UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2021


Apologies: George Boyne, Ruth Taylor, Russell Williams, Michael Brown, Gary Macfarlane, Andrew Dilley, Joachim Schaper, Joanne Anderson, Alessandra Cecolin, Ben Marsden, Mary Stephen, Amy Bryzgel, Tom Rist, Irene Couzigou, Malcolm Harvey, Lesley Lancaster, Samanta Miller, Chantal den Daas, Shantini Paranjothy, Valerie Speirs, Dawn Thompson, Delma Children, Russell McKenna, Marian Wiercigroch, Holly O’Connor, Nestor Carsen-Devereux, Braidan Smith, Heather Smith, Cassimir De Bonnieval and Athinoulla Konstantinou

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

18.1 The Senior Vice-Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members of the Senate.

18.2 The Secretary reminded members of procedures. Members were reminded to state their name before contributing to discussion and advised to use the chat function to state when they wished to ask a question, members were reminded that the chat itself does not form part of the formal minute, and to remain muted when not speaking. Voting was to be conducted via Microsoft Forms and the meeting was recorded.

18.3 Members of the Senate approved the agenda and the meeting proceeded.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

19.1 Members of the Senate approved the minutes 27 October 2021.

PROTECTIONS FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM

20.1 The Senior Vice-Principal addressed members on the issue of freedom of speech and the protection of academic freedoms.

20.2 The Secretary discussed the paper on Freedom of Expression, Academic Freedom and University Policies. The main tenets were as follows:
The paper provides information on and outlines the relationship between freedom of expression, academic freedom, and their interaction with University policies and procedures. It also details these principles against the backdrop of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 and other relevant pieces of legislation.

20.3 David Anderson, School of Social Science, thanked the Secretary and Senior Vice-Principal for the update and the provision of the aforementioned paper. He stated that the paper is very clear in relation to the relevant legal and policy frameworks; however, there are concerns regarding the practical application of these protections. David asked what sort of training and support will be provided to help staff feel safe expressing their views – specifically, all explicit forms of help and protection for members of staff who may be shunned for expressing an entirely defensible point of view. David stated that there are many ways in which this could be addressed; for example, many universities have adopted a charter for responsible debate. He also stated that Senate could adjudicate over difficult cases involving matters of academic freedom. David welcomed the paper on Freedom of Expression, Academic Freedom and University Policies but requested that further work is undertaken to provide an explicit set of measures to help staff feel safe during their seminars. The Senior Vice-Principal advised that the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee (EDIC) considered the points raised by the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture and the Charter for Responsible Debate published by The Young Academy of Scotland (The Royal Society of Edinburgh). He advised that EDIC welcomed the nine principles contained within the Charter and recommended that they be considered for adoption by the University. The Senior Vice-Principal reminded members that this remains a complex issue which requires collaboration with EDIC and Senate to reach an appropriate solution. He recommended the use of case studies to help inform the University’s approach. The Secretary agreed and re-iterated that Senate should be heavily involved in the process.

20.4 Jonathan Pettitt, School of Medicine, Medical Science and Nutrition, raised the point that exercising academic freedom ought to be balanced against preventing the infringements of other people’s rights. Jonathan raised concerns that certain debates occurring under the auspices of Academic Freedom are debating the very existence of certain groups of people. Jonathan stated that any debate centring around a person’s right to exist, particularly within a public sphere, is a form of bigotry and therefore not debatable. He recalled recent events at the University of Sussex and explained that some of their students felt very damaged by the way in which the matter was handled. Jonathan stated that he did not want to see a repeat within the University of Aberdeen. Jonathan recommended that the University shows explicit support for the diversity of the student body; and that the institution does not tolerate staff engaging in debates which effectively attack the existence of certain elements of the student body.

20.5 Scott Styles, School of Law, agreed that the nine principles laid out in the Charter for Responsible Debate offers a way forward. Scott explained that, by definition, Freedom of Speech must contain the freedom to express controversial views - without having one’s livelihood or personal safety challenged. Scott raised concerns regarding a tendency to confuse the substance with the procedure, i.e. creating space for the debate, and the importance of constructive albeit challenging debates.

20.6 The Senior Vice-Principal acknowledged the complexities of the issue and stated that the University is committed to upholding academic freedoms and freedom of expression. He reiterated the importance of a cohesive approach towards debating these matters as a community as well as the involvement of EDIC in determining a solution.
The Secretary stated that there is a clear framework within the law for the framing of any debates and the promotion of hate-speech or abuse will not be tolerated.

MATTERS ARISING: GOVERNANCE REVIEW UPDATE

21.1 The Secretary provided an update on the progress of the University Governance Review and detailed its intersection with the recent Senate Effectiveness Review. The main tenets were as follows:

- Senate was made aware of the recommendations of the Governance Review (see report appendix for details) which includes proposals for changes to the Court committee structure. This would see the executive position of sub-committees clarified.
- Senate was reminded that the Senate Effectiveness Review also called for a review of the governance of the joint committees of Court and Senate.

The Secretary advised members that whilst this report sets out the direction of travel it will require further discussions and decision-making as appropriate.

21.2 Ondrej Kucerak, Vice-President for Education (AUSA), raised questions in relation to 4.6 and 4.7 of the aforementioned paper. Ondrej asked if the University Education Committee (UEC) and Student Support Committee (SSC) will be involved in the discussion process, as these are substantial changes proposed, and for clarification regarding the current stage of proceedings. He also asked what is meant by the support for AUSA planning being consolidated with an AUSA Partnership Forum as there currently is no such body. The Secretary apologised if the items were not clear enough and stated that the Student Support Committee (SSC) will be involved in the process. She highlighted that both reviews revealed that the Student Experience Committee (SEC) was not as effective as hoped and added that it was important to recognise that both student support and student experience intersect. The Secretary apologised for inadvertently capitalising “Forum” which led to the confusion and clarified that she was referring to the partnership that already exists with AUSA. Abbe Brown, Dean for Student Support, thanked the Secretary for clarifying the position and stated that as co-chair of the Student Support Committee (SSC) she is looking forward to engaging with respective parties on the matter.

MATTERS ARISING: LIBRARY UPDATE FOLLOWING CIRCULATION

22.1 The Senior Vice-Principal asked whether there were any questions to raise and if members were content. There were no questions raised and homologation was achieved.

UPDATE FROM SENIOR VICE-PRINCIPAL

23.1 The Senior Vice-Principal advised that student recruitment went very well with a good intake of students during September. He stated that in terms of the budget the results were such that the University was estimated to be one million pounds ahead of the current budget. He advised that a briefing recently took place with the Head of External Relations revealing that the January intake of students is looking very promising with over 9,000 applications in comparison to 3,500 last year. The Senior Vice Principal stated that University will be required to consider the impact upon logistics, and the University as a whole, of a potentially larger intake than usual during January, including on an ongoing basis.

23.2 The Senior Vice-Principal commented on the return of in-person graduations in both Aberdeen and Qatar. He informed members that there was a very positive response to their return.
The Senior Vice-Principal advised members that the University has officially announced the appointment of four out of five Interdisciplinary Directors. He reassured members that work is underway to appoint the remaining director for Environment and Biodiversity.

The Senior Vice-Principal emphasised the importance of the recent announcement of the Queen’s Anniversary Prize award for the world-leading research and education undertaken in soil science to promote the control of greenhouse gas emissions and sustainable food production.

The Senior Vice-Principal provided an update with regards to the new COVID-19 variant, Omicron. He advised that the University has been liaising with the Scottish Government, as well as across the sector, and will continue to monitor the situation closely. The Senior Vice-Principal recommended the regular use of tests and the uptake of any booster vaccines as appropriate.

ITEMS FROM RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE -
CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCHERS

Mirela Delibegović, Dean for Industrial Engagement in Research & Knowledge Transfer, gave a presentation on the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (aka Researcher Development Concordat). The main tenets were as follows:

- It is an agreement between stakeholders to improve the employment and support for researchers in higher education within the UK. It identifies the responsibilities and working practices (inc. examples of best practice) necessary to sustain research careers in the UK.
- The three core principles of the Concordat align with the Aberdeen 2040 commitments to inclusivity; excellent research requires a supportive and inclusive research culture; researchers are recruited, employed, and managed under conditions that recognise and value their contributions; professional and career development are integral to enable researchers to develop their full potential.
- The University currently has 385 researchers (the largest group is within SMMSN).
- An internal Steering Group will oversee implementation of the Concordat within the University - an action plan will be finalised by September 2022.
- The Steering Group will look at 4 main areas; research staff roles and contracts, career development support, management of researchers, and the development of University policies and processes.

Paul Hallett, School of Biological Sciences, stated that the initiative was positive and that its content was complementary to the Postgraduate Research School (PGRS). He asked whether PGRS had been consulted on the matter since a post-doctoral career begins at PhD level and there may be an overlap in training. Claire Hawes, Postgraduate Research School, clarified that herself and Lucy Leiper, Manager of the Postgraduate Research School, are heavily involved in the oversight of the project and that the Concordat is aimed at research only staff. Mirela Delibegović, stated that it is important to foster this community but that the adoption of good practices and the development of a positive research culture will help others within the University. Mirela explained that there are representatives from the Post-doctoral Research Committee on the relevant steering group. Paul raised the point that post-doctoral staff might be better placed to deliver training as they often relate well to students. He also raised the issue of contract precarity and asked whether there was scope to utilise the current budget to provide tenure and enhance stability. Mirela highlighted that there will be cross-institutional collaboration. She stated that the steering group will explore the possibilities surrounding the provision of bridging funds for researchers and the involvement of potential investors.
Dragan Jovcic, School of Engineering, stated that the key issues relate to the contracts and employment conditions on a national level. Dragan suggested looking at examples of best practice across European Universities – particularly France and Sweden. Mirela Delibegović agreed with this recommendation and advised that it had been discussed as a potential course of action. Mirela also raised the need to address the title of Research Fellow in relation to the grade 7 band and using elements of this process to inform the Promotion Review. Claire Hawes advised that whilst funding is at the centre of many issues, there is an obligation to support those within the post-doctoral community who do not intend to pursue a career in academia. Mirela advised that many UK companies are seeking transferrable skills; therefore, it is important to enhance training so that this community can choose their career route effectively.

Murilo da Silva Baptista, School of Natural and Computing Sciences, stated that when member of the post-graduate community, he found himself at a disadvantage due to his apparent lack of teaching experience. He advised that this likely impaired his ability to be competitive in relation to certain posts. He asked Mirela if training meant providing a bridge between teaching and research. Mirela confirmed that according to University contracts, there is six hours per week available to undertake work that is not project related; therefore, during this time there could be a focus on teaching. Mirela stressed the importance of engaging in meaningful teaching. She explained that the steering group will discuss how best to deliver the appropriate training and ensure each member of staff is recognised for their teaching contributions. Mirela reinforced the importance of ensuring parity across schools with regards to teaching opportunities. The Senior Vice-Principal advised that the workload review group have been looking at these opportunities across the University. He agreed that it was important to ensure that there is a structured approach which is considered part of their development.

Brice Rea, School of Geosciences, raised that under contracts related to European funding, Horizon 2020, it is forbidden to undertake teaching out-with the agreed 37.5 hours. He explained that whilst handling a related enquiry, he was advised that staff should reduce the number of contractual hours to allow for an engagement in teaching. Mirela noted that different investors may apply different rules. She advised that research-led teaching currently allows for engagement with teaching without compromising the rules of investors and enhances CVs. However, Mirela stressed the importance of considering the impact of any restrictions imposed by investors and any suitable alternatives.

Iain McEwan, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, raised the issue of ensuring that there is enough advice and support for highly skilled professionals who wish to remain within the University in a research orientated role. Mirela advised that there are various centres across the University which allow researchers to engage with different projects every six months. Mirela spoke to the importance of looking at these different examples across the University to inform best practice. It was agreed by both Mirela and Iain that it is vital that these research skills are not lost.

Katie Gillies, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, suggested involving trial managers in the steering group. She mentioned the distinction between those on academic contracts and those on academic-related contracts; and advised that this may have an effect on their willingness and level of engagement.

Mirela Delibegović, Dean for Industrial Engagement in Research and Knowledge Transfer, advised that whilst there were no official vacancies, they would welcome volunteers with backgrounds in arts, humanities, and social science. Mirela advised that the first report would be made available to the Research Committee in February 2022.
ITEMS FROM RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE -  
REPORT FROM THE RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

25.1 Marion Campbell, Vice-Principal Research, provided a brief overview of the report from the Research Policy Committee. The main tenets were as follows:

- The review of the terms and conditions, and composition of the committee, revealed that it would be beneficial to include input from early career researchers in addition to PGR representation. This has now been actioned.
- There are currently five ethics review boards across the University. The review highlighted the need for an overarching institutional ethics board to process cross committee concerns. This will report regularly to the Research Policy Committee.
- All research commitments in relation to Aberdeen 2040 implementation plan were reviewed and confirmed.
- Consideration of research income and the ‘order book’, detailing committed research grants, revealed that the University has surpassed its budget by £5 million.
- The Covid Mitigation Fund included the extension of research contracts and extensive support for PhD students.
- The annual research governance statement was reviewed. It has been published on the University’s website - it details all the activities undertaken and any research misconduct cases.

Marion reminded members all papers are available online for consultation, including details of the ongoing discussions in relation to Elsevier and open access.

25.2 Diane Skatun, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, asked for reassurance that ethical procedures will be proportionate, as well as robust, and that the relevant academics will be represented in discussions surrounding research practice. Marion clarified that every School provides ‘health checks’ to the Research Policy Committee on a regular basis which detail ethical concerns and the relevant advisors report to the committee for discussions. Marion advised that this is often where procedural aspects are deliberated. She advised that having an over-arching ethical committee will allow for commonality between the five ethics review boards in relation to high-level ethical concerns. She reminded members that all schools are represented by their Directors of Research, within the Research Policy Committee, should they wish to raise any issues or concerns.

25.3 Amanda Lee, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, asked whether the committee has a remit to consider standardisation in addition to elements of good practice. Marion stated that it may be beneficial to discuss these at an annual open forum on ethics supported by the Research Policy Committee. She advised that she would consider the matter further.

ITEMS FROM EDUCATION COMMITTEE –  
GRADUATE OUTCOMES, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND SKILLS

26.1 The Senior Vice-Principal reminded members of the importance of employability; not only is it crucial for students but it is vital in enhancing the University’s competitiveness within the sphere of Higher Education.

26.2 John Barrow, Dean for Employability and Entrepreneurship, gave a presentation on Graduate Outcomes (GO) and employability. The main tenets were as follows:

- Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) are responsible for undertaking the survey 15 months after graduation (first assessment occurred in 2020 surveying 2017-18 leavers).
• Graduate Outcomes (GO) aims to help current and future students with insights into career destinations and employability.
• GO feeds into domestic league table rankings including Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide, Guardian University Guide and Complete University Guide.
• Graduate Reflections and Career Prospects Outcomes feed into the Complete University Guide and these are areas which require development within the University.
• Aberdeen 2040 strategy details the commitment to equipping graduates for global employment and will involve a review of Aberdeen graduate attributes and skills.
• There are new Task-and-Finish Groups being setup: Work Placements – to understand the extent of work-based learning and placement activities against the needs of disciplines or programmes. The aim is to conduct a scoping exercise for placement activities and develop various models and frameworks for the delivery of suitable placements, as well as internal policies and resource requirements to support their effective delivery. International Experience – to define what we mean by an international experience and to review and provide recommendations on our existing agreements with partner institutions.
• Career Registration Project underway to embed ‘career readiness’ questions within e-registration and the graduation process to allow students to reflect upon their readiness to enter the work-force and allow for greater strategic support from Careers Service.
• Enhanced Transcript processes are under review by the Careers Service.
• Effective consultation with staff, students, and stakeholders (i.e. employers) is recognised as essential for the success of the initiative.

John apologised for the omission of the report which provided a more detailed subject-level (by JACS code) analysis of the results and advised that it would be circulated after the meeting.

26.3 Ekaterina Pavlovskaia, School of Engineering, asked for further details surrounding the membership of the work-placement Task-and-Finish Group and the mechanisms used to involve schools. John Barrow advised that the School Administration Managers were contacted, in addition to programme advisory boards, to support the process and refer members. John stated that any recommendations in relation to members were welcome.

26.4 Iain McEwan, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, emphasised that the statistics would benefit from the inclusion of postgraduate taught data, as well as international student data, and asked for clarification regarding the data contained within the graph. John clarified that the report contains a detailed analysis of the relevant data separated by both discipline and school. The Senior Vice-Principal confirmed that the graph was set against the backdrop of subject benchmarks. Iain raised the point that when students are surveyed may affect the accuracy of reporting. John agreed that this is particularly acute for institutions who have a large post-graduate community.

ITEMS FROM EDUCATION COMMITTEE – REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

27.1 Kirsty Kiezebrink, Dean for Educational Innovation, gave a brief over-view of the report from the University Education Committee (UEC). The main tenets were as follows:
• The importance of clear and transparent communication between UEC, and Senate, as well as the schools themselves. The report details the communication plan for UEC.
• There will be a University Education Committee meeting during week beginning 6th December 2021 in relation to Aberdeen 2040 – the outcome will be shared online and at the following Senate.
27.2 Lindsay Tibbetts, Business School, raised concerns regarding the proposed deadline for the provision of results, 2nd June 2022, as it is far earlier than usual and stated that the School cannot meet the proposed deadline. She advised that exams must be carried out for accreditation purposes during weeks 39 and 40, which involves co-ordinating with colleagues in Qatar, and requires a further three weeks for marking and moderation thereafter. Kirsty advised that this issue would be covered in depth in the next item. It was agreed to consider this point under the next agenda item.

SESSION DATES 2022-23

28.1 Alan Speight, Vice-Principal Global Student Recruitment, addressed members with regards to the revised proposal for the 22-23 academic year. The main tenets were as follows:
- The new proposal takes into consideration the concerns raised at the previous Senate meeting. Specifically, ensuring that the first semester begins one week earlier than the previous proposal and allows for 13 weeks for teaching and assessment each semester. In light of this, induction will take place during the week of 12th September 2022 and teaching will commence week beginning 19th September 2022.
- Marking deadlines have been extended to allow for a four-week period in May 2022 to conduct marking and examiners meetings.
- Education Task-and-Finish Group will consider all aspects of teaching, learning and assessment; this will cover the re-instatement of in-person examinations as well as amendments to spring break.
- The new proposal is sensitive towards research and workload concerns with the inclusion of an additional week in the summer period. It was noted that this may be of particular benefit to women and early career researchers who have been disproportionately affected during the pandemic.
- There is greater scope for the inclusion of reading weeks which are of course at the discretion of the Schools themselves.
- The revised arrangements help to ensure students receive their results before the start of the second semester and delivers three protected weeks for marking at the end of each semester.
- It maintains a certain degree of flexibility with regards to applicant decision making, assists with conversion, and the provision of visas, as well as travel arrangements.
- It will incorporate the specific needs of the School of Engineering which were communicated in advance of the meeting by the Head of School.
- The paper had previously been considered by SMT and UEC.

28.2 Lindsay Tibbetts, Business School, advised that three weeks of protected marking does not sufficiently take into account moderation processes (inc. Examiners’ Meetings and External Examiner involvement). She stated that co-teaching in Qatar poses additional challenges and at present the School does not find the new timescale feasible. Lindsay questioned the proposed dates for graduation in addition to the implementation of earlier marking dates.

28.3 Gillian Mackintosh, Director of Academic Services and Online Education, confirmed that an extension to the marking deadline was being proposed for academic year 2021/22 due to the on-going effect of the pandemic. She stated that the three-week marking deadline window included in the proposals for academic year 2022/23 align with the University window for provision of feedback on assessment standards. She noted that these dates still require UEC approval. In response to the questions raised by Lindsay Tibbetts, in relation to earlier marking deadlines and associated graduation dates, Gillian confirmed that every seven years the term dates jump by a week, and this may be the reason for this.

28.4 Diane Skatun, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, asked for clarification regarding the approval process. The Senior Vice-Principal stated that should there be any
further modifications made by UEC the matter would be reported to Senate.

28.5 Ralph O’Connor, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, asked for further clarification regarding the vote in relation to marking deadlines and the organisation of teaching. The Senior Vice Principal confirmed that members are being asked to vote on the structure of the academic year. He re-iterated that marking deadlines are a matter for UEC and will be subject to further discussion as a result of the issues raised today.

28.6 Ekaterina Pavlovskiaia, School of Engineering, advised that she would like further consideration of August re-sit weeks by UEC as well as the accommodation of moderation processes.

28.7 Kathryn Martin, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, suggested shortening the spring break to two weeks. The Senior Vice-Principal reassured Kathryn that the matter had been considered thoroughly and Gillian explained the pedagogic importance of the provision of fieldtrips and other key activities during the spring break period.

28.8 The Senior Vice-Principal invited Members of Senate to vote with regards to accepting the revised proposal. Senate voted to accept the proposal:

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**ANY OTHER ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION**

29.1 There were no further matters raised for discussion. The Senior Vice Principal thanked members for their contributions and thereafter closed the meeting.