

Approved



## **UNIVERSITY COURT**

### **MINUTES**

of the meeting of the University Court held on 16 September 2020 at 2.00pm via Microsoft Teams.

Chair: Mr M Shaw  
Vice-Chair: Dr A Ingram

Professor L Bacon	Mrs M Guild	Mr I McDonald
Mr A Bailey	Professor T Inns	Dr J Rees
Ms D Bandeva	Mr F Keir	Dr A Samuel
Mr J Barnett	Ms V Lynch	Professor N Seaton
Mr J Burt	Ms C MacEachen	Dr K Smith
Ms G Ghafoor	Mr J Macgregor	Ms C Summers
	Mr T Marks	

Secretary: Mrs S Stewart  
Clerk to Court: Dr A Ramsay  
In attendance: Ms E Fraser  
Mr J Nicholson  
Ms J McKenzie  
Mr G Weir

### **NON-RESERVED AREAS OF BUSINESS**

#### **1 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

The Chair welcomed members to the first formal meeting of the session and thanked them for their attendance. Mr Shaw, in particular, welcomed Ms D Bandeva and Mr E Baines (*in absentia*) to their first meeting as President & Vice-President of the Students' Association respectively. On behalf of Court, Mr Shaw welcomed Mr Weir as the new Director of Finance, Infrastructure and Corporate Services and thanked Ms E Fraser and Mr J Nicholson for being in attendance to present reports on COVID-19, the National Student Survey and Equality Mainstreaming. Ms J McKenzie was welcomed as observer from Communications.

#### **2 DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The Chair reminded members of their responsibility to indicate if they had, or could be perceived to have, a conflict of interest in relation to the non-reserved items for discussion. Dr J Rees declared that, with the knowledge of the Chair of Court and the Principal & Vice-Chancellor, she had taken an interim position as Head of Edinburgh Napier University's Students' Association.

3 MINUTES OF THE CHAIR'S COMMITTEE MEETINGS HELD ON 29 JULY 2020 AND 1 SEPTEMBER 2020 (for information)

Court noted the above minutes, submitted as Enclosures 01 and 02, for information.

4 MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF COURT HELD ON 24 JUNE 2020

CT/0920/03

Court received and considered the above minutes, submitted as Enclosure 03 and approved them as an accurate record.

5 MATTERS ARISING FROM THESE MINUTES

Oral report

5.1 Internal Audit 2019/2020: Revised Internal Audit Plan

(paragraph 91.4 refers)

The University Secretary advised Court that the revised programme of reviews to be conducted by the internal auditors had been approved

5.2 Court membership update

(paragraph 93.3 refers)

Mrs Stewart advised Court that one lay member was required to confirm whether they wished to be reappointed for a further period of office and that this would then be reported to the Governance & Nominations Committee. Members were further apprised that an election would be held from amongst the support staff of the University to replace Mr I Lowe, who had left the employment of the University on 31 July 2020. It was intended that the result of the election would be known before the next meeting of Court.

5.3 Equality Mainstreaming Report

(paragraph 94.3 refers)

Mrs Stewart reminded members that this item had been deferred from the previous meeting of Court and would be considered as a substantive agenda item.

5.4 UBS Amendment to authorised signatories

(paragraph 96 refers)

Court noted that the University's investment portfolio managers were in liaison with the Secretary in order to finalise the replacement of Mr M Batho as an authorised signatory.

5.5 Celebration for graduating students

(paragraph 98 refers)

Mrs Stewart advised members that the on-line celebration event held for graduating students had been both well-attended and very successful.

Thereafter, there were no further matters arising that were not already on the agenda.

6 OPERATIONAL PLANNING AND BUDGETING: UPDATE

CT/0920/04

The Principal introduced the above paper, intended to provide Court with an update on operation planning since its meeting on 24 June 2020 and summarised internal and external developments during July, August and the first half of September. Professor Seaton noted that the University had had a successful admissions cycle but that it remained to be seen how many students would arrive to register. The UK's Research Excellent Framework

processes had been delayed by COVID-19 but had restarted and the University was working towards its submission for the revised deadline.

The Vice-Principal (Strategy & Planning) commended the efforts of Admissions colleagues in the face of the issues around the SQA and A-level results, noting that the University had taken into account the disruption that all applicants applying directly from school or college had faced and had confirmed offers at the level of minimum access thresholds for these students. Ms Summers noted that this approach had resulted in less volatility. Early indications were that student numbers would exceed planning assumptions, although International and Taught Postgraduate student numbers remained a concern.

Detailed budget and staffing plans for each School and Service had been confirmed, each being a combination of agreed actions or a commitment to consider options to be confirmed by the end of the calendar year. Progress would be reviewed against these at the end of October, followed by review points at the end of January and April 2021.

Court was reminded that, in June, the Scottish Government had requested SFC to undertake a review of coherent provision and sustainability across FE and HE. A call for evidence had been issued in late July, to which the University had responded, highlighting that Abertay's strengths aligned closely with Scottish Government ambitions. SFC had yet to publish the outcomes of phase one of the review and Court would be kept apprised when more information became available. Members noted that Court members had not seen the Abertay submission to the call for evidence and requested that this be circulated following the meeting.

In the course of a lengthy and involved discussion, Court considered the impact on staff of higher than anticipated student numbers, coupled with the increased teaching burden imposed by blended learning and COVID-19 restrictions on class sizes. Members sought clarification of whether this would result in a need for increased staff numbers and were advised that, once student numbers were confirmed at the end of October, the staff profile would be revisited. One member commended the involvement of the trade unions in discussions around budget and staffing plans but expressed concern that the consultation process was moving more quickly than anticipated and that redundancies would be likely before Christmas. The Principal reminded Court that the University's funding had been reduced in every year except one since 2013 and that a small number of redundancies occurred every year. Members were assured that management was discussing redeployment of affected staff as part of its Redundancy Avoidance Policy.

Court commended the approach taken to the admissions cycle in response to the SQA crisis but questioned whether the University had seen any evidence of applicants self-releasing to accept an offer elsewhere. The Vice-Principal (Strategy & Planning) advised that approximately 20 students were believed to have done so but that numbers were being monitored closely. One member sought information on efforts to support student retention at a time of unprecedented stress and the restrictions placed on students by the coronavirus pandemic. The Deputy Principal advised Court that retention was a priority for the University and apprised members of collaborative initiatives with the Students' Association (SA). Ms Bandeva noted that the SA was trialling an app which paired students virtually with others with similar interests. The Director of Student & Academic Services advised members that

50 peer mentors had been recruited for online support. In terms of the learning and teaching experience, Court was further apprised of Teams sites set up at module and programme level where online volunteers introduced themselves to new students and offered advice.

Thereafter, Court noted the report.

## 7 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STAFF: UPDATE

CT/0920/05

The Director of People and Organisation Development introduced the above report, intended to provide Court with an overview of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the University's staff and actions taken to support staff. Ms Fraser noted that the transition to partial face-to-face teaching was proving to be a time of stress and intense feeling. The Abertay UCU had requested that the University cancelled in-person teaching for Term 1 but management felt the institution had made a commitment to its students.

Members noted that the majority of University staff had jobs which could largely be performed remotely and that rapid action prior to the closure of campus had ensured that most had the necessary IT equipment to work from home. As remote working had continued, the range of resources to support new ways of working and staff health & wellbeing had continued to expand, including online seminars and guidance.

Ms Fraser advised Court that a number of roles, including cleaners, porters, staff working in commercial activities and research staff could not be carried out remotely and that the University had continued to pay these staff in full in accordance with their contracts. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme had been used for a total of 50 staff, the majority of whom were furloughed from on or around April 1 2020. A small number were furloughed from early June.

On the basis of tests or symptoms since 1 March 2020, seven staff had reported having COVID-19. Overall sickness absence rates had been lower than usual during that time with Occupational Health (OH) services and support continuing by telephone or by Teams. Any staff requiring particular equipment or adjustments to work from home had received OH assessments, resulting in arrangements being made to provide specialised equipment.

Staff mental health continued to be a focus, with the resources available to staff on the intranet having been expanded and promoted. The University had maintained staff access to Rowan counselling, although that service had not reported being overwhelmed.

In discussion, members questioned whether pulse surveys of staff would continue and were advised that this would take place once the first few weeks of Term 1 were underway. One member questioned how best management could maintain productivity and measure the effectiveness of staff and was advised that management was trying to ensure an even distribution of workload but that it was likely that other areas, such as research, would be impacted by what staff perceived to be an increase in workload. The importance of maintaining a work/life balance for staff was noted and it was suggested that consideration be given to how best to assess productivity as the University moved from a period of acute transformation to one of long term maintenance.

The SA President advised Court of student anxieties, noting that those from

overseas were particularly concerned by the prospect of another lockdown, while 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students were apprehensive regarding the impact of research limitations on their honours projects. Students with caring responsibilities and without computing equipment in the home were anxious that the restricted access to campus and therefore IT facilities would impact negatively on their studies. Ms Bandeva commended management and staff for their efforts on behalf of the student population.

Thereafter, Court noted the report.

## 8 NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY 2020: OUTCOME AND ANALYSIS

CT/0920/06

The Deputy Principal introduced the above analysis of the results of the 2020 National Student Survey (NSS). Professor Bacon advised Court that 24 out of 27 questions placed the University satisfaction scores above the sector and commended the efforts of academic and support staff in achieving this outstanding achievement.

Professor Bacon noted that areas for improvement remained and that an action plan would be developed. Although it was probable that the UK Government intended to move away from the NSS in future, some form of assessment mechanism would replace student satisfaction as a measure of quality teaching.

The Director of Student & Academic Services advised members that the results had indicated fewer long-term issues around certain programmes and that responses relating to the student voice had been particularly impressive. Mr Nicholson further noted that the external analyst employed to produce the analysis had commented on the positivity of feedback.

One member sought management's opinion on the likely future direction of the NSS. Professor Seaton advised it seemed likely that in England the questionnaire approach would be abandoned, moving to a more data-driven exercise. It was as yet unclear what approach the Scottish Government would take.

Thereafter, Court welcomed the report and commended the work of management and staff in achieving an excellent result.

## 9 EQUALITY MAINSTREAMING REPORT

CT/0920/07

The Director of Student & Academic Services introduced the above report, intended to apprise members of the progress and impact the University had achieved in equality and diversity. Mr Nicholson reminded Court that publication of the report was a requirement of the Public Sector Equality Duty and that the document under consideration was an interim progress report with the next publication due by the end of April 2021.

Court was advised that the University would require to consider new measures following publication of the 2021 report, as the Scottish Funding Council had indicated it no longer wished to receive gender equality reports. Gender-based violence had become a Scottish Government priority and Mr Nicholson apprised members of the reporting tool which had been developed and launched within the University to allow disclosure and reporting. The University remained committed to race equality and was in the process of preparing its reapplication for the Race Equality Charter Mark as the only

Scottish University to hold the award.

The Chair of the People, Health & Equality Committee (PHEC) advised members that the Committee had considered the report in depth at its meeting in June 2020 and had expressed concern regarding the retention rates of mature students in particular. Mr Burt noted that the Committee had requested that the working group established to consider retention specifically address mature students. Mr Nicholson advised Court that the new Dean of the AbLE Academy, Dr Luke Millard, would lead activity in the areas of retention and employability.

One member expressed concern regarding the increase in the overall gender pay gap from 11.4% in 2017/2017 to 14.5% in 2017/2018 and was advised that this represented the vertical occupational segregation, i.e. the higher proportion of women in the lower paid jobs and the higher proportion of men in the highest paid jobs. Court was assured that, at the level of the Professoriate, the University did not have the significant pay disparities often seen elsewhere.

Thereafter, Court endorsed the recommendation of the People, Health & Equality Committee to approve the report.

10 DRAFT RETURN TO SFC ON QUALITY IN SESSION 2019/2020 CT/0920/08

The Director of Student & Academic Services introduced the above document, apprising Court that the Annual Report was a statutory return, required to be submitted to the Scottish Funding Council by 30<sup>th</sup> September each year following endorsement by the governing body in line with SFC Guidance on Quality. Mr Nicholson apprised members of minor amendments which had been identified.

Thereafter, Court approved the report for submission to the Scottish Funding Council.

11 INDICATIVE COURT BUSINESS FOR SESSION 2020/2021 CT/0920/09

The University Secretary introduced the above indication of planned work for the coming session and invited members to submit suggestions for agenda items or strategic discussions. Members noted that, following Mr Burt's departure from Court on 31 December 2020, a new Intermediary would require to be appointed. It was agreed that this would be considered by the Governance & Nominations Committee in the first instance.

Thereafter, Court noted the above workplan.

12 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was declared.

13 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Court noted that the date of the next meeting was confirmed as Wednesday 11th November 2020.

.....  
**CHAIR**