UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 5 February 2020


APPROVAL OF AGENDA

31.1 The Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members of the Senate to the newly refurbished room in the King’s Quad for a meeting of the Senate. The attention of members was drawn to the instructions on the screen regarding the use of Ombea for voting.

1.2 The Principal invited members to approve the agenda. He noted that no items for routine approval or information had been brought forward for discussion. Members of the Senate approved the agenda and the meeting proceeded.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES OF 9 DECEMBER 2019

32.1 The Principal invited members of the Senate to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2019. No comments or objections were raised, and the meeting proceeded.
PROPOSED MOTION FOR SENATE REGRETTING THE DEPARTURE OF THE UK FROM MEMBERSHIP OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

33.1 Scott Styles was invited to propose his motion to the Senate. Scott informed the Senate that the motion was largely self-explanatory. He stated that it was being proposed as a consequence of the significance of the UK exit from the EU, its practical implications and its distressing nature. He sought the support of members of the Senate for the motion and, if approved, its communication to the wider University community. Mr Styles read out sections 7 and 8 of the motion in providing a summary of its meaning and intention:

7. Senate expresses the solidarity it feels with all members of staff and students affected by the UK’s withdrawal from the EU who are citizens of EU member states, and affirms that the University of Aberdeen continues to welcome their participation in the life of this University as it has for the past 525 years, now and in the future.

8. Senate affirms that while United Kingdom state may be leaving the European Union of states, the community of scholars and students who together comprise the corporation that is the 525 year old University of Aberdeen reaffirms its historical role as a European University and will continue to participate in the scholarly and cultural life of Europe in the future.

33.2 The Principal thanked Scott for presenting the motion and invited further comment from members of the Senate. No further comments were received. As such, the Principal moved to undertake a vote on the motion. Members of the Senate voted overwhelmingly in favour of the motion.

UPDATE FROM PRINCIPAL

34.1 The Principal, in providing an update to the Senate, began by addressing a couple of matters with regards to Brexit. Firstly, he stated the importance of Erasmus+ continuing. In addition, he stated the importance of continued access to Horizon Europe and the research funding attached to it. He further stated the importance of the University being able to attract European students to Aberdeen. He stated that he would like to see continued funding from the Scottish Government for the Education of European students. The Principal informed members of the Senate that he was making these points to the UK and Scottish Governments. The Senate were informed that the Scottish Government was sympathetic and had made public statements to this effect. He noted that Richard Lochhead, the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science had recently visited the University and that he had made these points to him. He informed the Senate that John Swinney, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, would also be visiting in the coming week and committed to also make these comments to him. The Principal noted that the funding for European students arriving to the University in the autumn of 2020 was guaranteed for the duration of their studies. He informed the Senate that it was his understanding that the Scottish Government was considering extending that commitment for at least one further year and that the University was committed to encouraging the Scottish Government to do so.

34.2 The Principal acknowledged that it looked as though the University was heading towards another period of industrial action. Since the December 2019 meeting of the Senate, he stated that there had been some progress on a national level regarding the arrangements in relation to pay gaps, casualisation and workloads. He further noted a series of very constructive talks on the report of the joint expert panel on USS between
Universities UK and UCU. He noted his disappointment that these talks had not proved sufficient to avert another period of industrial action. The Principal reiterated how pleased he had been in December that, despite the difficulties, the atmosphere within the University had been collegiate, constructive, cordial and respectful. He stated his confidence in the University being able to continue dealing with the issues in this way.

34.3 The Principal reminded members of the Senate that the Scottish Government budget was imminent and that there may be some news for the Higher Education sector. He stated his hope that no news of a cut would be reported. He expressed his expectation of news of flat cash. He stated the importance of generating our own revenue from the activities in which the University was engaged.

34.4 The Principal invited Richard Wells, Vice-Principal (International Partnerships) to provide members of the Senate with an update regarding the University’s arrangements with regards to Coronavirus. Richard assured colleagues that a group had been established and was meeting frequently to discuss the issue. He stated that, initially, the group had focussed on communication with staff, students and partner institutions and was looking at contingency planning measures should a significant outbreak affect the UK and Scotland in particular. Richard stated that the University was following its published contingency plan for pandemic flu, with a number of adaptations as a consequence of the differences in the viruses. He provided the example that the University was currently in the process of entering discussions with Schools regarding the preparedness for the use of alternative methods of delivering teaching and assessment should large activities such as lectures be advised against. Richard stressed to members of the Senate that, at this stage, it was not expected that this would happen but that steps were being taken to ensure the appropriate technology and training were in places, should it be required. Ralph O’Connor asked where students could be directed to for further information on contingency planning. Richard responded to state that there were coronavirus webpages with the information to date and to where further information would be posted.

34.5 Concluding his update, the Principal reminded members of the Senate that Aberdeen 2040 would be launched on Monday in Elphinstone Hall. He stated that the launch of the strategy was to continue to be true to the University’s foundational purpose of being ‘open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others through outstanding Education and Research.’ He stated his thanks to all those who had engaged in the preparation of the strategy.

REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COURT

35.1 On behalf of the Senate Assessors, Neil Vargesson provided an update to the Senate of the Court meeting held on 10 December 2019. Neil introduced the paper and drew the attention of the Senate to the following key points:

- The approval of the Aberdeen 2040 strategy and the move from the development of the strategy to its implementation and the development of associated five-year plans;
- The approval of the £50 million plans to revitalise the heart of King’s College campus with new teaching and learning spaces, including a new home for the Business School and major enhancements to several buildings in the area of King’s College;
- The encouraging increase in student recruitment, particularly at postgraduate level, and the consequent increase in tuition fee revenue;
The discussion of a paper on the progress of the University’s preparations for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021

No questions were asked of Neil by the members of the Senate and the meeting proceeded.

ENHANCING INTERDISCIPLINARITY: PRESENTATION FROM VP RESEARCH AND VP EDUCATION FOLLOWED BY DISCUSSION

36.1 The Principal invited Marion Campbell, Vice-Principal (Research) and Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), to provide a presentation to Senate on Enhancing Interdisciplinarity, a copy of which is filed with the principal copy of the minute.

36.2 Following the presentation, members of the Senate were invited to ask questions and discuss the matters raised, particularly in regard to:

- How to maximise continued engagement
- Learning from other experiences
- Underpinning elements for interdisciplinary education
- Inter-weaving interdisciplinary research and education (e.g., through PGT and PGR)
- Overarching vision for interdisciplinary education

36.3 A discussion ensued, the main tenets of which were as follows:

- Ralph O’Connor thanked Marion and Ruth for the presentation and the exciting thoughts regarding the interdisciplinarity strand of Aberdeen 2040. He stated that there had been a lot said of challenge-driven research or challenge-driven interdisciplinarity teaching but not of curiosity. He stated that amongst many of the disciplines, curiosity-driven research is crucial.
- Responding, Marion agreed with Ralph’s suggestion and the fundamental nature of this as a building block of research.
- Frauke Jurgens stated concern as to the apparent narrowness in the definition of interdisciplinarity. She stated that if the emphasis was skewed, the University wouldn’t be recognised a place for the pure sciences and humanities or a place where there is room for the examination and exploration of fundamental questions, problems and principles. She further stated her concern that this could lead to further paperwork in the proposal of courses to include reference to interdisciplinarity. She noted an imbalance in the way things were being presented.
- Responding, Ruth thanked Frauke for her comments and stated her apologies as this had not been the intention of the presentation. Ruth stated that regardless of terminology, there were opportunities for challenge within the areas described. Ruth recognised the importance of employability in real life but agreed that it was not all about this.
- Frauke further noted the importance of not using phrases such as real life and caution in the use of popular phrases such as this.
- Jeff Oliver, on behalf of a constituent, noted challenges including:
  - the bringing together of supervisors, sometimes from very disparate backgrounds, who haven’t necessarily undertaken interdisciplinary research before and the putting in place of appropriate structures in order to accommodate very different research structures
  - the discrimination of those who have achieved PhDs in interdisciplinary areas at the point of employment
Responding, Marion acknowledged the points raised by Jeff and the importance of the discussion of them. She informed the Senate that the University was acutely aware of these challenges and that the Graduate School was undertaking work in this regard.

A member of the Senate stated concern regarding issues affecting the ability to undertake interdisciplinary work within the University. He noted these as (i) the devolution of budgets to School level and the removal of the College structure and (ii) since the removal of the College structure, the loss of knowledge about activity and events ongoing within other Schools. He stated the importance of an improved communication strategy.

Responding, the Principal noted the points as important and stated that there was University resource to support interdisciplinarity. He stressed the importance of sharing news of events such as seminars. Marion informed the Senate of work ongoing within the Research team to improve communication and awareness of School activity.

Brice Rea, representing the discipline of Geography, stated that interdisciplinarity was not simple. He noted that the engagement of staff was important but that it would take time given resource implications. He also stressed the importance of engaging students in the work. Brice sought clarification on the timeline for change.

Responding, Marion acknowledged that the strategy was designed for the next 20 years and that it would not be possible to achieve this quickly. She stated, however, the importance of establishing a plan/timeline for implementation. Marion emphasised the importance of engagement to ensure appropriate progression.

Greg Gordon agreed with the points made regarding the impact of the University’s change in structure and removal of its Colleges. Conversely, however, he noted that interdisciplinarity was now easier between Schools out with the College structure they used to share. He stated that the dissemination of information was very difficult and proposed that the specific roles of the newly appointed Deans would help in this regard.

David Watts agreed with the challenges associated with interdisciplinarity at the point of employment. David informed members of the Senate that he had designed Sixth Century Courses and stated that the Graduate Attributes (GAs) were helpful in the development of these courses. David further stated that the graduate attributes already provide an underpinning element for interdisciplinary education.

Alfred Akisanya stated the importance of considering the impact on students and ensuring ownership of programmes which are interdisciplinary.

Responding, Ruth agreed with the points raised and noted that Dariya Koleva, Education Officer, was engaging in meetings of the informal Education committee to ensure student engagement in all aspects on discussion.

Dariya Koleva reiterated the importance of developing an attitude to support interdisciplinarity. She noted that students in their honour’s years are often encouraged to focus on one discipline. Dariya stated the importance of student input in this area. Dariya also echoed concerns regarding PhD students with supervisors from different areas.

A student member of the Senate emphasised the points made by Dariya and the importance of student engagement.

Finally, George Coghill stated that the problem of the employment of PhD students undertaking interdisciplinary PhDs was not universal.

36.4 The Principal thanked members of the Senate for their contribution to discussion. He acknowledged further discussions would follow as, as had rightly been pointed out,
this was not an easy commitment to meet. He stated that all the commitments within Aberdeen 2040 were challenging and none would be straightforward to address. He noted that the strategy had been designed for the next 20 years and would be approached in stages, at a pace the community felt able to accommodate. The Principal stated that interdisciplinary and practical challenges could not be addressed without ensuring the underlying intellectual rigour and analytical skill of each discipline. He stated that unless this was achieved, and of the highest quality, it would not be possible to contribute effectively to the five interdisciplinary challenges in Aberdeen 2040.

RESPONSE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN TO THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

37.1 The Principal invited Pete Smith to provide a presentation to Senate on the response of the University to the Climate Emergency, a copy of which is filed with the principal copy of the minute.

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

- Jonathan Pettit asked, with regards transport, if there were any figures regarding those members of staff who drove to work but lived locally.
- Responding, Pete stated that travel surveys had been undertaken, in addition to the gathering of data on emissions as part of expense claims. He noted that there was working ongoing with regards to the commute to work. Fraser Lovie added that a rough estimate of the impact of staff and students commuting was 3000 tonnes. He stated that the exercise had not otherwise explicitly been undertaken. He informed the Senate that the impact of business travel on the University's footprint was approximately 4000 tonnes out of a declared footprint of 21000 tonnes. Fraser acknowledged that measures to improve these figures was an important part of future discussion.
- Liz Curtis asked whether any work had been undertaken regarding food miles and the production of products such as almond milk. Responding, Pete noted that this was a tiny part of the carbon footprint in relation to food.
- A member of the Senate noted that travelling by train can often be more expensive than flying and sought consideration by the University in the implementation of the Sustainability action plan.
- Richard Wells stated that during the development of the strategy it has become apparent that there is a slightly difficult boundary between the international strand and the sustainability strand. He informed the Senate that this had absolutely been recognised and would be a key area to be worked on in the development of both elements of the strategy.
- A member of the Senate acknowledged the commitment given in the presentation to work with the local oil and gas sector. He sought clarity as to whether the University was also working with the local farming sector on these issues. The local impact was stressed.
- Responding, Pete acknowledged the potential threat and consequence and the importance of the examples of working with the industry to adapt.
- Ondrej Kucerak acknowledged the temperature impact referred to in the presentation. He asked whether the target was enough given this projection.
- Responding, Pete stated that the University’s target was also dependent on the work of others but as a responsible Education Institution it was important to set an example. He stated that it could be argued that the University could be more ambitious.
• Frauke Jurgensen, regarding travel and commuting, stated that assumptions had previously been made that journeys were being made simply from home to work. She stated that this was not the case and that this must be taken into consideration.
• George Coghill asked as to the University's strategy with regard to ruminants other than beef. It was noted that it could be a staged approach, to include dairy alternatives, for example.
• Jeff Oliver acknowledged the impact of universities, particularly where the efforts of Governments are not going far enough. Jeff further stated the possibility of a reflective culture regarding air travel and encouraged discussion of this.
• Brice Rea stated the importance of the University's unique location in addressing these issues.
• Richard Hepworth asked whether the University would sign up to the SDG accord. Responding, Karl Leydecker, Senior Vice-Principal, confirmed the University would be signing up and that this would be communicated to the University community on Founders’ Day at the strategy launch.
• Karl informed members of the Senate that work was not beginning from scratch on this issue. He noted the importance of the work undertaken by the strategy workstream and that the issues raised were front and central to the University’s strategy. He stated that he would be leading on the implementation plan and that work was beginning to be undertaken with a group being convened to make initial plans. He suggested a Dean for Sustainability may be recruited and that further work would follow.

37.3 The Principal thanked members of the Senate for their contribution to discussion.

NEW DEANS

38.1 Karl Leydecker, Senior Vice-Principal, introduced members of the Senate to the new Dean structure and the newly appointed Deans.

ELIR ONE-YEAR FOLLOW-UP REPORT

39.1 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education) introduced the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) follow up report. Ruth informed members of the Senate of the requirement of the University by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) that the University provide a follow-up report to its ELIR in 2018. She noted that the report was limited at 8 pages and provided an update on the work undertaken to take forward the recommendations and commendations for the University, resulting from the review. Members of the Senate noted that a draft had been submitted to the QAA who had provided some minor feedback which would be reflected in the report following Senate. Members of the Senate noted that the report was comprised of a summary of the areas of commendation and proposed development and following this, an update of development to date. She stated that the report had been considered and endorsed by the SMT and UCTL and distributed widely across the University. Members of the Senate were informed that although the report was required for submission in advance of the Court, a final version would also be sent following the Court meeting. Ruth confirmed that this approach had been agreed with the QAA.

39.2 Members of the Senate were invited to raise any comments or concerns regarding the report. A short discussion ensued as follows:
Regarding section 2.2, Helen Martin stated the importance of working with staff as well as students in the development of the Personal Tutoring scheme. She stated the importance of the consideration of the impact of the scheme on the health and wellbeing of staff. Ruth agreed the importance of both points for the personal tutor review. Regarding section 2.4.2, Helen suggested that it be recognised that not all postgraduate students are paid for the work they undertake and that this should be further looked at. Regarding section 2.6, Helen suggested the addition of a note detailing the pragmatic approach of the University regarding the obtaining of External Examining information. The Principal acknowledged these points; however, it was agreed that this detail was not required for the ELIR report.

Jeff Oliver stated the importance of putting in writing official comment on the gathering of data regarding External Examiners. Karl stated that all School Administrative Officers (SAOs) had been communicated with.

39.3 The Principal thanked members of the Senate for their contribution to discussion and asked whether they were content to approve the report. No objections were raised.

HONORARY DEGREES CRITERIA

40.1 Igor Guz introduced the report from the sub-group of the Honorary Degrees Committee (HDC) recommending changes to the criteria and process for nominations for honorary degree awards. Igor stated that the group met several times, considered the practices of other Universities with similar historic backgrounds, the number of degrees awarded by the University and the process for the nomination of individuals. He noted that the recommendations produced had been approved by the HDC. Igor stated that the majority of the recommendations for revisions to the criteria were self-explanatory. He underlined that the revised process sought to widen those consulted on nominations, set a clear timeline for objections to be raised, require the formulation of clear University and community connections and to enable all members of University staff to submit nominations. Igor invited any questions or comments from the Senate.

40.2 A member of the Senate stated the importance of ensuring the document is gender neutral. It was agreed that the paper would be amended in this regard.

40.3 Brice Rea sought clarification as to whether consideration is given to the match between Graduation ceremonies and Honorary Graduands. It was confirmed that this is undertaken as far as possible, within the time constraints of the Honorary Graduands themselves.

40.4 Abbe Brown stated that the inclusion of ‘cultural heritage’ to Doctor of the University may help to alleviate concerns. Members of the Senate agreed to this insertion in the document. It was agreed that the wording would benefit from the addition from the reference to community engagement.

40.5 Rachel Shanks stated concern as to the potential backlog of nominations and noted that she had submitted one over a year ago but, to date, had no response. She proposed that the next meeting of the HDC be extended to catch up with outstanding nominations. The Principal agreed with this proposal.

40.6 Lindsay Tibbetts asked regarding the suggestion that there be new ways of honouring staff and donors. She asked if this would form part of graduation ceremonies. Lindsay further suggested that student prizes also be considered for inclusion at graduation ceremonies. It was agreed that this would be considered.
40.7 The Principal thanked members for their contribution. The paper was approved subject to the addition of the suggested amendments.

OPPORTUNITY FOR SENATE MEMBERS TO RAISE ANY OTHER ITEMS OF ACADEMIC INTEREST FOR DISCUSSION

41.1 No items were raised for discussion and the meeting proceeded.

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 15 January 2020.

1. Remit and Composition

42.1 The Committee discussed and approved changes to its composition (copy filed with principal copy of minute), including the new addition of the new Education portfolio deans to its membership.

2. Annual Course Review Form

42.2 The Committee approved a revised Annual course Review (ACR form, amended to reflect the changes, as approved by the Senate, to the Course Evaluation Form (available on the University's webpages here).

3. Enhancement-Led Institutional Review One Year Follow up Report

42.3 The Committee received and discussed the draft Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) one year follow up report, agreeing that it should be forwarded to the Senate for approval.

4. Risk Register

42.4 The Committee received and discussed the Risk Register, specifically focusing their attention on section 9, regarding the Student Experience

5. Aberdeen 2040

42.5 The Committee received the final draft of Aberdeen 2040 and began initial discussion on the aspects of the strategy specifically in relation to Education activities.

SENATE REPRESENTATION ON ESTATES COMMITTEE AND DIGITAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

43.1 Senate noted that the Senate Business Committee had approved the following appointments:

Amy Bryzgel as a member of the Estates Committee, and
Murilo da Silva Baptista as a member of the Digital Strategy Committee

43.2 The composition of both the above committees includes two elected members of Senate, further volunteers would therefore be sought.
44.1 Senate noted the update on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 (copy filed with principal copy of minute).

GRADUATE DISCIPLINE CASE -

45.1 Following the conclusion of the disciplinary process considering Allegations of plagiarism against graduates of the University, the decision of the Disciplinary Committee for the above student was to rescind the PhD. Internal appeal processes are now completed. The University Library and the British Library have removed copies of the thesis. In addition, the student was asked to return the degree certificate.

45.2 The student has the opportunity to have the work re-reassessed with the possibility of a lower award being made.