

# UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

## SENATUS ACADEMICUS

### Minutes of the meeting held on 5 May 2010

*Present:* Principal, Professors Logan, Houlihan, MacGregor, Morgan, Haites, Rodger, Gane and Ross, Dr P Ziegler, Professors Crotty, Secombes, Imrie, MacDonald, Salmon, Cotter, Walkden, Wallace and Nelson, Dr B Connelly, Professor Edwards, Mrs L Johnson, Professors Long and Burgess, Ms C Banks, Mr A Arthur, Professor Hutchison, Dr J Lamb, Dr WD McCausland, Dr C Brittain, Dr Mills, Dr T Weber, Mr DC McMurtry, Mrs A Valyo, Dr A Gordon, Dr H Hutchison, Professor Saunders, Dr A Campbell, Professor Duff, Mr S Styles, Dr A Arnason, Mr N Curtis, Dr CW Haerper, Dr AD King, Dr M Delibegovic, Dr P Fraser, Dr L Hastie, Professor Robinson, Dr J Sternberg, Dr I Greig, Dr A Jack, Dr A Jenkinson, Dr B Müller, Dr J Pettit, Professor de Bari, Dr T MacFarlane, Dr G McNeill, Dr H Wallace, Dr R Bull, Dr S Duthie, Dr L Williams, Professors Chandler and Guz, Dr T Thevar, Professor Watson, Dr T Mighall, Professors Anderson and Grebogi, Dr TJF Norman, Dr J Skakle, Dr SP Townsend, Mr R Parker, Mr J Simpson, Mr A Wilson, Mr Y Volvyne, Mr S Fiddes and Ms T Smith

*Apologies:* Ms M Pearson, Professors Ingold, Black, McCaig, Greaves and Naphy, Mr MJ Radford, Professors Ritchie and Schaper, Dr P Mealor, Mr C Munro, Mrs F Payne, Dr M Young, Dr I Stansfield, Dr J Cleland, Professor Heys, Dr P Benson, Dr D Jolley, Professor Price, Dr N Spedding, Professor Webster, Ms L Bruce and Mr J Wakefield

### APPROVAL OF MINUTES

86. The minutes of the meeting held on 10 February 2010 were approved.

### STATEMENT BY PRINCIPAL

- 87.1 The Principal, in opening the meeting, thanked colleagues for the welcome he had received on his arrival at the University. He informed the Senate that he considered the University to be in an excellent position and that he looked forward to the opportunity to work with colleagues to move the University forward to even greater things in the future.
- 87.2 He informed the Senate that the University would be working to develop a new Strategic Plan in the coming months. He stated that he wished the new Plan be informed by the whole University community and accordingly would be undertaking a consultation. A set of questions would be circulated to the community with Schools being asked to submit a collective response while at the same time individual responses would also be welcomed. Heads of College would be asked to arrange focus groups to enable cross-College views on the University's future as well as a number of meta-themes. He urged colleagues to participate in this consultation process. He further informed the Senate that the outcome of the consultation would be used to inform the development of the new Strategic Plan which would aim to set out the shape of the future University in four to five years time and the strategies to support the achievement of that goal.
- 87.3 The Principal informed the Senate that the President of the Students' Association had requested that the UCTL Annual Report to Senate be brought forward for discussion from the items for information. Specifically the President had requested that there be a brief discussion on the Equal Opportunities Monitoring and Data on Complaints and Appeals. In particular, he drew attention to the fact that over half of appeals come from a group of students that make up less than 10% of the student population (postgraduate students of 'other' ethnicity). While noting that the changes to the Postgraduate Grade Spectrum approved by the Senate at its last meeting may have some impact on this in the future, the President of the Students' Association felt that the scale of the issue should be drawn to the attention of the Senate.

- 87.4 The Principal invited the Convener of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning to respond. In response, he commented that the large increase in appeals and complaints from postgraduate international students had been noted and, in particular, had been raised at the Student Affairs Committee. At that meeting, it had been agreed that the matter should be investigated. He stressed that this investigation was currently underway and would report in due course. He noted that a large number of the issues relating to appeals and complaints are associated with progression within taught postgraduate programmes and as such stressed that the changes approved at the last meeting of the Senate in regard to the Postgraduate Grade Spectrum should hopefully show some benefit in this area in the future.
- 87.5 There followed a short discussion, the main points of which are noted below:
- One member of the Senate stressed that in some programmes international students make up the majority of the cohort. He commented that this may be the reason why the majority of appeals come from international postgraduate taught students. In response, it was noted that the investigation being conducted would consider the percentage of the relative population and not simply at raw numbers.
  - One member of the Senate commented that 35% of the postgraduate population is international which is higher than the equivalent at undergraduate level. However, he commented that despite the higher numbers of international postgraduate students, the level of appeals and complaints was still almost double what might normally be expected.
- 87.6 In drawing the discussion to a close, the Principal stressed that he considered the issue to be part of the wider international student experience, both academic and non-academic. He stressed that this was one of the major challenges for the University and, accordingly, invited the Convener of the University Committee on Teaching & Learning work with colleagues to review the overall experience of international students with a view to reporting back to a meeting of the Senate in the autumn.

### **SFC MAIN GRANT LETTER 2010/2011**

- 88.1 The Principal invited the Senior Vice-Principal to present the paper on the SFC Main Grant Letter 2010/2011 (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). In presenting the paper, he highlighted the following main points as summarised below:
- That the funding provided by the Scottish Funding Council to the sector is a 0.8% decrease on that in 2009/2010.
  - That the balance of funding between the Horizon Fund and the General Fund has been shifted with marginally towards the Horizon Fund with allocations from this fund being announced quarterly
  - That the funding allocated to the University had decreased by 0.2% as compared to that in 2009/2010 with this being made up of a decrease of 1.1% in Core Teaching Grant and Fees and an increase of 2.5% in Core Research Grants. The decrease in Teaching Grant funding being due to the impact of the Scottish Government's decision to fund 200 fewer initial teacher education places at Aberdeen.
  - That the University had seen a significant increase in Research Grant funding with the University now having a 9.4% share of this funding stream across the sector meaning that the University is now third in Scotland in terms of Research funding.
  - That the announcement of the funding associated with the Knowledge Transfer Grant was awaited together with some of the other grants drawn from the Horizon Fund.
  - That the 2010/2011 settlement was a one-year settlement.
- 88.2 There followed a short discussion, the main points of which are summarised below:

- One member of the Senate commented on the impact of the late notification of the reduction of places for initial teacher education and the impact of this on admissions. He sought assurances that more timely notice would be given in the future. In response it was noted that representation had been made to the SFC in this regard.
- A student member of the Senate sought reassurance in regard to the changes in initial teacher education places and any impact this might have on the teaching and learning experience of current students. In response, it was noted that discussions were ongoing to ensure that there was no impact on existing students.
- In regard to Aberdeen having 9.4% of the sector allocation of Research Grant funding, one member of the Senate queried whether this was quantitative or qualitative driven? In response it was noted that in addition to quality, size was a large factor in the allocation of this funding together with the subject distribution.
- The President of the Students' Association commented that while the University had received a relatively favourable funding allocation this year, there was uncertainty in the sector in regard to future settlements. He suggested that there was a need to raise awareness with the public in regard to the importance of higher education in Scotland.

### **CURRICULUM REFORM: UPDATE**

89.1 The Principal invited the Vice-Principal (Curriculum Reform) to update the Senate on progress in regard to the implementation of the Curriculum Reform recommendations (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). In presenting the update, the Vice-Principal highlighted a number of key points from the paper:

- The Internal Auditors had recommended that the current composition of the Implementation Board remain for the rest of the academic year. The possibility of streamlining the Implementation Board would be kept under review.
- There remained time for submission of Sixth Century Course proposals for 2010/11 and he urged colleagues to give active consideration to this.
- The Learning to Work Two bid had been short-listed by the SFC and a more detailed proposal was being prepared, jointly with UHI.
- The list of other UK universities now involved in curriculum projects includes the University of Warwick, King's College London and the London School of Economics. An international conference on Curriculum Reform, to be held in November, was being organised jointly with the University of Southampton.
- Work on the timetable was progressing to schedule.

89.2 One member of the Senate sought an update on the review of the academic year. In response, it was noted that it had been agreed at the meeting in February 2010 that the debate on this matter would be deferred for 18 months.

### **STUDENT RETENTION**

90.1 The Principal invited the Convener of the University Committee on Teaching & Learning to introduce the three papers on Retention: (i) HESA Performance Indicators 2008/09; (ii) Full-time Undergraduate Student Retention; and (iii) College Reports on Actions to Address Retention (copy filed with the principal copy of the minutes). In regard to the HESA Performance Indicators, the Convener of the UCTL informed the Senate that the data presented relate to first degree students and cover widening participation of under-

represented groups and non-continuation rates. The benchmarks included in the paper are expectations of the expected level of performance if the institution were performing in line with the sector. In regard to the data presented, he noted that in terms of participation by under-represented groups it was interesting to note that the number of students from state schools was decreasing whilst the benchmark was increasing suggesting that the University was performing less favourably than the sector in this area. In regard to non-continuation after first year, he noted that this was not at benchmark but had improved over the last two years. In regard to data on projected outcomes, he drew attention to the increase in those neither gaining an award nor transferring from 10.9% to 14.4%. In putting the data into perspective, he noted that Dundee University which has similar benchmarks to that of Aberdeen has more favourable indicators. In regard to the paper on Full-time Undergraduate Student Retention, he commented that these data were based on real student numbers and not projections as in the HESA paper and hence stressed that the two papers were not directly comparable. He informed the Senate that this paper analysed student retention across a range of categories. The paper had been considered by the University Management Group in February and following that meeting Colleges had been asked to report on actions being taken. These reports were included in the papers for the meeting.

90.2 The Principal invited the Heads of College to comment on their reports. The Head of the College of Life Sciences & Medicine stressed that student retention was taken very seriously by the College. A teaching fellow had been appointed with a retention remit and he worked closely with Schools to implement a wide range of measures. The Head of the College of Physical Sciences reported that student retention was a high priority for the College and that it was a complex problem. Induction, especially for international students, was a high priority. Other measures being implemented included use of diagnostic Web CT tests to identifying those having difficulties at an early stage and peer support. He also highlighted the important role played by Advisers of Studies. The Head of the College of Arts & Social Sciences stressed that retention was taken seriously in the College and that a wide range of initiatives had been introduced. There had been increased focus on induction and ensuring a sense of belonging for new entrants which was especially important within the MA Degrees. In areas with high levels of non-progression, significant work was being done to develop greater small group teaching. Work was also being done to monitor closely the impact of such initiatives in order to ensure that the effort was being utilised to the best effect. In this regard, he suggested that a review might best be undertaken at the end of the summer following the resit exam diet.

90.3 There followed a discussion, the main points of which are noted below:

- A student member of the Senate indicated that students are sometimes not clear as to who they should approach where difficulties arise. In response it was noted that the Adviser of Studies is an important first contact but that Schools should ensure that someone is always available to help.
- It was noted that the work done across the University in regard to enhancing induction for new students was significant and that the slight improvement in level one retention may reflect the impact of these efforts.
- One member of the Senate commented that there was a need to ensure that students' feel engaged, a sense of belonging and that their expectations are fully met. In this regard, it was noted that the Curriculum Reform process may help support this.
- It was commented that some students simply choose not to attend. The reasons for this need investigated.
- The President of the Students' Association stressed the importance of good advising in supporting student retention. He suggested that there was a need for more frequent Advisor : Advisee interaction. He further proposed, in regard to the HESA figures, that the University

should do more to tackle the issue of widening participation. In response to this latter point, the Principal stated that this was an important issue and one which would be investigated.

- One member of the Senate sought an update on the progress in regard to implementation of the recommendations in the Senate Working Group's Report on Academic & Pastoral Support. In response, the University Secretary commented that discussions with the UCU were now close to agreeing a set of recommendations which would see the University moving over a three year period to implementing the full recommendations as set out in the Senate Working Group's paper.

90.4 In drawing the debate to a close, the Principal stressed that it was important that the Senate took this matter seriously. He noted that there had been much work done to help address this matter but it was important to ensure that the impact of these measures is monitored and evaluated. In this regard, he invited the Convener of the University Committee on Teaching & Learning to work with colleagues over the summer to review the impact of the actions taken to date to provide an evidence-base for future work.

### **REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY COURT**

The Senate noted the actions taken by the University Court at its meeting on 30 March 2010:

#### **1. Appointment of the Principal**

91.1 The Court noted that Professor Sir Duncan Rice had agreed to demit office as Principal & Vice Chancellor from the earlier date of 31 March 2010 rather than 30 September 2010.

91.2 The Court approved the appointment of Professor Diamond as Principal from the earlier date of 1 April 2010 at the rate of 80% of full-time until 30 June 2010. The remainder of Professor Diamond's time will be spent in his current role as Chief Executive of the Economic Social and Research Council.

91.3 The Court also noted that the Chancellor had confirmed that Professor Ian Diamond should serve as Vice Chancellor from 1 April 2010.

#### **2. Draft Resolution No of 2010 [Changes to Regulations for Various Degrees]**

91.4 The Court received the draft Resolution No of 2010 (Changes in Regulations for Various Degrees) from the Senate and agreed to forward it to the General Council and to make it generally available in terms of Section 6 of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966.

#### **3. Draft Resolution No 264 of 2010 [Amendments to the Code of Practice on Student Discipline]**

91.5 The Court approved, on the recommendation of the Senate, the draft Resolution "Amendments to the Code of Practice on Student Discipline" and further agreed that, in accordance with the provisions of Section 6(2) of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966, that the draft Resolution be passed forthwith, so that the amended provisions may be applied with effect from the date on which they were passed.

### **REPORT FROM THE UCTL**

The Senate noted the actions taken by the University Committee on Teaching & Learning at its meeting on 17 March 2010:

## **1. UCTL Annual Review of data in regard to student progression, academic appeals, academic discipline and student academic complaints for 2008/09**

- 92.1 The Committee noted the annual data in regard to student progression, academic appeals, academic discipline and student academic complaints for 2008/09.

## **2. Institutional ELearning Strategy**

- 92.2 The Committee considered a paper from the Institutional eLearning Strategy Group, a sub group of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL). The paper proposed an eLearning Vision and underpinning principles of an Institutional eLearning Strategy including: future directions for eLearning across the University, with a focus on staff development; ePedagogy; the eLearning environment; student diversity, quality and research development.
- 92.3 Following general discussion of the issues raised in the paper, the Committee were broadly supportive of the proposals made by the Group. It was noted that the Group Convener would be visiting Colleges to discuss the specifics of the proposals in more detail.

## **3. Updated Learning & Teaching Operational Plan 2009/2010**

- 92.4 The Committee considered updates to the Learning & Teaching Operational Plan. The Committee noted the progress made towards items identified in the plan, in particular the items relating to the implementation of Curriculum Reform. In particular, comments raised by the Colleges in connection with the progress made, at the time of meeting, towards the development of level two Sixth Century course proposals were noted.

## **4. Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure**

- 92.5 The Committee considered a discussion paper detailing the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure being undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). It was noted that an institutional response would be developed for submission to QAA.

## **REPORTS FROM THE ASCS – COURSE AND PROGRAMME CHANGES**

- 92.6 The Senate noted the changes to the list of courses and programmes approved by the Academic Standards Committees at their recent meetings, available at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/senastracking/report>

## **SENATE APPOINTMENTS**

93. The Senate noted that the Senate Business Committee approved the appointment of Professors R Butler and R Buckland and Drs R Wells, R Bull and D Galbreath as members of the Senate Postgraduate Academic Appeals Committee and the Senate Postgraduate Students' Progress Committee with immediate effect.