UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2020


APPROVAL OF AGENDA

78.1 The Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members to an extraordinary meeting of the Senate. It was noted that the meeting had been called due to a request, from a group of elected members of Senate, to discuss aspects about return to campus.

78.2 Members of the Senate approved the single item agenda. The attention of members was drawn to the fact that the meeting would be recorded. Members were reminded to state their name before contributing to discussion, to use the chat function to state when they wished to raise a question and to remain muted when not speaking. It was noted that any voting required was to be conducted via a form in the chat functionality. The Principal confirmed that as this was an extraordinary meeting of Senate, regular standing items were not included on the agenda.

78.2 The Principal noted that since the receipt of the letter from elected members of Senate, an open session had been held addressing many of the points raised in the letter and issues around the return to campus and blended learning. The Senate meeting was to focus specifically on the points raised in the letter.
UPDATE FROM SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM IN RESPONSE TO THE PREVIOUSLY CIRCULATED PAPER FROM THE REQUESTING GROUP

79.1 Karl Leydecker, Senior Vice-Principal, shared a presentation on campus planning and preparations for the new academic session. Karl confirmed that Senate were asked to look at matters of feasibility planning and risk assessment and questions regarding the Covid-19 risk register, circulated after the previous meeting.

79.2 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), was invited to present on feasibility planning. Ruth stated that blended learning was a sector wide response, with cross-institutional work taking place prior to the initial lockdown in March to ensure that students could achieve their learning outcomes regardless of their individual circumstances. Ruth thanked Schools and Professional Services for their role in the continuing implementation of blended learning. It was noted that the Blended Learning Task and Finish Group (BLITFIG) had representation from all Schools across the University and that the feasibility of the delivery of blended learning had been an ongoing consideration of the group. Timetabling was given as an example where wide and rigorous consultation had taken place to ensure the feasibility of plans. Members of the Senate were reassured that there were processes in place to allow timely response to emergent issues.

79.3 Karl reiterated that feasibility was established on a combination of the University’s people, buildings and activities and highlighted the groups in place to ensure the feasibility of blended learning in the context of Covid-19. Karl explained that he sought to clarify the distinction between the risk register and a risk assessment. He noted that the risk register had been established near the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic as a specific, evolving document in response to the developing situation. Members of the Senate were advised that the most recent iteration included enhanced mitigations regarding staff health and wellbeing. It was clarified that the intention of the risk register was to capture risks and to provide assurance that these were being appropriately handled. Karl explained the elements of the risk assessments, noting the three elements of building risk assessments, individual risk assessments and risk assessments of teaching activities. It was noted that each building now had its own risk assessment, standard operating procedure and circulation plan, developed over the past several months. Members of the Senate were informed that these would be made available to all staff through SharePoint. Karl further stated that guidance on the return to campus, prepared in line with Government advice, had been provided to staff. In addition to published guidance providing an overview on in-person teaching, risk assessment templates for the most common kinds of activities had been produced. It was acknowledged that Schools may wish to hold activities that deviate from these templates and that the templates could be updated to reflect this.

79.4 Siladitya Bhattacharya, Head of School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, was invited to provide an update on the experience of teaching at Foresterhill, where the teaching term had already commenced. Siladitya noted that, overall, the experience had been positive but had required flexibility and adaptation. He noted that the fundamentals of delivering teaching on campus were anchored in clear risk assessments and circulation plans for each building and setting robust and flexible standard operating procedures and inductions for building users. He informed members of the Senate that the flow of people through corridors was highlighted as a point of key importance and focus, as it had been noted there was a tendency for building users to become slightly relaxed about social distancing as teaching events ended and people exited buildings. Members of the Senate acknowledged that advance visits to campus were recommended to ensure familiarity with signage. Siladitya
explained to the Senate that a dedicated group had been established within the School, to work closely with the Campus Planning Group (CPG) and to provide feedback to it on challenges faced. Siladitya suggested that while a degree of anxiety was to be expected, the majority of staff and students, in the context of Covid-19, were habitually observing good practices and developing safe solutions to minor emergent issues. Siladitya noted that, for some colleagues, it was acknowledged that face to face teaching would not be possible. He informed the Senate that these staff had worked to exchange roles with others to ensure learning outcomes could be delivered. Siladitya observed that the levels of anxiety amongst staff and students could been seen to decrease as they adjusted to procedures on campus.

79.5 Ruth provided a presentation to the Senate on why a blended learning approach had been chosen. It was noted that a majority of new and returning students had indicated that, if possible, they wanted to be on campus, with blended learning also supporting those unable to return. It was specifically noted that all plans for blended learning were consistent with Scottish Government guidance and expectations.

79.6 In concluding the presentations to the Senate, Karl stressed the importance of the University’s response being a community response that required a shared duty in understanding the campus pledge and committing to detailed guidance. It was noted that all academic staff were shortly due to receive further guidance in this regard.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

80.1 The Principal invited questions and comments from those present. A discussion ensued, the main tenets of which were as follow:

- Amy Bryzgel, representing the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, noted concern amongst her constituents that the risk assessment form does not allow staff to note any concerns about at-risk dependents or family members outside of the additional comments box. Karl confirmed that there was no specific box on the form and that the process had been underway for some time, but this could be looked at. Debbie Dyker, Director of People, added that while the forms could be looked at, many members of staff have gone through the risk assessment process and had discussions with their line managers. The guidance for managers could also be explored to establish if further guidance can be given on how to handle these circumstances. Amy, along with Helen Martin, School of Education noted that the form had only been received very recently prior to the meeting of Senate or not received at all. Karl noted that if the process had been delayed within the School, further discussion could take place.

- Helen Martin, representing the School of Education, and Richard Hepworth, on behalf of the School of Natural and Computing Sciences, reported that some Academic Line Managers (ALMs) were unsure what criteria to apply in meetings and whether these meetings decide if staff are returning to campus. Richard suggested more guidance was necessary. Responding, Debbie Dyker, Acting Director of Operations, explained that the HR team had planned further meetings with Schools based on feedback that some line-managers were not clear on their role regarding the forms. Further feedback was welcomed if more guidance was required through Heads of School and ALMs.

- David Anderson, on behalf of the School of Social Science, followed up on the points made regarding receipt of the forms and noted that his School had also only recently received the forms. David queried on what basis staff could complete the risk assessment forms when they had not received their teaching timetable and may be expected to undertake multiple
iterations of the same small-group teaching event over a single day. David also wished to add that the exercise of assessing the risk of blended learning accounted for contingencies in a scenario where multiple staff became ill. David asked if the SMT had looked at issues of scale. Karl explained that it was not anticipated that there would be in excess of 20% of the usual on-campus teaching. While it was understood that some individuals would be teaching multiple sessions, numbers would still be low. There was no guidance from the Scottish Government suggesting that the amount of times performing an activity would factor into its safety. Ruth explained that the request for information about the readiness of Schools for blended learning was intended to get an understanding of how Schools were proceeding and if any further support was required. Timetables were now with Schools, although there was some flexibility due to student numbers. David noted that staff had not yet had access to their timetables. Ruth anticipated that School leadership teams should be in contact regarding these shortly.

- Tom Rist, representing the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, asked for clarification on why face-to-face teaching had been coded red in the risk assessment at this late stage, and sought clarification as to how this tallied with the claim that the anxiety of colleagues was a forefront issue. Tom noted that he had observed a high level of anxiety within his School, prior even to an awareness about face-to-face teaching being coded red. Tom further expressed concern about how well blended learning would operate under pandemic conditions, as this was not what the delivery method was designed for. He noted concern for very small units such as those within his School where the absence of even a small number of staff could prove very problematic and lead to student disadvantage. The Principal clarified that the risk register had been amended in recognition of anxieties about a return to campus. Ruth, also responding, acknowledged that it was true that blended learning was not specifically designed for a pandemic, however, that the University’s approach was developed with wider consultation across the sector and in the context of Covid-19. Ruth stated that the need for a degree of flexibility to address emergent issues was to be expected. Tom suggested that providing further detail to staff would allow for reassurance in this regard. He accepted that it was likely there would challenges to be addressed. Concern was expressed that students may not have been given reasonable expectations about the level of service which could be reasonably be provided. Responding, Ruth confirmed that the University had been transparent in its communications to all students about provision that could reasonably be offered.

- David Mercieca, on behalf of the student body, confirmed that there was an understanding amongst students regarding what could be expected and that there may need to be a degree of flexibility in the face of changing rules and guidance with clear communication provided. Ondrej Kucerak, AUSA Vice-President for Education, expanded on this by stating that it was made clear at the student open session that, if government guidance requires, the University would need to respond to any change in the level of restrictions including those similar to the original lockdown in March.

- Helen Martin, on behalf of the School of Education, queried where students would be permitted to go in between teaching events while on campus. Responding, Karl clarified that the library would be open, along with bookable on-campus study spaces. Helen acknowledged the balance between having safe numbers on campus and providing learning spaces.

- Ben Marsden, representing the School of Divinity, History and Philosophy reported concerns as an ALM that not all staff would be replaceable at short notice. Ben requested guidance on what should be done in cases where a member of staff may feel comfortable delivering on-campus teaching in the short term but begin to feel unsafe as the situation develops. He stated that this would have implications for the delivery promised to students and may pressurise staff to stay on campus. The Principal thanked Ben for raising this point which was illustrative of the contingencies the University must be prepared to tackle. Ruth explained that the plans
for blended learning took this risk into account and that course material had been developed in a manner by which it can be delivered online. It was further noted that the SMT welcomed communication from staff through their ALMs in order to find ways of supporting staff working on campus or, if that is not possible, to establish contingencies so students are not disadvantaged. Karl added that it is vital that staff do not make unilateral decisions but make these along with teaching teams so all involved are aware of what is happening in individual courses. Karl also reiterated remarks from his presentation that many who had returned to campus had found their anxieties diminishing. It was also noted that ongoing work and conversations with trade unions meant that the situation and response was evolving to allow the best course of action to be taken in the interests of staff and students.

- Murilo Da Silva, representing the School of Natural and Computing Sciences, asked if the University had a strategy in place to monitor numbers of Covid-19 cases in the community and if these would be published to allow staff to prepare themselves and make decisions on how to deliver teaching. Responding, Karl confirmed that numbers were being monitored and must be reported to public health authorities. It was stated that the University would be transparent with the wider community. Debbie Dyker confirmed that the strategy would involve monitoring both those who have tested positive and those who are self-isolating, the process for which exists separately from the reporting and test and protect measures, and measures in place for reporting information to public health authorities.

- Frauke Jurgensen, on behalf of the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, queried how the risk and feasibility of on-campus activities was measured, particularly in regard to those activities which take place in small groups. It was acknowledged that until infection rates are much lower, some activities could not take place and were prohibited, such as live music performance and practice. It was noted that some of these activities were essential to the development of students and the research activities of staff. Frauke expressed concern that there was a lack of transparency on how it would be decided that activities such as group tutorials, with their attendant risks, could proceed while other small group activities which did not appear to pose any greater risk were still not allowed. Karl explained that units were asked to risk assess their own activity and decide if these could take place. Members of the Senate noted that risk assessments were provided for activities in line with Scottish Government advice, to determine if activities were safe to proceed with mitigation in place, or if proceeding would be unsafe. Frauke stated that a greater concern was present in the Government’s multi-stage plan, in which the kind of activities that music students and researchers engage in were quite far away. Karl proposed further discussion about this specialist area of risk assessment offline with himself or Debbie.

- Alessandra Cecolin, representing the School of School of Divinity, History and Philosophy wished to know if lecturers would be permitted to ask students to wear a mask for the entirety of a tutorial. Alessandra also asked if the University had plans to offer a free flu vaccination to staff teaching on campus to reduce the instance of symptoms that may be mistaken for Covid-19. Debbie confirmed that the University was in contact with a Pharmacy regarding delivery of the flu vaccination and hoped to offer further information shortly. Karl clarified that face coverings may be removed in-class once everyone was safely seated with 2-metre physical distancing. It was noted that there was currently no requirement from either the Government or the University to wear a mask once safely positioned.

- Scott Styles, on behalf of the School of Law, requested an opportunity to visit teaching spaces ahead of the return to campus, in order for staff to familiarise with them and to ensure that they are adequate. Karl confirmed that the organisation of visits to teaching spaces for staff was in hand, with further details expected soon. Scott also asked if priority testing would be carried out if required. Karl confirmed that ongoing discussions were taking place with the Scottish Government to establish a walk-in testing centre in Aberdeen, near the campus. This
was expected by the end of September, but the exact location and opening date was not yet known.

- David Anderson asked if the Principal’s statements that no-one who felt unsafe would be compelled to hold face-to-face teaching were formalised and published in written form. Karl confirmed that this was already in the CPG commitments that had been consulted upon, approved and published.

- Amy Bryzgel again raised concerns about staff anxieties. Amy noted that mental health was a factor in any staff risk assessment. She stated that her constituents had suggested the following to ease anxiety: the mass testing of students, (as many under-25s are symptomatic); the testing of wastewater to identify outbreaks in specific buildings or dormitories; the requirement to wear face coverings in classrooms. The Principal noted that there was debate in the scientific community on the efficacy of mass-testing. Siladitya clarified the distinction between suspected cases (where an individual is displaying symptoms) and asymptomatic cases which comprise those who may be carrying the virus without displaying symptoms, those who may be immune and those who are completely unaffected. Siladitya also clarified key issues in the debate around mass testing including the risk of false-positives increasing in proportion to the amount of testing carried out, resulting in an impact on society and healthcare systems and testing only providing a snapshot of a person’s condition at the time of testing and not giving total confidence that the virus may not be contracted between the point of testing and the result. Siladitya added that the number of positive tests within the University community had been very small. Karl confirmed that wastewater testing was under exploration in consultation with the campus trade unions. Karl also explained that while there was no existing guidance recommending face coverings once safely seated, there was scope for this to be updated based on feedback to provide reassurance or in response to rising cases.

80.2 The Principal thanked those present for voicing their concerns clearly and constructively, aiding the addressing of these points as efficiently as possible. The Principal stressed the importance of continuing to put students first. He made it clear that it was vital that staff set the right example for students and are compliant with guidance and put health and safety first. The Principal noted that he would be happy for further extraordinary Senate meetings to take place to discuss blended learning, if necessary.