

**MINUTE OF THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL MEETING
HELD VIA ZOOM VIDEO CONFERENCE
ON SATURDAY 24 APRIL 2021 10.00AM – 12.15PM**

Present via video link : Iain Anderson (GC Assessor)(IA), Alison Baverstock (AB), Alan Chalmers (AC), Adrian Greer (Chancellor's Assessor)(AG), Jonathan Hewitt (GC Assessor)(JH), Grace Lyon (GL), Alastair Merrill (Registrar & Clerk & VP Gov)(AM), Gregory Newman (GN), Wendy Russell (Convener)(WR)

Apologies: Sally Mapstone (Principal), Stuart Bryan (SB), Annabel Hamid (AH), Stephanie O'Rourke (SO'R), Eliane Sum (ES).

Abbreviations

BC = Business Committee of the General Council

GC = General Council

StA = St Andrews University

1. Introduction and appointment of minute secretary.

WR welcomed everybody. The agenda was agreed as circulated and no further items of competent business were added. GL was appointed minute secretary. WR informed the Committee that Dan Marshall (President of the Students' Association) would join the meeting from Agenda

2. Resignation

WR informed the meeting that Brittany Collins had resigned from the Committee citing a number of personal reasons. WR noted with thanks the contribution she made.

3. Apologies for Absence

As above

4. Minutes of Business Committee Meeting 23 January 2021 and Matters Arising

The draft minutes were approved, with a minor change to the wording of the nomination and appointment of Ian Anderson to the Court.

Matters arising are discussed under the various headings below.

5. University Update

AM gave a summary of the current topics at University Court.

- i. The nationwide revaluation of the USS pension scheme, where cost increases and/or changes to benefits looked inevitable.
- ii. The next stage of the refurbishment of the Younger Hall has been given the go-ahead.
- iii. Covid

With student and staff support, Covid restrictions have been very successful in controlling the spread of Covid within the University. Restrictions are still necessary and teaching is still essentially online. Examinations will be online and this summer's graduation ceremonies have been cancelled as in-person events.

The “Can Do” project, has been an enormous success in providing safe space for students to meet. This initiative has contributed to supporting good mental health and providing a better student experience.

Covid restrictions in Scotland are currently being relaxed and the University is gradually opening its buildings.

Teaching next year (this year’s teaching is nearly finished) is being planned with a view to providing in-person teaching but with continuing Covid precautions.

Quarantine and further vaccinations for arriving international students are also under discussion.

- iv. The Enhancement-led Institutional Review, an evidence-based method of peer review, conducted by the [Quality Assurance Agency \(Scotland\)](#) (QAA). It occurs every five years and is a detailed examination of every aspect of higher education. StA was commended.
- v. Degrees in Medicine and Dentistry:
The Bill was passed unanimously in the Scottish Parliament. As a result the University can now award these degrees for the first time in 50 years (since Dundee split off).
- vi. Green Gown Awards – where StA had three prizes
- vii. Eden Campus has received money together with Strathclyde University to develop hydrogen energy.
- viii. St Andrews Community Fund – with grants available for some excellent ideas from both the local community across Fife and the University for engagement activities.
- ix. Research grants are holding up well despite Covid and Brexit.
- x. Official Development Assistance (ODA) from the UK government has been drastically cut and will adversely affect grants both in the future and some existing grants. The exact consequences are not yet known.
- xi. Admissions are in good numbers.
- xii. A number of University events last weekend were postponed out of respect for the funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh and will be run this weekend.
- xiii. Strategy planning for the University is also under discussion as the current strategy comes to an end in 2023.

Comments and Questions

- i. AC asked about the financial impact of the pension benefits review. AM replied that the impact on the University could be quite severe. The USS remains a defined benefit scheme, which is notoriously difficult to calculate and there are disagreements over the future valuation of the fund’s assets and liabilities. Since it is a UK-wide negotiation, StA has limited influence over the outcome.
- ii. AG commented that this time last year a financial disaster caused by Covid seemed imminent, but the position was now much improved and Court was once again positively planning for the future. The focus of financial income planning would turn to entrepreneurial projects and philanthropic income.
AM agreed that the financial situation had eased, with capital from the Tay City agreement and the insurance claim over the Biology building fire now settled. Both of these would allow significant capital investment in improved facilities. There was still a loss of income from student residences and from the hire of facilities over the summer, now into a second year. Also, the pension negotiations are likely to lead to further costs, hence the need to look for additional income streams.

- iii. JH mentioned that no-one wants a strike over pensions just when the University is beginning to recover from Covid. AM agreed, but without difficult decisions, the cost of pensions could become prohibitively expensive for staff as well as employers, with a growing risk that some staff might opt out.
- iv. WR asked what progress had been made about the “St Andrews Survivors” group. AM said that the University has been in contact with them; many of the claims were historic and none had been reported to the University. One claim was subsequently investigated and found inconclusive. However, in the present day. The University actively encourages all students to report incidents of sexual or other abuse, and an anonymous reporting system has been created. A first report is imminent.
- v. AM mentioned that in relation to diversity, although Prof Woodfield plans to leave the Principal’s office, her position is about to be promoted to a full VP, rather than Assistant VP, to reflect the importance the University places on diversity and the amount of work involved.

6. **General Council Meeting**

WR and AM have discussed the summer GC meeting, which will have to be cancelled once again because of the Covid restrictions. At the last GCBC meeting, it was decided not to repeat the format of the autumn broadcast. Instead, the Principal will send out a letter to the GC, with a report and the opportunity to ask a question and receive a reply.

Action : AM to speak to the Principal

7. **Student Association President – Dan Marshall**

WR welcomed Dan Marshall to the meeting and invited him to tell us about his year in post and the student issues he has been dealing with, in an extraordinary year.

- i. DM felt the students had risen to the challenge of the Covid restrictions, they acted responsibly themselves and they also appreciated the steps the university had made to keep everyone safe and to support the students. He felt it was a good joint effort. To an extent, the StA students are accustomed to being self-reliant and things like the “Can Do” initiative enabled them to maintain a sense of community, get out of the house, see and speak to new people etc, which is good for mental outlook.
- ii. Raisin Weekend was cancelled and there was no appetite for an online version. Next year will be a jumbo event with both first and second years celebrating. DM is hoping that after this gap, the recent heavy-drinking habits can be quietly forgotten in favour of a more fun atmosphere, which the first years tend to prefer.
- iii. Diversity training materials are being prepared for the student population, this originating from the “Black Lives Matter” campaign.
- iv. The academic family tradition is still going strong, with the new addition of a “Lonely Hearts” wall where those looking for or offering families can post details.
- v. Students have coped well with online teaching, and the experience has improved as feedback led to continuous change. “Lecture Capture” in particular is useful. Also, some project supervisors have met students outside for a walk and a talk, which is much appreciated. Students are still keen to return to in-person teaching.

- vi. Students also appreciated the discussions with academic staff on academic assessments, which have been adjusted sympathetically to allow all students to do their best work, rather than stressing about passing an exam.
- vii. It has been an exceptional year, but DM is proud of what they have all achieved and feels they have created a great many new ideas which may be built on in the future.

IA praised DM for true leadership in an astonishingly difficult year and others added their appreciation of DM's presentation.

8. Legacy of the Gown

WR, IA, DM and JH are involved. JH reported on the progress of this idea (which is to have a bank of "pre-loved" gowns which are lent out to students for their time at StA and then returned and re-used). The bank could have many benefits – economy for the students, sustainability, promoting a sense of history and possibly increasing the use of the gowns and a sense of community with it. The aim is to make it as easy to operate and as fool-proof as possible, so it is worth taking a little time to plan and ideas are still circulating. The "After Many Days" society will be approached as a source of opinions and possibly gowns. An online operation is envisaged and the original (charming) idea of a label inside each gown is likely to be too laborious. DM will research further into student attitudes to see if there is student support. Once that is complete, and if the support is there, the project will be worked out in detail before being taken to Court for a discussion.

Action : DM to sound out student opinion: WR, IG, DM and JH to take forward work on the business case as required.

AG left the meeting at this point

9. Delivering Value

Engagement – (WR, AH, SO'R) - has not been progressed as Robert Fleming has been busy with the virtual Alumni Weekend. The last minutes noted that Robert Fleming should be invited to future GCBC meetings to provide further updates.

Action : WR to contact Robert Fleming

Entrepreneurship – (WR, AB, AC) a meeting is still to be arranged with the Quaestor. AC said it was good to see the idea of entrepreneurship getting more attention. We need to devise ways of bringing alumni back to the University to share their experience. We would like to play a larger role in all this, without getting in the way. AM reported that the entrepreneurship drop-in centre in Walter Bower House will open with the rest of the estate in due course. The plan is generally to create an entrepreneurial culture and both to support students who have ideas and to capitalise on research. There are in fact all sorts of activities across the whole University which could spawn commercial projects. This all needs mentoring, finance, professional and development support of all sorts, as well as the input of experienced entrepreneurs.

AB mentioned that in Kingston, a feeling of pride in community entrepreneurship was fostered by photographs of people and projects with a “Made in Kingston” caption; and suggested that this would work well in StA.

IA said that Robert Fleming (Development) has data on what alumni have gone on to do, which might form the basis of a support and information network.

Action : WR, AB, AC to meet with the Quaestor and possibly to work out some details for the photographs

Diversity

IA is to be the convener of a “People and Diversity Assurance” group to review the diversity programme for Court. He would be glad of input. The promotion of Prof Woodfield’s job to full VP status is an indication of how much the University is trying to be a centre of excellence. They are keen for new ideas, as well. Gender pay equality seems to be the main area for concern.

AC queried the Scottish Funding Council “Outcome Agreement” which investigates diversity percentages, and wondered if StA would meet all the targets. He also queried if StA had any strategy to combat “micro-aggression”.

AM said that the Outcome Agreement, which started as a good idea had become something of a box-ticking exercise, all for a relatively small amount of money. StA does in fact exceed its Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) targets, although the SIMD can throw up anomalies. However, also, the StA “Equality Outcomes Report” is coming out soon, comparing progress against the four Equality Outcomes AM set in 2017, and setting new targets for the next five years, which includes diversity in all its aspects. Some gender pay disparities occur in the senior science positions, for specific reasons, and also at the senior professional service level. Both areas have small numbers which means that even just one person can distort the figures.

AB said that it was important to monitor the images published by the University in all contexts, and the language used. Also, the University needs to be aware of sensitivities within minority groups, and make them feel valued.

AM agreed with this and said they attempted to do so at all times. StA has senior staff involvement in supporting BAME networks and listening to them.

JH wondered if the GC could be another conduit of communication with BAME alumni. Also, possibly GC meetings could include information about StA’s journey towards total inclusion, just to bring the subject to the forefront.

AB said we must be careful not to be patronising to BAME alumni, but if we are looking for alumni entrepreneurs, it would be good to identify “diverse” successes.

WR said this brought us back to how GC can better engage with alumni.

GL wondered if we could speak to the BAME student groups at a GCBC meeting and possibly keep in touch with them as they graduate.

DM said there was a new subcommittee in the Student Association, the BAME student network, which has regular discussions with the University.

Action : Could some of this go into the Principal's GC letterer future report? AM

10. GCBC 2021 Election

GL with GN, reported that in order not to cause too much work for staff at the time of the virtual Alumni Weekend, the timetable for the election was brought forward a few weeks, and spread out a bit more, and it was decided to hold an entirely online process. The call for nominations and attendant documents were amended accordingly and have gone out, with the deadline for nominations coming up on Monday. We have, of course, no control over the number of applications or the type of people who appear.

AM reported that to date we have 7 nominations, with a couple of days to go. WR (along with the whole committee) particularly wanted to thank Elaine Cartwright for all the work involved in this.

11. General Council Assessors' Report

JH and IA reported, JH speaking

- i. The normal pre-Court dinners have not been possible. These offer good opportunities to discuss topics at length. Also, various other informal meetings have not been happening either. Replacement small Zoom sessions have been organised and JH joined one on student admissions. Government vacillating on exam results made admissions very difficult last year, but the University has an excellent system in place for this year. Numbers have to be balanced for the different subjects, and are generally holding up well.
- ii. There were further pre-Court meetings of non-executive members with heads of units just to get a feeling for how they work and how Covid has impacted them and changed their working methods. JH found the teams were very positive, despite various difficulties and were coping well and creatively with the situation.
- iii. DM had set up some focus groups between students and Court members. The students were very appreciative of the "Can Do" initiative, but very much missing in-person contact with staff and the likes of tutorial groups. An issue which came up was the degree of overlap between the Rector's Committee and the Student Association, although that is now being worked on. Student accommodation and price is still a concern. The current problem is that private landlords have not yet made accommodation available for next year, presumably because of Covid uncertainty. The students would like StA to take some action over this, although they realise StA has done a lot already and cannot control private landlords. They also mentioned that step-free access throughout the University would be appreciated.
- iv. JH also paid tribute to the enormous amount of work DM has put in to give the student body a voice, in an exceptionally difficult year.

- v. The Court meeting itself, with the address by the Principal on the usual topics of Covid, finance, admissions etc, was generally more positive and forward looking than it has been for the last year. Finance has been helped by a number of capital receipts (see AM's comments above) and generally StA seems to be shaking loose from Covid and starting up again.
- vi. Plans include work on the estate at North Haugh; refurbishment of the Younger Hall and Butts Wynd; and the ongoing work on Eden Campus.
- vii. JH was also pleased to note that the schools were being given more autonomy over their budgets.
- viii. IA agreed that the conversations with students were very useful. So much screen work is very exhausting, notwithstanding the huge amount of work which StA has put into the system. He found the presentation by Prof Ian Boyd on the "green agenda" very interesting.
- ix. IA echoed JH's perception that the University was beginning to move forward out of crisis management.

WR thanked everybody for attending and for their input. She mentioned the forthcoming Court and committee dates, and hoped that we would be able to meet at DRA in September.

Notes from previous minutes

A process for inviting GC members to vote on proposed changes to GC Standing Orders (see the Minutes of the January 2020 BC meeting, Section 5) has been discussed by AM and WR. It is hoped that this can be achieved in June 2021. Failing that, at the November GC meeting.