

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

**Minutes of the meeting held on 29 April 2015**

*Present:* Principal, Professors Kilburn, Hannaford, McGeorge, MacGregor and Ross, Ms AM Slater, Professors Morrison, Craig, Coyle, Gimlin, and Mr M Whittington, Professors Skakle, Guz, Lumsden and Davies, Dr R Neilson, Dr C Kee, Professors Connolly, Masthoff, Dr M Ehenschwendtner, Dr S Lawrie, Professor Lurie, Dr D Hendry, Ms M Beaton, Mrs L Tibbets, Dr J Lamb, Dr WD McCausland, Professor Buckland, Dr A Sim, Dr Y Bain, Dr E Curtis, Professor Mealar, Dr G Sharman, Dr K Groo, Professor Duff, Dr Z Yiidhego, Dr A King, Dr D Lusseau, Dr M Pinard, Mrs C Dennis, Dr A Rajnicek, Professor Teismann, Dr M Delibegović, Dr N Mody, Dr L Aucott, Professor M Helfirch, Professor R Barker, Dr S Fielding, Dr I Cameron, Professor A Lee, Dr F Thies, Professor Sahraie, Dr D Ray, Dr N Hoggard, Professor Chandler, Dr A Akisanya, Professor Kashtalyan, Dr O Menshykov, Professor MacDonald, Dr A Ebinghaus, Dr C North, Dr N Oren, Dr R Machpherson, Dr M da Silva Baptista, Dr B Martin, Dr W Vasonselos, Professor Hutchison, Dr C Brittain, Miss E Beaver, Mr R Henthorn, Mr L Fuller, Miss A Pavelekova and Mr O Toloch,

*Apologies:* Professors Haites, Kunin and McGeorge, Greaves, Baggs, Morgan, McCaig, Macrae, Reid, Jolley, Wells, Brown, Gow and Shennan, Dr P Bishop, Mrs D Bruxvoort, Dr A Dilley, Dr A Bryzgel, Professor Friedrich, Dr H Pierce, Dr P Ziegler, Ms S Cornelius, Dr A Halsall, Professors Stollery, Dr J Biggane, Dr A Lewis, Dr A Simpson, Dr L Bennie, Dr M Bain, Dr T Argounova-Low, Dr J Sternberg, Dr J Baird, Dr J Barrow, Dr S Tucker, Dr A Jenkinson, Dr D Scott, Professors Schwarzbauer and Heys, Dr K Khalaf, Dr M Cruickshank, Dr R MacKenzie, Dr C Black, Dr A Venkatesh, Dr K Foster, Dr L Williams, Dr J Keifer, Professor Dobney, Dr D Green, Professor Coghill, Mr D Delelis, Miss G Ivanova, Miss J Killin, Miss Z Howell Mr K Strain, Mr T Griffin-Walker, Mr J Squires, Miss K Gombert and Miss G Clarke

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

24.1 The minutes of the meeting of 4 February were approved. There were no items arising.

**STATEMENT BY PRINCIPAL**

25.1 The Principal thanked all colleagues who had helped to prepare Elphinstone Hall for the General Election Leaders' Debate and for presenting the University in such a good light. The Principal went on to say that the General Election will mean change for the University – whether or not there is a change in Government. The Principal added that the University will need to respond quickly to any changes in funding or fees in preparation for new students arriving in September.

25.2 Fiscal austerity in relation to research funding is likely to continue and universities who see research and innovation as investment opportunities will be those who are able to counterbalance such austerity. The Principal commended the current review of research funding currently being undertaken by Sir Paul Nurse, commenting that it could result in greater opportunities for universities across the UK. The picture with European funding is less positive because of ESFI but we will continue to lobby to help mitigate the cuts.

- 25.3 Aberdeen City and Shire continues to negotiate a City Deal with the Government, with the three areas of the bid being infrastructure, housing and innovation. The University is contributing by its involvement in projects relating to energy, hydrogen fuel, big data and food security.
- 25.4 The Principal was pleased to announce that the new MOOC in Sustainable Development had attracted thousands of registrations in its first two of weeks. The Principal also reported that negotiations regarding the new campus in Korea were going well and it was planned to open, on target, next March.

### **HEALTH AND SAFETY**

- 26.1 The Principal reported that the post for replacement of the Director of Health, Safety and Wellbeing was now being advertised and that recruitment process was under way.

### **FINANCIAL SITUATION**

- 27.1 The Senior Vice-Principal reported on the Financial Situation paper (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) saying that Aberdeen, along with most other universities in the UK, is going through challenging times financially. In addition to the climate of financial austerity, all universities are finding the recruitment of international students to be challenging. The Senior Vice-Principal reported that, as a result, the University has to make significant savings this year. The University aims to make a surplus of £2-million in 2014–15 and £5 million in 2015–16, which are significantly lower surpluses than aimed for by other UK universities. The Senior Vice-Principal pointed out that the surpluses are essential to pay for the University's capital investment, new buildings and initiatives. The university is also facing additional costs related to the changes in the USS pension scheme and the University has also seen a reduction in its REF funding. The Senior Vice-Principal reported that in order to achieve the surpluses the University needs to make £10.5-million savings, and that ways in which these savings can be made will continue to be identified. He went on to say that it is hoped that the Voluntary Severance Scheme will secure the surplus required.
- 27.2 A member asked whether the financial deficit figures distributed to Schools relate to the reduction in staff numbers that those Schools are expected to make. The Senior Vice-Principal said that the figures are an accurate breakdown of the deficits operating in each School. He went on to say that it is recognized, however, that each unit of the University might be unable to make exactly those savings. The Principal added that in a University of this size it is expected that there will always be cross-subsidisation, but that by publishing the figures the cross-subsidisation is now transparent.

### **STRATEGIC PLAN WHITE PAPER**

- 28.1 The Principal reported on the Strategic Plan White Paper (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes) and thanked everyone who had contributed. The Principal invited Senate to discuss the three main strands of the Paper: Learning and Teaching, Research and People.
- 28.2 The Principal invited the Vice-Principal (Learning & Teaching) to talk on Learning and Teaching. The Vice-Principal said that whilst a lot is stated about excellence, the Paper does not define what that means nor does it prescribe how we can measure it. The Vice-Principal invited comment and discussion on this, a summary of which is as follows:

- A member pointed out that in data comparing us with other universities Aberdeen has far fewer firsts and said the University needs to change what is happening in exam boards. The Vice-Principal responded by saying that if staff mark to scale then the paucity of first class degrees should not occur; he added that exam boards could not change that.
- One member said that if learning and teaching is to be excellent it must be engaging, empowering and student-led, adding that the current curriculum is outdated in that it is structurally oppressive and that it needs to become libertarian.
- A member said that if the University is to enhance distance learning it will need to invest in its eLearning team. The Principal responded by saying that expansion of distance learning would be supported and it was up to Schools to say how they would do that in their operational plans.
- One member asked what progress had been made with student course self-selection. The Vice-Principal said that the system had undergone user testing and only minor issues had been found, with most testers scoring the system at 7/10. Based on the current situation, the system will be ready for September registration.

28.3 The Principal then invited the Vice-Principal (Research and Knowledge Exchange) to comment on the research area of the Paper. The Vice-Principal stated that the main issues to consider are how the University balances the need to support those who are already achieving excellence and those who are working towards it but not necessarily in areas where there are good sources of funding. Also, though the University does interdisciplinary research well, how can it do it even better and how does the University strike the balance between the needs of cross-disciplinary themes or projects and the needs of individual academics who wish to develop their own discreet areas of research. The Vice-Principal invited comment and discussion, a summary of which is as follows:

- One member said that the University's strategy in the REF was to go for gold rather than glory – which is not in alignment with the current Strategic Plan – and asked why the University had deviated from the plan. The Vice-Principal pointed out that the requirements of REF were published after the University's current Strategic Plan and the University had to change its approach in order to meet the new requirements. The University took a balanced approach submitting those it thought would achieve a high rating. If the University had submitted only those it thought would achieve a four-star rating, the number of people submitted would have halved and would have resulted in a reduction of £7–8-million in funding. The Vice-Principal added that one of the key performance indicators for research in the forthcoming strategic plan is that all submitted staff are expected to achieve at least 4 three-star outputs.
- Another member raised the issue of Arts and Humanities and interdisciplinary or themed work, giving the example that History and Divinity do not fit into current themes and so are excluded from interdisciplinary research and funding, adding that interdisciplinary themes are counterproductive to the individual scholar approach favoured in much of Arts and Humanities. The Vice-Principal agreed that both interdisciplinary and individual scholar research is needed. He went on to say that he anticipated that the University would build its research around a mix of large research groups, smaller focussed research groups, and individual scholar researchers, in order to ensure its research excellence; adding that individual scholars must be honest, however, when their research is not world-leading.
- One member commented that it might be too early to assess the success of themes as the North, for example, received its funding in 2012 and was only just beginning to get off the ground. The Vice-Principal agreed that it was possible that some areas were only just beginning to flourish but that the University also needed to be honest about research areas that were not working and make decisions as to whether or not they should be continued. Another member mentioned that whilst the themes had been

good incentives, incentives were not necessarily the way to encourage excellence in research, saying that it would be better to reward research that proved to be excellent rather than give incentives to research that might not work.

- Another member asked whether there were plans to improve the support given to research, particularly within sections such as Research and Innovation. The Vice-Principal said that indeed that was the case and would be part of the Operational Plans rather than the Strategic Plan. The Principal added that it would be up to Schools to include in their operational plans support for research.
- Another member commented that the University needs to be less risk adverse, adding that she would welcome more blue sky thinking around operations and not just around strategy. The Vice-Principal said that if the Strategic Plan is right then an appropriate change in the University's operations should come out of it.

28.4 The Principal then reported on the People strand of the Paper, saying that there are already a number of initiatives ongoing in the University. The University is now an accredited living wage employer, various policies on equality and diversity are being developed and the University is looking at the equality and diversity content in its courses. Progress has been made with Athena Swan and Aurora submissions. Zero-hour contracts have been eliminated, a Workloads Working Group is currently developing workload models to ensure fair workloads for staff across the University, and the minutes of the Remuneration Committee are now being published on the University's web pages, subject to data protection requirements. The Principal invited comment and discussion.

- One member commented that the People strand of the Strategic Plan was very much appreciated and that much of the feedback had been around ensuring fair workloads. The member asked how this would be aligned with the results of voluntary severance as there were concerns that remaining staff would find their workload increased given that there would be no replacements for staff who left. The Principal said that the University would ensure that everybody had fair workloads and that the voluntary severance would not impact on this.

28.5 The Principal thanked everyone for their contributions to the Plan and to the discussion. The Strategic Plan will now go to Court, following which Colleges and Schools will be required to prepare their Operational Plans.

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

29.1 The Principal reported three items of other business, as follows.

29.2 The Principal congratulated Mr Rob Henthorn and Ms Emily Beever on their election to the posts of Vice-President Education and Vice-President Women, respectively, for NUS Scotland. The Principal added that Ms Megan Dunn, a former Aberdeen Student President, had been elected to the post of President of NUS Scotland. The Principal extended the congratulations of the University and the Senate to these three.

29.3 The Principal announced that during the meeting of Senate he had been informed that shares in one of the University's spin-out companies had raised income of US\$4.5-million.

29.3 The Principal wished students well in their upcoming examinations.

## **REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COURT**

The Senate noted the actions taken by the University Court at its meeting of 24 March 2015, as under:

- 1. Draft Resolution No 277 of 2015 [Changes in Regulations for Various Degrees]**
- 30.1 The Court noted that the draft Resolution No 277 of 2015 [Changes to Regulations for Various Degrees] had been recommended by the Senate and had been considered by the Business Committee of the General Council, and with no amendments having been received following public display for the statutory period, formally approved the Resolution for Various Degrees' and 'Supplementary Regulations for the Degrees of Master of Arts (MA)' (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes).
- 2. Draft Resolution no 278 of 2015 [Supplementary Regulations for the Degrees of Master of Arts (MA)]**
- 30.2 The Court noted that the draft Resolution No 278 of 2015 [Supplementary Regulations for the Degrees of Master of Arts (MA)] had been recommended by the Senate and had been considered by the Business Committee of the General Council, and with no amendments having been received following public display for the statutory period, formally approved the Resolution.

With regard to both resolutions, a sub-committee of the Business Committee was convened to receive further information regarding the background and rationale for the proposed revisions to the Resolutions.

## **SENATE MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES**

31. The Senate noted that the Senate Business Committee approved the appointment of Dr Phil Ziegler and Ms Gayle Gorman as members of the Hay of Seaton Committee (vice Professor J Schaper, Professor C Fynsk and Mr D Paton). The remaining vacancy will be filled in due course.