advisers varies depending on the group of students being advised. It was stressed that this inequality further emphasises the anomaly of the current situation.
- In regard to recommendation one, one member of the Senate queried why it was worded as 'any member of staff' rather than 'all members of staff'. In response, it was stated that the use of 'all' might imply that everyone would necessarily become an Adviser which was not the Working Group's intention. Rather, the Working Group had agreed that some staff would be better suited to such a role than others.
- One member of the Senate commented that it would not be illogical to accept the recommendations set out in the Working Group's report but maintain the payment of the honorarium. He stated that there would be no problem to pay staff for doing this role and also take account of it in terms of the workload model. Furthermore, he stated that if the University was committed to the importance of the role of the Adviser of Studies, then they should pay. He therefore suggested that recommendation two in the Working Group's report might be revised from "...the University should consider discontinuation of the award of advising honoraria..." to "...the University should consider the award of advising honoraria...".

[Following the meeting, the member of Senate confirmed the precise wording of his suggestion as detailed below:

"In order to remove the ambiguity outlined above, the Working Group recommends that the University should consider ~~discontinuation of the award of advising honoraria and that the funds that finance the system should be devoted to other areas of student support.~~

The Group acknowledges that ~~this recommendation, if approved in principle by Senate,~~ any change would impact directly on the terms and conditions of academic staff who currently undertake advising duties or who would do so in the future and that the discontinuation of the honorarium would be a matter for negotiation under the terms of reference of the Joint Negotiating and Consultative Committee of the University Court."]

In response, the Convener of the Senate Working Group commented that the suggestion appeared to him to be reasonable.

- It was commented by one member of the Senate that the existence of the honoraria can cause problems in regard to the need to spread expertise. Where a Head of School wishes one member of staff to stop being an Adviser of Studies and asks another to take on the role, it can cause difficulties.
- The President of the Students' Association commented that the current Advising system was not working well for students. He stressed that it was vital that the University started to tackle the issue and encouraged the Senate to endorse the Group's recommendations.

- 19.6 The Principal then invited the Senate to vote, in principle, on the report as it stood. The vote was carried by a majority of the Senate. The Principal then moved to invite the Vice-Principal (Curriculum Reform) to update the Senate on progress in regard to Curriculum Reform implementation. One member of Senate then queried why he had not sought a view from the Senate on the suggested amendment to recommendation two. The Principal took the view that as no formal amendment had been either proposed or seconded, it would be inappropriate to return to the item.

[Following the meeting, it became clear that there had been a misunderstanding by some Senators regarding the precise nature of the vote taken at the conclusion of this debate. In order to remedy this matter, the Principal, as Chairman of the Senate, issued a statement to the Senate. A copy of this statement is appended to the minute.]

UPDATE ON CURRICULUM REFORM

- 20.1 The Vice-Principal (Curriculum Reform) updated 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 the Implementation Board had been established and had met twice. Weekly meetings were being held to work on the communication strategy. A date of 30 March 2009 had been agreed for an Aberdeen launch with a launch being held in Edinburgh in early April. The web pages were being relaunched to support the implementation phase of the project. He further informed the Senate that timetables for enhanced study courses, the move from 20 to 15 credit level one courses and the process of course and programme review had been prepared and disseminated to staff through an ezine. He also informed the Senate that the Resources Group had submitted its report and a number of key issues had been identified. A risk analysis report had been prepared and had been signed off by the Implementation Board. Finally, he noted that the Curriculum Reform project was beginning to get external recognition.
- 20.2 He then invited any comment from the Senate. There followed a short discussion, the main points of which are summarised below:

- It was noted that Joint degrees would be exempt from the enhanced study requirements. In regard to this, it was queried what would happen where a joint honours student at the end of their second year chose to move from joint to single honours. In response, it was noted that in such a situation the joint discipline being dropped would normally satisfy the enhanced study requirement.
- It was queried whether sixth century courses could be offered to run in only one half session or whether they had to be offered in both half sessions. In response, it was noted that it was planned that such courses normally would be run in each half session.
- The credit requirements were queried. It was asked whether in a joint degree it would be expected that there would be up to 45 credits in each of the two subjects with a further 30 credits of enhanced study. It was confirmed that this would normally be the case.

20.3 In drawing the discussion to a close, the Vice-Principal informed the Senate that he would bring a fuller report to the next meeting of the Senate.

ANNUAL REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON TEACHING & LEARNING FOR 2007/2008

- 21.1 The Senate received the Annual Report which presents a brief analytical review of data regarding student progression, academic appeals, student academic discipline and student academic complaints for the 2007/2008 session.
- 21.2 The Convener of the University Committee on Teaching & Learning presented the UCTL's Annual Report to the Senate for 2007/08 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). In presenting the report, he highlighted to the Senate some of the key points: the number of students who had had their studies terminated by the Students' Progress Committee had decreased; the level of withdrawal was around 10% - the issue of retention was being actively considered by the University; there had been an increase in undergraduate academic appeals and a decrease in those from postgraduate students; there had been an increase in the number of academic discipline cases but a decrease in the proportion of those due to plagiarism; and, academic complaints were becoming increasingly complex.
- 21.3 He informed the Senate that the UCTL had agreed that while the data presented was useful it would be more valuable in future to receive in addition qualitative information as it was felt this would enable the committee to get a better understanding of the background to the issues and enable common trends to be identified.
- 21.4 He invited comment from the Senate. There followed a short discussion, the main points of which are summarised below:
- The number of discipline cases not upheld was commented on. In response, it was noted that not all cases founder on merit, rather it was stressed that procedural irregularities can lead to cases not being upheld.
 - The drop-out rate of 10% was commented on. It was questioned whether this was an expected level of withdrawal and therefore it was questioned whether this should not be seen as an area of concern. In response, it was noted that the University has a duty of care for all students. It was further noted that work was ongoing to try to identify the reasons as to why students withdraw.

- In regard to withdrawals, it was noted that some students were being allowed to progress who would not have done so previously. It was questioned whether this was the right approach to be taking.
- It was commented that the 10% drop-out rate was only the tip of the iceberg as the level of withdrawal varies across disciplines. It was suggested that many first- and second-year students feel very much 'at sea' by the end of week 6. It was suggested that there was a need to ensure that such students are supported at an early stage to avoid them leaving. In this regard, it was noted that of the 700 students leaving the University in 2007/08, 500 left without any intervention.
- In regard to understanding the reason for student's leaving the University, the poor level of attendance was noted. It was suggested that there was a need to invest in speaking to students to find out why they choose not to attend classes. In response, it was noted that the UMG and Colleges were actively working to address the issue of student retention, building on the recommendations brought to the Senate in June 2008. It was noted that this work was ongoing and that a report would be brought to the May meeting of the Senate.

REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

1. Amendments to Regulations

- 22.1 The Senate approved, on the recommendation of the University Committee on Teaching & Learning, and agreed to forward to the University Court, the draft Resolutions 'Changes to Regulations for Various Degrees' and 'Regulations for the Degree of Master of Science (MSci)' (copies filed with the principal copy of the minutes). The Senate also approved amendments to the Supplementary Regulations for the Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE).

2. Amendment to the *Policy on Student Complaints*

- 22.2 The Senate approved an amendment to the *Policy on Student Complaints* to insert a new paragraph (to become paragraph 3) as follows:

"Students who submit a complaint will not suffer any disadvantage as a result of doing so, irrespective of the outcome"

- 22.3 This amendment was proposed in order to ensure compliance with the revised version of Section 5 of the *QAA Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education* and consistency with the University's *Policy on Academic Appeals*.

3. Graduation Dates

- 22.4 The Senate noted that the UCTL had approved the dates and allocations of students for the July 2009 graduation ceremonies.

4. Amendments to the documentation for Internal Teaching Review (ITR)

- 22.5 The Senate noted that the UCTL had approved amendments to the Internal Teaching Review (ITR) documentation to take account of amendments to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) *Guidance on institution-led quality reviews*.

5. Curriculum Reform

- 22.6 The Senate noted the various recommendations contained in the Final Report of the Curriculum Commission which it had been made responsible for. It was noted that responsibility for several of these recommendations would be delegated to other sections within the University to be taken forward in the context of other ongoing work. The UCTL would receive reports on work in this regard, in due course. The UCTL had also discussed and agreed an outline timetable to be forwarded to the Implementation Board for the required course and programme review processes which would be required to enable a 'reformed' curriculum to be implemented in September 2010.

6. Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)

- 22.7 The Senate noted that the UCTL had discussed the main amendments to the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) method which would be utilised for the second cycle of ELIR. In particular, it had been noted that, in line with the timetable employed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the first Cycle, the University was scheduled to undergo ELIR during academic year 2009-2010. The ELIR team would visit the University on 24 & 25 March 2010 and during the week of 3 May 2010. In addition, it was noted that a small planning group had been established to prepare the University's submission for review, drafts of which would be considered by the Committee in due course.

REPORT FROM THE ACADEMIC STANDARDS COMMITTEE (POSTGRADUATE)

- 23.1 The Senate approved, on the recommendation of the Academic Standards Committee (Postgraduate), the recommendation that the following UHI Millennium Institute academic areas 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, MLitt, MPhil and PhD:

Archaeology of the Highlands and Islands
Archaeological Geophysics
Archaeological Resource Management

- 23.2 The validation would remain in force for five years under the terms of the accreditation agreement between the University and UHI. The validation proposal was subject to the academic areas 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 ACADEMIC STANDARDS COMMITTEES – COURSE AND PROGRAMME CHANGES

- 24.1 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>

REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COURT

The Senate noted the actions taken by the University Court at its meeting on 9 December 2008, as under:

1. Committee for the Appointment of the Principal

- 25.1 The Court approved a recommendation from the Governance Committee for the establishment of a Committee for the Appointment of the Principal to take forward the process for the selection of the next Principal.
- 25.2 The Court agreed that the composition and membership of the Committee would be a panel of 8, consisting of 5 academics and 3 independent members. These being:
- Sir Don Cruickshank (Convenor), Independent Member of Court
Sir Moir Lockhead, Independent Member of Court
Dr Alistair Mair, Vice-Chairman of Court
Professor Celso Grebogi, Sixth Century Chair in Nonlinear and Complex Systems
Professor Neva Haites, Head of College of Life Sciences and Medicine
Professor Dominic Houlihan, Vice-Principal for Research and Commercialisation
Professor Tim Ingold, Chair in Social Anthropology
Mrs Margaret Ross, Head of School of Law
- 25.3 The Court had agreed that Professor Sir George Bain, former President and Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University Belfast, be appointed to serve as an external advisor to the Committee.

2. Curriculum Reform

- 25.4 The Court had noted that the Senate, at its meeting on 19 November 2008 had received a response from the Curriculum Reform Commission to a number of issues raised by the Senate at the previous meeting of 29 October 2008 when the Commission's Final Report had been considered.
- 25.5 The Court had noted that having received this response, the Senate, for its part, had approved, in principle, the recommendations set out in the Final Report from the Curriculum Reform Commission, subject to one amendment.

3. Baseline Report on Quality Arrangements

- 25.6 The Court, having noted that the Senate, for its part, had approved the Baseline Report on Quality Arrangements, agreed on the further recommendation of the Operating Board that the Report be submitted to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

PRIZES AWARDED 2007/08

26. The Senate noted that the list of prizes awarded in 2007/08 is available on the web at: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/registry/prizes.shtml>.

A Statement from the Chairman of Senate

Report from the Senate Working Group on Academic and Pastoral Support

I am writing following the meeting of the Senate earlier this week to seek to remedy what I believe to have been an unfortunate misunderstanding at the conclusion of the debate on the Report from the Senate Working Group on Academic and Pastoral Support.

As those members who were present will be aware there was a full and frank exchange on the Working Group's report with much of that debate focussing on the issue of the honoraria and the Working Group's recommendation that "...the University should consider discontinuation of the award of advising honoraria..." [Recommendation 2].

During that discussion several suggestions were made about how Recommendation 2 could be retained, altered, amended, set to one side or dropped altogether. Towards the end of the discussion there was a further proposal that the wording of the recommendation be changed and this appeared to be acceptable to the Convener of the Working Group. Alternative views were then expressed and shortly, thereafter, I thought it appropriate that we move to a vote that, in principle, the recommendations contained in the Working Group's paper should be approved. This was supported by the large majority of senators present.

I then moved on to the next item on the Agenda.

The view was then expressed that it would have been appropriate to formally consider the suggested proposal *ex post facto*. I took the view that as no formal amendment had been either proposed or seconded, it would be inappropriate to return to the item.

It has subsequently become clear that a number of senators believed they were voting for the paper amended in the light of what they believed to be the Convener's apparent earlier concession. It has been made equally clear that other senators believed they were voting for the paper without amendment. Given this confusion it is important that we achieve an outcome that most effectively expresses the consensus of the Senate and takes all the significant issues forward in an appropriate way.

I had considered bringing the entire paper back to the Senate at a future meeting but given that concern was centred on only one recommendation (Recommendation 2) in thirty this seems unnecessary.

It remains the case that any decision to discontinue the honoraria is a matter for the Court following appropriate negotiation through JNCC. It is not a matter for the Senate although of course Senate can express an opinion and indeed that is effectively what it was being asked to do. Given the confusion about what was and was not agreed it would now seem appropriate to make JNCC and Court aware of this.

I propose to add this note to the formal record of the meeting. This will have the effect of ensuring that all views expressed in the Senate are taken into account by those involved in taking the matter forward.

It is obviously best to prevent communication from the Senate being inhibited by procedural technicalities and I hope this statement now clarifies the position and allows the University to progress the matter in a way that is acceptable to all senators.

C Duncan Rice

20 February 2009