UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 12 May 2021


Apologies: Martin Meyer, Gary Macfarlane, Mirela Delibegović, John Barrow, Jerry Morse, Allan Sim, Tom Rist, Sarah Woodin, Valerie Speirs, Gareth Jones, Russell McKenna, Alex Brasier, Sofia Puentes Ferreira, Ava Lindberg, George Bostick, Marijus Juodka, Laura Ong, Daniel Cutts and Louise Henrard

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

53.1 The Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members of the Senate to the meeting. Senate members were reminded that the meeting would be audio recorded and asked that they introduce themselves before contributing to discussion to allow for an accurate minute. Members were reminded that comments made in the chat function would not form part of the formal minute and the mechanism for voting through was through Microsoft Teams.

53.2 The Principal invited members to approve the agenda. Members of the Senate approved the agenda and the meeting proceeded.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

54.1 The Principal invited members of the Senate to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2021 and 17 March 2021. No objections were raised.
UPDATE FROM PRINCIPAL

55.1 The Principal noted the relaxation of the Scottish Government lockdown guidance and the subsequent implications of this for the 2021-2022 academic year, noting that if current progress in suppressing Covid is maintained then social distancing may not be required. This would allow the university to return to what is considered a normal university environment, resulting in better workload, teaching and research balance.

55.2 The 5-year action plan for Aberdeen 2040 is under development and it is anticipated that this will be available for Senate consultation in June before Court approval in the Autumn.

55.3 The Principal reflected upon the result of the recent Scottish Government election, outlining the key considerations for the University. It was noted that it was not appropriate for the University as an institution to take a position should a second Scottish independence referendum take place. There would be three key matters of interest for the University:

1. Universities are adequately and properly funded
2. The policy context is favourable to excellent teaching and research
3. There are protections for universities to retain their independence

REPORT FROM COURT

56.1 Neil Vargesson, Senate Assessor, provided members with an overview of the Court Digest, highlighting the key points raised in the meeting of Court on 23 March 2021.

- The Court noted the financial report and the financial impact of the University’s backdated incremental pay increases.
- A Pensions Working Group will consider the issues arising from USS pension scheme and the staff response to proposals.
- The Court received a presentation on Race Equality and an overview of the programmes that are expected to be available later this year to support the University’s aim of becoming anti-racist.
- The routine public sector reports were approved, and the Gender Pay Gap report was highlighted as now available on the University’s website.
- The Court had an extensive discussion about the staff survey and were congratulatory on the positive elements of the survey, including staff morale and the management of the University. On the other hand, the Court expressed concern around workload and stress and discussed the measures the University is taking to address the issues raised in the survey, for example via the Workload Review Group. It was noted that the University has provided funding for additional staff recruitment.
- The Court congratulated Marion Campbell and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Team on the REF 2021 submission.
- The Court unanimously voted to repatriate the Benin Bronze from the University Museum Collection and noted the positive international press attention this has brought.
- The next phase of the governance review was discussed and is expected to be completed later this year.
- The Senior Governor election recently took place, with Julie Ashworth elected.

56.2 Neil Vargesson reminded members that there are 4 Senate Assessors who are available to raise feedback to Court or raise any questions.
Ben Marsden, School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, asked if the Court had considered the low turnout for the Senior Governor election and the mechanisms to increase participation. Responding, Tracey Slaven acknowledged the challenges around this and reminded Senate of the University’s role and constraints in the promotion of Senior Governor elections. It was noted that the turnout was in line with the sector average and slightly lower than the 2019 election at the University. Furthermore, students represent a larger proportion of the electorate compared to staff but have significantly lower proportional turnout.

Amy Bryzgel, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, commended the University’s commitment to become anti-racist and queried whether a similar approach could be taken to address the issues surrounding other protected characteristics such as gender-based violence and harassment. Karl Leydecker noted the public sector equality duty which sets out the University’s position and actions to address issues across all protected characteristics. The University has committed to an understanding that race is an area that requires focus in particular, however work to address all protected characteristics is ongoing.

Marion Campbell, Vice-Principal (Research), presented the key elements of the paper to Senate, highlighting the impact of Covid-19 on research activities and re-engaging with Aberdeen 2040. Marion noted that the main focus has been on the REF 2021 submission, however it is now time to look forward.

Nir Oren, School of Natural and Computing Sciences, wished to highlight the importance of ensuring parity of support across demographics in the context of the pandemic for example those with childcare responsibilities. Responding, Marion Campbell acknowledged the importance of a personalised approach to support through a close dialogue between Schools and Directorates. It was also noted that Schools will need support to help staff re-balance their priorities.

Alessandra Cecolin, School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, expressed support for Nir Oren’s comment regarding the gender gap and noted the impact of the pandemic on early career researchers and travel restrictions. Marion noted that the Research Culture Task and Finish Group would be reviewing various reports about the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, including the impact on specific groups, and that this is a University-wide issue explored by the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee. Marion acknowledged the lack of networking opportunities for early career researchers, but one positive is the range of opportunities digital conferences have presented; the Postdoctoral Research Committee is tasked with exploring this further. Addressing Alessandra’s concern about international travel, Marion reassured members that international travel for research will resume as government guidelines allow and a travel group has been formed to manage this. It was noted that an update on the concerns raised at the last Senate meeting about Research Assistants abroad will be requested from Debbie Dyker. Adding to the discussion, Karl Leydecker outlined the activities of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee which includes the process for promotions. There were some positive implications of the pandemic emerging in reports for women with caring responsibilities with better access to conferences without travel, however the full impact on all protected characteristics will be monitored over a long period of time.

Dragan Jovcic, School of Engineering, requested more depth in relation to point 9 of the paper regarding commercialisation and spin-out companies, emphasising the benefit of start-up
companies to the University and research. Dragan noted that the Scottish Funding Council have ceased operation of the Proof-of-Concept programme and the University’s policy on spin-out companies. Marion Campbell informed members that there was one spin-out company last year, one currently in the final stages, and one buy-out. Members were reminded that the Commercialisation Team were available to provide support, training, mentorship, and networks, whilst acknowledging the time commitment required to develop a spin-out.

57.5 The Principal noted that the UK Government’s aspiration to spend 2.4% of GDP on research and innovation is unlikely to be achieved through extra public spending but through investment from companies, thus the University needs to engage with external partners to take full advantage of this growth.

PRINCIPLES AND PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE DELIVERY OF TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT IN ACADEMIC YEAR 2021/22

58.1 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), gave a presentation to Senate on the Principles and Planning Assumptions for Teaching, Learning and Assessment for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students in Academic year 2021/2022, a copy of which is filed with the principal copy of the minute.

58.2 Following the presentation, a discussion ensued, the main tenets of which were as follows:

- Colin North, School of Geosciences, queried whether 5.3 contradicted other statements in the document stating that the intention is to deliver as much on campus as possible. It was noted that students have found it challenging to work in isolation and returning to group teaching is important for their wellbeing, whilst acknowledging that online teaching will be required for some students. The definitions of large and small groups will be crucial to planning. Ruth Taylor stated that the wording could be revised to make it clear that the University will offer as much face-to-face teaching as is permissible with in the Government guidelines. The capacity of rooms is being worked on currently and aims to be available for the timetabling process to commence at the end of May. Tracey Slaven, University Secretary, clarified that the current guidance is generally for 30 people with an exceptional maximum of 50.

- Ekaterina Pavlovskaia, School of Engineering, queried whether 6.1 would result in delaying the start of the 2022/23 academic year and implies that there will not be exams which may impact accreditation. Secondly, Ekaterina asked whether the University is prepared for the transition to no physical distancing at short notice. Ruth Taylor, responding, assured members that a discussion would take place about the 2022/23 academic year. It was noted that the opportunity to reduce restrictions has been built into the planning and as such, a decision around the second half-session teaching will not be made until Autumn.

- Ralph O’Connor, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, emphasised the importance of communications being clear that plans are provisional and dependent on the Government guidance. The welfare of staff and their concerns around returning to campus must be considered irrespective of the guidelines. Ralph expressed support for the flexibility built into the wording of 5.2.iv and 4.13 and asked that this is reflected in the communications sent to staff and students in order to manage expectations. Responding, Ruth Taylor hoped the uncertainty was implicit in the document however the document would be reviewed to make it more explicit. The Principal noted that the
welfare of staff has been protected throughout the pandemic and this would continue, however clear communication of expectations must be issued to current students and applicants.

- Frauke Jürgensen, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, expressed support for teaching of practical subjects to be considered individually; however, raised a concern around one-to-one teaching to be conducted online, specifically for music students who require live music practice. Ruth Taylor clarified that the intention is for personal tutor or supervisory meetings to be conducted online, and that she would change the wording to reflect the points made by Frauke.

- Alison Jenkinson, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, noted that whilst the document is comprehensive in providing support for students who cannot come to campus, there may also be students who are self-isolating in Aberdeen. The University must provide means for them to continue their learning. Ruth Taylor will clarify this in the document.

- Ondrej Kucerak, Vice President for Education (AUSA), expressed support for the paper but queried what the University’s position would be if the restrictions were to be lifted more quickly than anticipated, with concern around bridging the gap between Government guidance and University guidance. Responding, Ruth Taylor noted that the principles in the document account for any changes in Scottish Government guidelines. Tracey Slaven added that the University was using the current guidelines and assumptions for planning. In a university context, we can assume that all staff and students should have been offered a vaccination by the start of the Semester. However, given the timing, we must be mindful that some students may have had one dose, a vaccine that is not recognised by the UK or none at all. The planning assumptions for physical distancing take into consideration the fact that there may be changes to national guidance and restrictions. The Principal confirmed that the University’s position is to take full advantage of all relaxations of restrictions. Adding to the discussion, Karl Leydecker stated that we must consider the extent to which we can implement changes at any one time, with thought given to workloads and logistics.

- Janet Gauthier, Student representative, thanked Ruth for the presentation and emphasised that some students may require in-person one-to-one meetings for personal reasons and suggested that we may be able to utilise space in the Sir Duncan Rice Library for this. Ruth Taylor will explore this further.

- Scott Styles, School of Law, wished to acknowledge that the University has dealt with the past year admirably and expressed support for the paper. Scott emphasised that students want to be on campus and what is considered a normal university experience, and therefore encouraged the University to be open to the possibility of pivoting quickly in a positive direction should the guidance permit. Responding, the Principal reiterated that the University will be prepared to react to any changes quickly.

- Alexandros Zangelidis, Business School, commended the consultation process for the paper but expressed concern for the number of activities on campus and the size of cohorts, resulting in increased teaching workload. Alexandros requested clarification about how many students can be in a room with distancing measures in place to help staff in planning. Secondly, it was queried whether online timed exams will be available at the University in the future. Ruth Taylor noted that Estates are working on capacity for rooming and timetabling and this should be available by the end of May. There are multiple complex challenges surrounding online timed exams including proctoring, however this will be explored.

- Amy Bryzgel, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, raised challenges and limitations around summer teaching for Postgraduate Taught students and requested whether the risk assessment processes could be streamlined and incorporate flexibility
for drop-in sessions. Ruth Taylor clarified that the University is operating within the rules set by the Scottish Government which includes reporting who is on campus. Karl Leydecker added that the Campus Planning Group will continue to work in line with Government guidance in relation to planning for AY21/22.

TERM DATES FOR SECOND HALF SESSION 2021/22

59.1 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education) provided members with an overview of the paper, highlighting the key implications and the reasoning for the proposed change of term dates in the second half-session of 2021/22.

59.2 The Principal invited Members to ask questions and comment on the paper, and a short discussion ensued with the following points:

- Amy Bryzgel, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, expressed concern about returning to teaching after the spring break and taking time away from research over the summer period. Responding, Ruth Taylor clarified that whilst the start of term would be delayed, the end of term date is not affected (i.e., a 13-week term in the same way as AY2020/21). Alan Speight added that January recruitment had been successful, partly because of the University’s flexible approach. It was noted that recovery from the pandemic will not be linear across all countries as there will be varying access to vaccines and new variants adding to uncertainty for the sector. Following up, Amy noted the challenges facing postgraduate taught students who start in January, with emphasis on the compact nature of the academic year. Responding, Alan Speight acknowledged the concern and noted that the University is reconsidering some January start programmes with Schools. The Principal emphasised the importance of January start programmes by stating that 200 jobs had been safeguarded this year as a result of successful recruitment.

59.3 The Principal invited Members of Senate to vote on the three elements of the proposed term dates for the second half-session of 2021/22. Senate voted to accept the proposal:

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR SENATE MEMBERS TO RAISE QUESTIONS FOR THE PRINCIPAL ON ANY OTHER ITEMS OF ACADEMIC INTEREST FOR DISCUSSION

60.1 No other items of academic interest for discussion were raised and the meeting was closed with the Principal thanking Senate for their work during a challenging academic year.

REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Senate approved and noted the actions taken by the University Committee on Teaching and Learning at its meeting on 14 April 2021.
1. Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) Policy

61.1 The Senate approved, on the recommendation of the UCTL, the revised APL policy (copy filed with principal copy of minute).

2. Omnibus Resolution

61.2 The Senate approved, on the recommendation of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning, and forward to the University Court, the draft Resolution ‘Changes in Regulations for Various Degrees’ (copy filed with principal copy of minute).

The Senate would ask the University Court that, in accordance with the provisions of Section 6 (2) of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966, the draft Resolution be passed forthwith, so that the amended provisions may be applied with effect from date on which they are passed by the University Court.

3. Captioning Update

61.3 The UCTL received an update on work ongoing with regards to captioning. Members of the Committee noted that in the second half session of the 2020/21 academic year, 13,100 videos were created, 56% of which had captions (edited or unedited), an improvement on the first half session (37%). Members noted the importance of maintaining this upward trajectory and ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements. Members sought clarification with regards the guidance for staff to follow on captioning. The UCTL agreed to progress discussions with Digital and Information Services (DIS) in this regard.

4. Planning for AY2021/22

61.4 The UCTL received the paper on Planning for AY2021/22. Members of the Committee noted that the paper provided was being consulted on widely, prior to its consideration by the Senate on 12 May. The Committee acknowledged the need to begin planning for the 2021/22 academic year as soon as possible. The attention of Committee members was drawn to the proposal contained within the paper to amend the January 2022 term dates.

5. Transition for Returning Students AY2021/22

61.5 The UCTL noted work ongoing with regard the transition of returning students to AY2021/22. The Committee received an update on the proactive work ongoing to engage returning students, including work around communication, orientation, web resources and in-person support. The Committee endorsed the work ongoing in this regard.

6. Education Committee Structure Update

61.6 The UCTL noted that proposed changes to the Education Committee structure had now been approved by the University Court. Members of the Committee were informed that implementation of the University Education Committee (UEC) and its sub-committees would follow as soon as possible.

7. Enhanced Transcript Update
The Committee considered a series of papers on the Enhanced Transcript. Members of the Committee approved the inclusion of the following initiatives on the Enhanced Transcript, as recognised activities, from September 2020:

- Green Champion
- S4S Mentors
- ABDNConnect Programme

8. **ScienceDirect Negotiations**

The UCTL received a paper providing an update on the ScienceDirect Negotiations.

9. **Aberdeen Student Experience Survey**

Members of the committee noted the outcomes of the Aberdeen Student Experience Survey.

10. **Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment**

Members of the Committee are asked to note the Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment undertaken on the Comprehensive Measures for Fair and Consistent Assessment in the Context of Covid-19.

**RECTORIAL ELECTION**

Senate approved the proposed timeline and make a formal recommendation to Court for the election to be held (copy filed with principal copy of minute).

**SENATE ELECTIONS**

The Senate noted that the Senate Business Committee approved the timeline for election of school representatives to the Senate, and Senate Assessors to Court as (copy filed with principal copy of minute).

**STUDENTS’ PROGRESS COMMITTEE CONVENOR**

The Senate noted that the Senate Business Committee, on the recommendation of the Heads of School for Biological Sciences, Geosciences, Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition, Natural & Computing Sciences and Psychology, approved Michelle Pinard as Convenor for the Student Progress Committee for Science.

**SCHOOL OF DIVINITY, HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY NAME CHANGE**

The Senate noted that, following extensive consultation and discussion within the School, including discussion at the discipline level, The School Executive and the School Forum, the School of Divinity History and Philosophy has agreed to change the name of the School to reflect the fact that the School also contains the discipline of Art History. The option of adopting a ‘collective’ name was considered as well including the disciplines in the title. Following two separate polls within the School there was agreement that the name should be changed to Divinity, History, Philosophy & Art History.
The Senate noted that the Senate Business Committee, approved a change to the nominated PGR School Officer for Geosciences: Clare Bond replaces Matteo Spagnolo.