

Approved



UNIVERSITY COURT

MINUTES

of the meeting of the University Court held on 20 May 2020 at 2.00pm *via* Microsoft Teams.

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

Professor L Bacon	Mr F Keir	Mr T Marks
Mr A Bailey	Mr I Lowe	Dr J Rees
Mr J Barnett	Ms V Lynch	Dr A Samuel
Mr M Batho	Ms C MacEachen	Professor N Seaton
Mr J Burt	Mr J Macgregor	Dr K Smith
Mrs M Guild	Mr I McDonald	Mr O Wright

Secretary: Mrs S Stewart
Clerk to Court: Dr A Ramsay
In attendance: Mr E Baines
Ms D Bandeva
Ms E Fraser
Ms L Jack
Ms C Summers
Mr S Uphill

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Professor T Inns and Ms G Ghafoor. Mr G MacDougall was unable to join the meeting due to technical issues.

NON-RESERVED AREAS OF BUSINESS

74 WELCOME

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting and thanked them for their attendance.

75 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. None was declared. Mr Shaw further reminded those in attendance that the matters under discussion should be regarded as confidential.

76 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IMPACT ON STUDENTS: REPORTS FROM THE STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT AND FROM THE DIRECTOR OF STUDENT & ACADEMIC SERVICES

CT/0520/51

The President of the Abertay Students' Association (SA) introduced a report on (a) the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the student body and (b) on SA campaigning prior to Covid-19. Mr Wright advised Court that the SA had been lobbying management during session 2019/2020 on a number of issues

including climate change, accommodation issues and costs and the provision of student spaces on campus.

Following the closure of the campus and the move to online provision, Mr Wright noted that the SA had advocated the cancellation of all assessments and exams and had supported student-led online initiatives. Members were advised that the SA considered management had taken too long to introduce the Fair Assessment Policy and that developments elsewhere in the sector would guide any change in the SA stance on assessment.

The decision taken by the University to allow students to cancel their accommodation contracts had been welcomed, as had the decision to remove graduation registration fees. The SA continued to work with the NUS on the issue of hardship and funding.

The Director of Student & Academic Services then introduced an analysis of quantitative indicators intended to demonstrate the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the student population. Mr Nicholson provided Court with a breakdown by School and by year of study of those students who had requested, and been granted, at least one assessment extension as part of the Fair Assessment Policy, as well as assessment deferrals, suspensions and withdrawals from study.

Members were advised that there had been a 51% increase in the number of students requesting study skills support compared to the same period last year, but that the number of students attending the counselling and mental health service had declined by 21%. Mr Nicholson noted that Abertay had been awarded an additional £66k in April 2020 by the Students Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) to distribute *via* the Discretionary Hardship fund, of which £51k had already been disbursed. The University had also to date provided £15k towards supporting EU and Overseas students who could not access the SAAS funding.

In discussion, members questioned the apparent disparity between the positive response to online counselling noted by the SA report and the decline in uptake indicated in Mr Nicholson's report. Mr Nicholson advised Court that the downturn was due to a number of students deferring counselling until they could be seen face-to-face. These students were being contacted by counselling staff, who had reported that uptake was buoyant, noting that the therapeutic benefit of support *via* telephone or Skype was no less effective than in person. One member questioned whether there was a correlation between the increased number of requests for deferrals and the number of students from widening access backgrounds and was advised that an analysis of this and of the protected characteristics remained to be conducted.

Thereafter, Court thanked Mr Wright and Mr Nicholson and noted the reports.

77 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IMPACT ON STAFF: A REPORT FROM THE DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE SERVICES & ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CT/0520/52

The Director of People Services & Organisation Development introduced the above report, intended to provide Court with an overview of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on University staff. Ms Fraser advised Court that most University staff had jobs which could, to a large extent be performed remotely. Rapid action prior to the closure of campus had ensured that most staff were equipped with the necessary IT equipment to work from home and those staff

whose roles could not be carried out remotely or were not required due to the closure of campus had been furloughed. These staff continued to be paid in full and the University had honoured its commitment to hourly-paid staff, whether or not they could work remotely.

Members were advised that, thus far, six staff had reported having Covid-19 on the basis of tests or symptoms and twenty-six staff members were shielding. The overall sickness absence rates since the closure of campus had been no higher than usual and People Services was developing a process for health risk assessment in preparation for staff returning to work on campus in due course. One member questioned whether the reduction in absence due to stress or mental health issues was the result of under-reporting and was advised that there was no evidence of this.

In discussion, members sought assurances that the Health & Safety Officer and the Occupational Health Officer were being provided with appropriate management support during this time of unprecedented strain and were advised that both were in regular contact with Ms Fraser as their line manager. The effects of long-term isolation on staff were noted and Court was advised that all line managers received regular reminders from People Services of the importance of maintaining regular and supportive contact with staff.

The cumulative costs incurred by the University's response to the global pandemic were noted and members questioned whether this could result in redundancies. Professor Seaton advised Court that this was inevitably a possibility, but noted that there were a small number of redundancies each year and that the University would first use its redundancy avoidance policy.

One member expressed concern that the move to online provision had in fact increased working hours for academic staff and that the volume of extensions granted would impact adversely on the ability of staff to mark assessments within the expected turnaround period. Going forward into the next session, academic staff were concerned that student expectations of staff accessibility would be unreasonable, based on the increased level of electronic contact between students and staff since March. Both the Principal and the Deputy Principal assured Court that management was cognisant of this and would be working with staff and the trade unions to lessen stress levels in the long term.

Thereafter, Court commended the University for the rapidity with which it had made the transition to online provision and thanked staff for their willingness and flexibility in supporting the student experience. The Chair of Court noted that the closure of campus had prevented visits to Schools and Services to meet staff and advised members that an opportunity for virtual engagement with staff was planned.

78 OPERATIONAL PLANNING & FINANCIAL UPDATE (2019/2020 AND 2020/2021)

CT/0520/53

The Vice-Principal (Strategy & Planning) introduced the above report, intended to provide Court with an early update on the University's operational and financial planning for 2020/2021 and beyond. Ms Summers noted that the document sought to brief Court on the latest position and direction of travel, with the caveat that the operational planning process had not yet concluded and discussions with Deans and Directors continued.

Court was advised that the update had been discussed in detail at the meeting of the Finance & Corporate Performance Committee (FCPC) on 12 May 2020 and that the assumptions upon which the financial planning for 2020/2021 were based had been shared also with the Audit & Risk Committee (ARC) and with the trade unions. Management believed these assumptions to be both prudent and reasonable, taking into account the level of uncertainty across the sector at this time.

Ms Summers advised Court that, in late April, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) had required all institutions to submit revised financial forecasts for 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 in order to advise the Scottish Government on the likely financial impact of the pandemic on institutions. This had not been circulated to Court as it was not the basis upon which the University's planning assumptions had been made.

Court was advised that the updated year-end forecast for academic year 2019/2020 was that, excluding net Covid-19 costs of c£.05m, the University would finish on-track to achieve the budgeted EBITDA of c£2m (6%). Whilst this would not meet the institutional aspiration to generate 8%, the University was in a relatively strong position compared to many other universities in the sector.

Members noted that the Scottish Government had announced an additional £75m funding for research, which would most likely be allocated according to existing formulae, but that without additional funding from the UK Government, the Scottish Government would be unable to provide any further support. In discussion, members questioned whether any additional funding would be predicated on a future restructure of the HE landscape and were advised that Scottish Ministers maintained that there would be no disruption to the sector.

In terms of planning for 2020/2021, Court was advised that management had agreed a framework for delivery, assuming online provision by default with attendance on campus only where online delivery was impossible. Student recruitment was difficult to predict, although a decline in the number of international students was inevitable. Members noted that staff in External & Corporate Relations (ECR) were working to convert applications into acceptances, tailoring communications for different applicant groups with weekly updates for applicants from individual programmes. Those applicants whose education had been disrupted by the pandemic would have their offers adjusted accordingly and a virtual Freshers' Week was also being planned.

Additional costs would likely be incurred to accelerate investment in the digital infrastructure required for online delivery. Coupled with a loss of income from other sources, such as residences, and accepting that the University would to an extent run down its reserves in response to the drop in income in 2020/2021, management expected to set stretching targets for Schools and Services. Further savings would be made through a planned reduction in activities and improved business processes.

Thereafter, Court noted the report and the assumptions on which it was based and looked forward to receiving a further detailed report at its meeting in June.

79 HOMOLOGATION OF APPROVAL OF SFC FINANCIAL TRANSACTION BORROWING

CT/0520/54

The University Secretary introduced the above report, intended to provide Court with an explanation as to why £10.3m of SFC transactional funding had been accepted without asking Court to approve acceptance of the arrangement. Under the Scheme of Delegation, borrowing of this amount was not delegated to management or to the Finance & Corporate Performance Committee.

Members were advised that Court had been made aware at its meeting on 15 April 2020 that the University had been successful in its bid for £10.3m from the SFC for four specific projects as part of SFCs Financial Transaction funding. Although this had been discussed at the Finance & Corporate Performance Committee (FCPC) and noted at Court, a formal recommendation from FCPC to Court to approve the borrowing had not been made.

Mrs Stewart advised Court that lessons had been learned and that the Governance & Nominations Committee (GNC) would be reviewing the Scheme of Delegation. Members noted that verbal reports should not be accepted in lieu of formal proposals.

Thereafter, Court endorsed the recommendation of FCPC to homologate its earlier action and approve the borrowing retrospectively.

80 FINANCE & CORPORATE PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE: MINUTES OF THE RESCHEDULED MEETING HELD ON 12 MAY 2020

CT/0520/55

The minutes of the above meeting, submitted as Enclosure 55, were approved.

The following matter was approved:

- 80.1 Homologation of action in relation to SFC financial transactions
(paragraph 28 refers)
Court noted that this had already been endorsed as a separate agenda item under paragraph 79, above.

The following matters were noted:

- 80.2 Post-Project Evaluations for library and laboratories
(paragraph 29 refers)
Court noted the Committee's consideration of the above post-occupancy evaluation reports for the projects to refurbish the library and the science laboratories.

- 80.3 Process for Strategic Evaluation & Prioritisation of Projects
(paragraph 30 refers)
Court noted that the Committee had received and considered an update on the development of a revised approach to project evaluation, approval and governance. Members noted that the Committee expected to receive a more detailed framework at its next meeting.

80.4 Finance Report

(paragraph 31 refers)

Court noted the Committee's consideration of a high-level overview of the financial position for the seven months to February 2020.

The Chair of FCPC advised Court that, having previously expressed frustration around the lack of written documents and proposals, FCPC had taken assurance from the detailed reports it had received. Members reiterated that Court required to be assured in an appropriate and timely manner that it was receiving sufficient information from management. As a matter of good governance, Court required papers and proposals and not verbal reports.

81 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

One member questioned whether the University would require to consult with the Joint Liaison Group to enable changes required to policies as the current situation evolved and was advised that this would be discussed at the next meeting of the People, Health & Equality Committee.

Thereafter, no other business was declared.

82 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Court noted that the date of the next meeting was confirmed as Wednesday 24 June 2020.

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CHAIR