UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2021


APPROVAL OF AGENDA

30.1 The Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members of the Senate to the first meeting of Senate of the 2021 calendar year. 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 asked to please refrain from using the comments function during presentations and reminded of the mechanism for voting through Microsoft Teams. It was noted that observers conducting the Senate Effectiveness Review were present.

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

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

31.1 The Principal invited members of the Senate to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2020. The minutes were approved with no amendments.
32.1 The Principal reported that the University’s finances were satisfactory, with a level of deficit projected in the new year still being the expectation. The January post-graduate intake was positive, and all involved with ensuring this took place successfully were thanked. The financial consequences resulting from student rents being waived as a response to Covid were noted. It was confirmed that the Scottish Government were providing some support in response to this.

32.2 The impact of Brexit was not as negative as expected due to access to Horizon Europe research funding still being available. Access to Erasmus Plus was no longer possible, however the Turing Scheme allowed for global student mobility. The Turning Scheme has a focus upon students who may typically face barriers to student mobility.

32.3 The results of the most recent staff survey showed an improvement upon previous surveys and were good in relation to the wider sector. It was noted that concern about workloads remained an area of concern. Andrew McKinnon, School of Social Science, was invited to present his question on staff workload concerns.

32.4 Andrew McKinnon noted that the level of dissatisfaction regarding workload concerns was strikingly high amongst academic staff and there was concern that the survey did not fully reflect the extent of the problem. It was explained that there was widespread feeling that recent measures to address these concerns did not do enough to benefit staff involved primarily in teaching to the same degree they benefit staff with administrative responsibilities. The initiatives in place were not felt to help those most in need of workload reduction. The Principal and Vice-Principal were invited to respond to queries.

32.5 The Principal’s view on why pressure had appeared to fall disproportionately on academic staff was sought. It was queried what challenges there are to significantly reducing workloads, particularly for academic staff. The Principal answered this by noting that the major challenge is that the University is understaffed, as a result of several years of staff cuts between 2013 and 2018. This has begun to be addressed through the 50 extra T&R posts recruited in 19/20. Further staff recruitment was planned prior to the onset of the pandemic, and it was planned to resume this dependant on revenue growth in 21/22. The Principal noted that the University was in the top quartile for performance with third quartile student-staff ratios and acknowledged that this was unsustainable.

32.6 It was also queried if further work was underway centrally to address how workloads could be reduced for academic staff or if this was the responsibility of Schools to address based on the options made available in the toolkit. The Senior Vice-Principal confirmed that methods of addressing workload are still being considered centrally. The Toolkit was developed to empower individuals and teams to address workloads within directorates and Schools by identifying where activities might be streamlined.

32.7 It was asked if any further work was underway to consider how workload strain impacts those with caring responsibilities or if this was the responsibility of Schools to establish based on the resources in the toolkit. The Vice-Principal explained that the toolkit provided a template for structured conversations around caring responsibilities, as these can be highly individual, paired with structural review within Schools. Further to this, feedback was sought to inform the Workload Review Group to address challenges.
32.8 The Principal confirmed that additional financial support was being investigated and would not be sourced from existing School budgets. It was emphasised that there would not be competition for resources between academic staff and professional services, but dialogue between Schools and Directorates would identify pressure points.

32.9 Daniel Cutts, Postgraduate Research Student, noted that PhD students had been offered the opportunity to provide teaching support which had a consequential impact on their own personal research workloads. Daniel wanted to ensure that recompense this was fair. The Principal agreed that pay should be fair and consistent, although this did not imply that it should necessarily be equal to academic staff members.

32.10 Amy Bryzgel, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, commented that academics held themselves to very high standards and were reluctant to lower these, even in the context of the pandemic. It was requested that top-down measures are in place to address workloads. The Principal acknowledged that sustained excellence was not expected at the moment and that temporary slowing down was acceptable.

32.11 Brice Rea, School of Geosciences, had concerns regarding staff on teaching and scholarship contracts. It was felt that these staff had no room for manoeuvre, while those on teaching and research contracts had a higher degree of flexibility. It was also noted that Schools were receiving requests for information. It was requested that more autonomy be given to Schools to ease back on internal requests for information. The Principal confirmed that the Scottish Government had had sought to reduced bureaucracy in light of current circumstances, and the Senior Management Team are also reviewing this.

32.12 Frauke Jürgensen, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, requested that students are appraised of the workload pressures on staff to help manage expectations. The Principal believed that this was taking placed based on student feedback received. Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), confirmed that methods of communicating this to students could be considered. The Vice Principal added that the Parents and Carers Network planned to communicate with students to follow up on the expectations of both staff and students. It was confirmed that top-down communication from the Workload Review Group was planned.

32.13 The Principal was to provide a further update at the upcoming open session.

**RACE EQUALITY PRESENTATION BY RUTH TAYLOR, VICE PRINCIPAL (EDUCATION) & SILADITYA BHATTACHARYA, HEAD OF SCHOOL (MEDICINE, MEDICAL SCIENCES & NUTRITION)**

33.1 Ruth opened the presentation by explaining that work was taking place with regards to addressing race equality and creating an anti-racist University. This was in line with the University’s Aberdeen 2040 commitments, but work was accelerated due the Black Lives Matter movement, representations from staff and students (locally and across the sector) and sectorial reports and studies.

33.2 Race equality was identified as a sector-wide issue and the University had signed the Advance HE declaration on race which acknowledged institutional racism and racial harassment in Universities.
33.3 The University’s vision to address race equality was laid out for Senate and had been discussed through the Race Equality Strategy Group. It was emphasised that anti-racism is action based and acknowledged that racism exists on campus.

33.4 The aim was to establish a collaborative, University-wide approach to anti-racism. It was noted that Advance HE and the QAA are undertaking a joint project on the ‘Anti-Racist Curriculum’ of which Ruth is a deputy chair. RESG has put in place a data plan to gather the data required for the work on the Race Equality Charter. Promotions, recruitment, and progression were some of the areas under review and with actions in place. It was noted that membership of the Race Equality Network had been steadily increasing.

33.5 Siladitya Bhattacharya explained some of the current actions and how all could contribute. The Race Equality Strategy Group had been established to identify and address systemic inequalities, ensure that decolonising the curriculum work is taken forward, develop and deliver partnerships, take forward the requirements for the Race Equality Charter and for the Tackling Racial Harassment action plan, amongst other actions. A coherent training strategy was in development, beginning with virtual training for members of the UMG and targeted areas with active engagement, followed by virtual training for all members of staff. The training will focus on individual and institutional anti-racism. Training was to build support mechanisms for BAME staff and students and the need for collective action was emphasised. Members of Senate were encouraged to consider enablers and barriers to creating an anti-racist University and a selection of recommended reading, available in the library, was shared. The Principal invited comments and questions.

33.6 Amy Bryzgel thanked the presenters for their efforts. Amy noted concern that the project may lose momentum and be displaced by other projects. Siladitya noted that this work should be viewed as an essential, core part of the University’s behaviour and not an add-on.

33.7 Arash Sahraie, School of Psychology, acknowledged that observation and understanding is essential. The presenters thanked Arash for raising this.

33.8 Ralph O’Connor, School of Language, Literature and Visual Culture, asked if xenophobia was part of the group remit, and if so, how this is linked. It was confirmed that no direct discussion with regards to xenophobia had taken place, but that discussion was ongoing on definition and scope.

33.9 Diane Skatun, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition championed the idea and acknowledgement of the problem. Diane noted that a measure of intermediate success may be the revelation of issues which illustrate the scope of the problem, which it was hoped, would then allow these problems to be addressed.

33.10 Alessandra Cecolin, School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, noted that the questions of Western and white supremacy were entrenched in every aspect of Western culture, including teaching and teaching resources. It was queried how this could be addressed. Siladitya responded that there was an increasing body of work that offered different perspectives. Ruth confirmed that the Decolonising the Curriculum working group was taking this forward and will seek relevant expertise on the group. It was confirmed that this was to be an institutional dialogue and not a top-down directive.

33.11 The Principal noted that it was disturbing to find that staff had reported feeling discriminated against within the previous 12 months.
UPDATE ON SENATE EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW

34.1 The Senior Vice-Principal explained that work on the Senate Effectiveness Review had been temporarily suspended from Spring 2020 to the Autumn due to the pandemic. Advance HE had been appointed to act as external facilitators for the review and, as such, were observing the business of Senate. It had been intended to complete the review by the end of the 2020/21 academic year, but suggested that the pace was slowed to allow full engagement with submission of a report in Autumn 2021 to take account of workload pressures and intersection with the Governance Review (35.2 refers).

GOVERNANCE REVIEW: AN UPDATE FROM THE UNIVERSITY SECRETARY

35.1 A brief recap was provided. The initial phase one report was commissioned in November 2019. This expanded to meet the requirements of the SFC and OSCAR reviews of payments to the former Principal in February and July 2020. These required that an externally facilitated review of governance took place with reporting of actions and outcomes. The internal phase one report was submitted to Court in November 2020 and focused on structure and operations which now need to be examined in terms of culture, values, and behaviours. There were a significant number of recommendations, the majority of which will be brought forward and require further consideration during the external part of the review. The relationship between Senate and Court required consideration, with appropriate involvement from Senate and the outcome of the Senate Effectiveness Review incorporated. The external review was originally intended to conclude in March 2021; however, this has been extended until the beginning of the next academic year. This would involve observation, workshops and facilitated sessions.

35.2 It was proposed by the Senior Vice-Principal that the Senate Effectiveness Review was allowed to take place at a slower pace and presented in the Autumn with more intensive involvement from Senators in the coming months. It was acknowledged that there may be no ideal time, but views were welcomed to identify the best period. There were no objections to this proposal.

NO DETRIMENT PROCEDURES 2021

36.1 Ruth Taylor provided a brief summary of rationale and the proposal. The proposal had been reviewed by various committees to date, whose comments had been incorporated into the amended version presented to Senate. The proposal was made in response to the new period of lockdown and it was emphasised that it was not in response to the quality of teaching or delivery, but due to the external impact.

36.2 Input on the proposal had been received from AUSA and external examiners’ comments from the previous academic year had been reviewed. Wording issues, issues affecting year-long courses and the need for IT solutions had all been taken into consideration. No finalised IT solution was in place as of the meeting of Senate, but it was believed that a solution was feasible should Senate back the proposal. Conversations with Schools were planned to make sure unique scenarios could be accounted for.

36.3 Concern was noted that students may disengage based on their 1st half-session performance, however it was believed that this would be unlikely as transcripts would show the grades
achieved, even if they were excluded from award calculations. It was confirmed that there was some grade inflation observed under the previous policy, but this was in line with the wider sector. It was confirmed that it was proposed that the capping of resits would be in place. The rules for progression had not changed.

36.4 Ondrej Kucerak (Vice President for Education) noted support for the policy, adding that it was likely to be the norm across the sector. The policy was felt to address situations beyond the University’s control. Ondrej noted that he would have liked to have seen Qatar included in the proposal and felt that their exclusion was a missed opportunity. Ruth confirmed that the proposal was a response to the Scottish lockdown context and that conversations had taken place with the Qatar campus.

36.5 Ava Lindberg, student representative, commented that the policy put a focus on learning and would be helpful to students. This was also echoed by Taylan Campbell, student representative.

36.6 Alex Brasier, School of Geosciences, observed that there may be some unfairness if the policy was applied with the calculations as written and illustrated this with examples. There was also concern over how the policy would impact cohorts of students where students had different splits of credits over each half-session. It was suggested that guidance is given to exam boards to allow flexible application of existing policies. Additionally, Alex noted concern about staff workload due to the volume of calculations that would be required under the proposal. Ruth confirmed that the policy was intended to support those who may perform less well than anticipated within the context of Covid-19 and there was no indication that the policy would allow students to select which grades are considered by exam boards. Schools would be involved in ensuring IT support for calculations was in place. It was noted that consistency across the University was important.

36.7 Sarah Woodin, School of Biological Sciences, noted that colleagues were opposed to the proposal due to the University having sufficient existing measures in place to address extenuating circumstances. There was a strong feeling that the proposal would cause grade inflation, reduce student confidence in the value of their degree and damage the institution’s reputation. There was also concern regarding staff and student motivation. It was felt that the student experience during the second half-session had been improved to date due to increased staff experience of delivery of blended learning.

36.8 Frauke Jürgensen, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, expressed concern that programmes dependent upon year-long projects could theoretically find students with awards based on one level 4 course and the first semester of the student’s 3rd year. The rationale behind the proposal was supported but concerns about the integrity of awards remained.

36.9 The Principal advised caution against allowing extreme cases to inform a decision.

36.10 Bettina Platt, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, reiterated concern around cases whereby students are disadvantaged by their 3rd year performance determining the classification. It was suggested that it would be preferable if any policy was advisory and supported by a robust appeals process.

36.11 Javier González Cuervos, Vice Chair of Education wished to acknowledge that conditions would not necessarily improve for all international students in support of the proposal.
36.12 Abbe Brown, Dean for Student Support, highlighted that many students were concerned that they would not perform as well as hoped and supported the proposal with IT support to ensure staff workload was not adversely affected.

36.13 Brice Rea, School of Geosciences, was in agreement with comments made by other staff noting that existing procedures were in place to support students. Brice was also concerned about the potential devaluation of students’ degrees from the perspective of potential employers. Brice also noted that he could not see the rationale for separating the first and second half-sessions in the policy.

36.14 Colin North, School of Geosciences, agreed that existing policies were satisfactory noting that he was unaware of any analysis suggesting that these were insufficient. Colin also expressed concern about the devaluation of degrees to employers.

36.15 Iain McEwan, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, noted concern about eight potential calculations adding to staff workloads.

36.16 The Vice-Principal commented that consistency was sought and that the proposal supported a consistent approach to progression and awards.

36.17 Scott Styles, School of Law, believed that a system that allowed for eight ways of calculation was itself inconsistent. Scott added that he felt that the University had been prepared for the further lockdown due to teaching having been delivered online for the academic year. It was added that a blanket no detriment policy would lead to grade inflation and undermine quality and that existing procedures were consistent.

36.18 Daniel Cutts, Postgraduate Research Student Representative, noted that grade inflation would be dependent upon the number of students seeking adjustment and that he disliked the use of the first semester as a basis for calculation. It was felt that it must be clear to students if individual circumstances are being considered along with the workload implications of this.

36.19 Ondrej Kucerak asked staff to be confident that students were looking to do their best at this time. Ondrej provided examples of other Universities that had similar policies in place and asked the Senate to consider the proposal based on likely scenarios and not fringe scenarios adding that the policy would ease both staff and student workloads.

36.20 In order to avoid confusion, Ruth Taylor confirmed that the proposal was only in response to the second-half session lockdown. It was reiterated that the policy was in response to external circumstances and not in response to teaching quality or delivery. While individual circumstances could be considered, there was concern that this would lead to barriers for students unable or unwilling to engage with processes and increase staff workload. It was acknowledged that there may be courses or programmes that sit outside of usual term dates for example, however these could be looked at individually retaining consistency. It was added that frequently asked questions could be developed for Schools with specific concerns.

36.21 Members of Senate were invited to vote on the approval of the proposed no detriment policy. Senate voted to not accept the proposal (Votes in favour 40; Against 56; Abstentions
6). Ruth was requested to consider methods of ensuring that existing procedures can be enhanced to ensure students are not at detriment.

ANY OTHER ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

37.1 No further items were raised for discussion.

RECTORIAL ELECTION

38.1 Senate approved, on the recommendation of the Senate Business Committee, that Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education) acts as Returning Officer for the election. Senate also approved the memberships of the Election Committee and the Student Election Committee.

REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Senate noted the actions taken by the University Committee on Teaching and Learning at its meetings on 20 January 2021.

1. Updated Risk Register for Learning and Teaching

39.1 The UCTL received an updated version of an excerpt of the University’s Risk Register, listing risks specific to Learning and Teaching. It was noted that the Register had been updated to include new risks associated with compliance with Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) requirements, negative student feedback and the maintenance of good quality assurance processes.

2. Update on the Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group

39.2 The UCTL received and discussed a paper providing an update on the Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group (BLITFG).

3. No Detriment Procedures

39.3 Members of the Committee received a paper on draft no detriment procedures. The Committee were content to approve the procedures for introduction and to forward to the Senate for consideration and approval.

4. Student Withdrawals Data

39.4 The Committee received a report on student withdrawal data, acknowledging that while each individual student is very important, overall, the data demonstrated that non-continuation rates were very positive. Members of the Committee noted the need to keep the January 2021 non-continuation rate under close review. Members of the Committee agreed that it would be beneficial to look at the data in respect of certain groups, such as widening access students, in more detail. The Committee noted that further updates, including such level of detail, would follow to a future meeting of the UCTL.
5. Inclusion and Accessibility Policy

39.5 Members of the Committee received an updated version of the draft Inclusion and Accessibility Policy. Members of the Committee agreed with the proposal that the policy and related issues, such as how it could be monitored and integrated into existing practices, would be best discussed in detail by a small group. The Committee agreed that work should be progressed to engage relevant parties in discussion before progression of the proposed policy to the Senate.

6. Race Equality Strategy: Decolonising the Curriculum Sub-Group

39.6 The Committee received a paper on proposed terms of reference and membership for a Decolonising the Curriculum Steering Group. Members of the Committee noted that the sub-group would report to the UCTL. The Committee were content to approve the proposal for the setup of the group.

7. Enhanced Transcript Update

39.7 The Committee considered a series of papers on the Enhanced Transcript. Members of the Committee approved:

- The proposal to report, where relevant, both recognised roles and the accredited STAR Award programme on the Enhanced Transcript. Members of the Committee were informed of the current position with regards the STAR award, where students are not permitted to receive it and the recognised activity, they reflected on to achieve the award, on their transcript. Members of the Committee agreed that both should appear on the transcript, agreeing that while the roles related to each other, the work undertaken to complete each was different and should be recognised as such.
- The proposal for the set-up of a short-term task and finish group to conduct a full review of the framework for enhanced transcript recognition of students’ activities.
- The proposal to include AUSA Student Group Volunteers and Student Content Creators on the Enhanced Transcript as recognised activities from September 2020. Members of the Committee were happy to support the inclusion of all the roles proposed.

8. Term Dates 2021/22

39.8 The UCTL approved the Term Dates for Academic Year 2021-22 (available on the University’s webpages here).

9. UCTL and the Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group (BLITFG)

39.9 Further to the meeting of the UCTL, it was agreed that the Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group (BLITFG) agenda would be integrated into UCTL. This decision was taken to address workload in the current context of the new lockdown and to move towards a more integrated approach to taking forward the requirements for the Education portfolio.

REF UPDATE

40.1 Senate noted the following:
The institutional timetable for finalisation of the REF2021 submissions recommended by the REF Steering Group and agreed by the Senior Management Team

That the Research England REF team and the funding councils are reviewing urgently whether any further measures are required to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 related restrictions on institutional preparations for REF2021

That further revisions of the REF timetable by the Research England REF team are possible, but a further postponement of the final submission is currently considered unlikely

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SENATE REPRESENTATION ON SENIOR GOVERNOR RECRUITMENT COMMITTEE

41.1 Senate noted that Amy Bryzgel and Andrew McKinnon were duly elected to serve on the Senior Governor Recruitment Committee.