Minutes of the meeting held on 9 October 2020


Apologies: George Boyne, Paula Sweeney, David Smith, Martin Meyer, Russell Williams, Graeme Nixon, Gary Macfarlane, John Barrow, Jerry Morse, Johan Bohan, Laura McCann, Allan Sim, Joachim Schaper, Elizabeth Curtis, Zeray Yihdego, Scott Styles, Andrew McKinnon, Ilia Xypolia, Paul Hallett, Fiona Murray, Pietro Marini, Peter Henderson, Lindsay Tibbetts and Louise Henrard

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

81.1 The Senior Vice-Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members to an extraordinary meeting of the Senate. It was noted that the meeting had been called to discuss second-half session delivery.

81.2 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 would be conducted via a form in the chat function. The Senior Vice-Principal confirmed that as this was an extraordinary meeting of Senate, regular standing items were not included on the agenda.

SECOND HALF-SESSION DELIVERY

82.1 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal for Education, delivered a presentation (a copy of which is filed with the principal copy of the minute) based on the paper circulated to members of Senate on second-half session delivery. It was noted that consideration of this item had been planned for the 21 October meeting of the Senate, however Court, colleagues and students had requested an update prior to this date. Ruth provided Senate with an overview of the paper, including feedback that had been received from Committees to date, including the Blended
Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group (BLITFG) and the University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL).

82.2 Members of the Senate noted that the UCTL had approved the recommendations subject to the inclusion of clarity that they applied to the remainder of the 2010/21 academic year. The Senate were therefore advised that the proposal they were being asked to consider related not only to the second half-session but to the entire academic year. Members of the Senate noted the following other key points outlined in the presentation:

- Flexibility would be maintained to ensure that the University could respond quickly, should Scottish Government restrictions be relaxed or further tightened;
- Blended learning remained consistent with Scottish Government guidance and expectations that Universities deliver on-campus experiences where safe and possible;
- A large January 2021 student intake was expected, with applicants having an expectation of blended learning;
- The blended learning model supported a sense of belonging and community, student retention, mental health and well-being, peer to peer interactions and allowed access to on-campus resources.

82.3 Members of the Senate were advised that discussion around staff experiences had highlighted a need for preparation time for the second-half session. Members of the Senate were informed that a one-week delay to the start of the second term and the addition of a further flexible week, allowing for preparation time, in the second half-session had been proposed. Ruth advised the Senate that such a proposal required further development and that discussions would take place in this regard, before returning to the Senate for consideration. Ruth clarified that there was no expectation that all course materials should be ready in advance of the half-session commencing.

81.4 The Senior Vice-Principal invited Senators to discuss the proposals from the paper. A discussion ensued, the main tenets of which were:

- Amy Bryzgel, representing the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, noted concerns about staff burnout, stating this had become apparent in colleagues after two weeks of teaching and as a consequence of the time spent redeveloping course content over the summer. Amy acknowledged that teaching was going very well and that there was evidence of communities operating well online. Amy suggested to the Senate that staff were struggling due to poorly designed systems and the overwhelming processes involved in delivering both online and on-campus teaching, resulting in a detrimental impact to staff wellbeing. Amy welcomed the fact that there were plans to streamline associated administration where possible but sought further detail on these plans. Amy queried whether the recommendations of the paper were taken as a foregone conclusion as a poll of staff within the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture had returned a majority preference for fully online study. It was felt a shift to fully online teaching would help with the reported administrative issues and address health anxieties. While it was appreciated that staff cannot be forced to teach on campus, this was impractical in smaller disciplines. Amy appealed to the Senior Management Team (SMT) for more information on how processes would be streamlined if a continuation of blended learning was agreed. It was also requested that the guarantee that staff will not be forced to teach on campus be reiterated.
• Richard Hepworth, on behalf of the School of Natural and Computing Sciences, stated that he had received encouraging positive feedback on blended-learning delivery, however, there was an awareness that this was from a self-selecting group and that those with negative feedback were less likely to come forward. It was queried if feedback in this format could be considered reliable. Similar positive feedback on the on-campus experience was reported from several other Schools.

• Alessandra Cecolin, on behalf of the School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, suggested that Senate should be looking at what could be learned from the first half-session. Alessandra expressed to the Senate that the excellent work of teaching staff in delivering blended learning should be recognised along with the stress staff are under to deliver both on-campus and online teaching. Alessandra suggested to the Senate that the decision to either teach on campus or online should be devolved to individual Schools, as not every School required its students to take part in on-campus activities.

• David Anderson, representing the School of Social Science, also sought to discuss devolving the decision to Schools.

• Frauke Jurgensen, on behalf of the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, echoed the view of those who suggested that flexibility was required due to the varying needs of Schools.

• Sarah Woodin, representing the School of Biological Sciences, noted that on-campus teaching was working well for the School of Biological Sciences, with students enjoying lab work and only a very small number of students choosing to study exclusively online, Sarah queried why lectures were required to be asynchronous, when teaching material could be delivered to students within a standard lecture slot. She sought flexibility regarding the set-up of some teaching rooms, noting that many were not conducive to the setup of a course. Sarah also noted concern that the number of on-campus study spaces available were not meeting the demand for spaces for students between teaching events.

• Chris Collins, Head of the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, reported the positive experience of staff within his School. Chris informed the Senate that a number of staff had expressed relief that the campus felt safe and secure with blended learning in place. He stated, however, that colleagues had expressed concern about digital poverty and the exacerbation of inequalities amongst students, particularly where students may live somewhere without access to broadband. Chris stated his awareness of concerns regarding the mental health of students, not only those who are in halls of residence, but amongst those who had returned home. He noted that that access to on-campus facilities, such as libraries and practice rooms, was essential to some programmes.

• Robert Taylor, representing the School of Law, observed that blended learning was still in its infancy and that data was still being collected on its efficacy from staff within the School of Law. He informed the Senate that focus within the School had been on how to deliver blended learning well. Robert noted that, in addition to the pressures on academic staff, support staff had been under a lot of pressure. He noted that while there had been a lot of support available to staff at the onset of the crisis, such as days off and reminders to take breaks from e-mails, measures for staff and students such as e-mail free days or days off would be useful in avoiding burn out.

• Ekaterina Pavlovskaia, representing the School of Engineering, added that staff surveyed with the School had demonstrated a preference to move to a fully online teaching model. She added that a majority of undergraduate students surveyed had indicated a preference for blended learning, while post-graduate students largely indicated a preference for on-campus teaching. Ekaterina noted concerns regarding
blended-learning and stressed that more support and the sharing of good practice was essential to ensure blended-learning worked well.

- Alexandros Zangelidis, on behalf of the Business School, commented that a universal approach would not suit all. He agreed with suggestions that approaches to learning should be devolved to Schools. He noted that some Schools choosing to teach entirely online would free up on campus resources for other schools.

- Ondrej Kucerak, AUSA Vice-President for Education, thanked members of the Senate and their colleagues for all their hard work in preparing for and delivering blended learning. He stated that feedback to date suggested that most students were enjoying the in-person components of their courses and that online delivery was also working well. Ondrej informed the Senate that students had expressed a need for consistency, particularly where international students were concerned. He urged caution in considering Schools taking differing approaches to teaching and stated that all students should have the opportunity to receive some teaching on-campus.

- Responding to some of the points raised, Ruth confirmed that she and Gillian Mackintosh, Director of Academic Services and Online Education, were meeting with BLITFG School representatives to discuss and address any overburden on Schools in terms of processes. Ruth confirmed that quality assurance processes would be as streamlined as possible for the second half-session. Ruth committed to further investigate if additional processes could be simplified. With regard to devolving the decision on how to deliver teaching to Schools, Ruth stated that this would present serious challenges, including around recruitment and course choices. It was reiterated that students had made the choice to come to Aberdeen on the basis that an on-campus experience would be delivered. Ruth also acknowledged issues around workload. She stated that if the proposal to deliver blended learning in the second half-session was agreed, the proposed delay to the start of the second half-session would allow further preparation time. It was reiterated that there was no requirement that all teaching material should be prepared in advance of a course commencing. Ruth informed the Senate that while only informal feedback had been received to date, more formal feedback was beginning to be received to allow for evaluation. Ruth acknowledged that experiences would vary, however, staff and students had welcomed a balance between online and on-campus learning.

- The Senior Vice-Principal expressed concern that the University should consider an inconsistent approach to the delivery of teaching. He reminded the Senate that the University had made a commitment to deliver blended learning. In addition, it was noted that universities that had switched to an online learning model had experienced negative feedback from students. The Senior Vice-Principal informed the senate that a switch to a fully online model would be made if deemed necessary, however, to do so at this time would be against the advice of the Scottish Government and the wishes of the student body.

- Neil Vargesson, representing the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, requested consideration of the likelihood that a change to session dates by two weeks would potentially push postgraduate assessment into the subsequent academic year. Neil stated that this would have further workload implications. Responding, Ruth confirmed that the proposal was for a shift of one week, but that a full proposal would be brought to the Senate for consideration.

- Iain McEwan, on behalf on the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, sought clarification regarding the exam diet in May 2021. He noted that students wished to know if the exams were likely to take place. It was clarified that the proposal under consideration put forth that an alternative assessment model would be in place.
81.5 The Senior Vice-Principal moved to undertake a vote to determine if a blended learning approach should be adopted in the second half-session:

| In favour of a blended approach to learning: | 67 |
| Not in favour of a blended approach to learning: | 4 |
| Abstaining from the vote: | 5 |

A vote having been taken; it was confirmed that a blended approach to learning would be implemented for the remained of the 2020/21 academic year.

81.6 In drawing the meeting to a conclusion, the Senior Vice-Principal thanked members of the Senate for their contributions to discussion. He acknowledged the need to gather further feedback on blended learning from both students and staff and to make flexible changes to its delivery, where appropriate. Members of the Senate acknowledged work being led by Ruth to review the success of blended learning and to learn further ways of increasing its efficacy. Members of Senate were advised to contact coronavirus@abdn.ac.uk should any immediate concerns be identified.