

ROBERT GORDON UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC COUNCIL

Minute of the meeting held on 11 March 2020 (2.00pm – 4.25pm).

Present: Professor J Harper (Chair), Dr I Agouris, Mr E Akerele, Dr I Arana, Mrs L Binnie, Dr P Bremner, Dr D Cockburn, Dr N Connon, Dr S Cunningham, Ms L Curtis, Mr T Dounas, Mr E Eke, Professor P Hagan, Dr D Hill, Mr W Jackson, Dr J Isaacs, Dr A Lamb, Mr R Leven, Professor K Mackinnon, Professor D McClean, Professor I Murray, Dr A Oke, Ms J Royle, Mr M Shepherd, Professor J Steel, Mrs V Strachan and Ms J Tait.

Apologies: Dr H Ahriz, Ms J Bisset, Mr J Buckley, Professor D Cairns, Dr G Droubi, Dr N Emmison, Ms I Fairley, Professor E Gammie, Professor E Hancock, Dr M Leon, Professor J McCall, Ms L Meng, Dr E Rey-Marmonier, Ms H Ohanusi, Mrs L Sharp and Professor S Vertigans.

In Attendance: Mr F Antoniazzi, Mr J Dunphy and Mrs F McLean Whyte (Secretary).

Welcome: Mrs Binnie and Dr Isaacs were welcomed to their first meeting of Academic Council.

1.	MINUTE	Action
	Academic Council approved the <i>Minute of the meeting held on 19 November 2019 [AC/20/1]</i> , and noted a <i>Matters Arising Report</i> .	
1.1	Chair's Report [AC/20/1/3]	
	The presentation on the University's marketing activities was circulated on 6 March 2020.	
1.2	University Strategy, Business Plan and Risk Register [AC/20/1/4.1]	
	The <i>Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2019</i> was circulated on 6 March 2020.	
1.3	Annual Appraisal Process: 2018-19: Student Handbook Audit [AC/20/1/5.1.1]	
	The audit of <i>Student Handbooks</i> across the University, being undertaken by the Department for Governance and Academic Quality to ensure compliance with the minimum content of <i>Student Handbooks</i> as specified by Academic Council, was nearing completion and Schools were encouraged to ensure all <i>Student Handbooks</i> were reviewed and updated at the earliest opportunity.	Heads of School
2.	CHAIR'S REPORT	
	The following was highlighted by the Chair:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Student applications:</i> considerable effort was currently being invested in conversion activities. Excellent feedback had also been received for the recent Open Day and Applicants' Day, with positive comments received for the attitude and friendly professionalism of staff, the student ambassadors, and the University's resources (see also item 4.3 below); 	

- *Appointments:* following the recent election, Dr Colin Hunter had been elected as the Chair of the Board from 1 April 2020. An announcement was imminent regarding the appointment of a new Principal and Vice-Chancellor;
- *Higher education finances:* the University's financial situation was showing positive signs of stabilising and key performance indicators were moving in the right direction;
- *National Subsea Centre:* the Centre was an important strategic development for the University. An office building had been secured and a director was in the process of being appointed;
- *University response to the climate emergency:* Professor de Leuw had recently presented to the Board of Governors, the University Management Group and the Academic Development Committee on the University's programme for addressing the climate emergency. The strategy and plan had three main areas of focus:
 - reducing the University's carbon footprint in respect of campus activities;
 - reflecting on the content of the University's course provision, both in terms of the *Teaching and Learning Framework*, and course developments to meet the needs of climate change and energy transition;
 - the University's impact on the external environment.

Academic Council **agreed** *climate change and energy transitions* would be the topic of strategic discussion at its next meeting.

Academic Council
Holding File
[09.06.20]

In respect of *COVID-19*, the Executive was meeting daily to consider and confirm appropriate actions and responses to guidance, as it was being issued by the UK and Scottish Governments, and this was being supported by a Teaching and Learning Group, led by the Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience that was meeting twice weekly and liaising closely with Schools and RGU:Union.

Although it was a rapidly-changing environment, an early decision had been taken to change all semester 2 assessments online and external examiners would be informed accordingly. Guidance for Schools would be developed by the Department of Governance and Academic Quality and DELTA in liaison with the aforementioned Teaching and Learning Group. It was anticipated professional, statutory and regulatory bodies would be generating guidance for the higher education sector. A pragmatic approach to delivery and assessment would be required as the focus turned to online methods. It was key to ensure students were reassured assessment feedback would be provided within the normal 20 working day timeframe, and it was **agreed** a high-level communication would be issued to students.

Heads of School
RGU:Union
Prof J Harper &
Ms A Duthie

3. **STRATEGIC DISCUSSION [Standing Item]: Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR)**

At its last meeting in November 2019, Academic Council had agreed that there would be an item on each agenda covering topics of strategic importance. The first such discussion covered the University's forthcoming *Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR)* in April 2021. The ELIR was a review coordinated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland on a quinquennial basis for all Scottish higher education institutions, and the University's last ELIR had been conducted in 2016.

Council received a presentation from the Assistant Chief Academic Officer and the following was highlighted:

- an ELIR Steering Group was meeting regularly:
 - it was reviewing progress with, and evidence of, work done since ELIR 3 in 2016; and
 - it had considered potential key themes to be highlighted in the University's *Reflective Analysis* and *Advanced Information Set* that were due for submission to the QAA in early December 2020, ahead of the ELIR;
- the following core themes underpinned the University's strengths and how it conducted its business:
 - student partnership was at the core of decisions;
 - its use of data to enhance provision;
 - its focus on ensuring high quality teaching learning and assessment;
- the University's themes and strengths remained the same as those identified in ELIR 2016:
 - use of data to enhance the student learning experience;
 - widening access;
 - employability; and
 - student representation and partnership working.

Much of the evidence base would be drawn from Session 2019-20 activities, particularly the *Annual Appraisal Process*.

Council members were asked to forward further suggestions and ideas to the Assistant Chief Academic Officer.

Academic Council was advised the University was currently developing a level 1 accreditation process in respect of the Scottish Innovative Student Award (SISA) Scheme offered by the Scottish Institute for Enterprise (SIE). Mr Eke, the postgraduate research student representative on Council, had previously achieved a Gold Scottish Innovative Student Award in July 2018, and it was **agreed** more could be done to promote such successes.

Academic Council
Members to
Mrs V Strachan

SISA Steering
Group
(Mr C Moule,
Ms P Bremner &
Ms L Ginsberg)

4. **STRATEGIC PLANNING**

4.1 **Business Plan**

Council noted the mid-year report on progress with the delivery of actions in the *Business Plan 2019-20*.

4.2 **Outcome Agreement**

Council noted the *Outcome Agreement 2019-20: Mid-year update* and the draft *Outcome Agreement 2020-21 to 2022-23*. It was confirmed that all students identified in the case studies within the *Outcome Agreement* had given approval for them to be used for promotional purposes, including marketing and communications collateral, social media, press publicity, and teaching and research material.

Although the University's MD20 numbers were positive, in that 70-80% of MD20 school leavers in the region came to the University, with approximately 40-50% arriving through articulation routes, achieving the Scottish Government's percentage target remained a challenge. Detailed analysis of the University's progress in this had area had been forwarded to the Scottish Funding Council.

4.3 **Session 2019-20: Semester 2 Enrolments**

A report from the Director of Planning and Policy providing an overview of semester 2 enrolments for 2019-20 by market segment, as at 5 February 2020, was noted for onward reporting to the Board of Governors.

Board of
Governors Report
[31.03.20]

4.4 **Academic Development Committee**

Council noted a report of the Academic Development Committee meetings held on 4 December 2019 and 6 February 2020 that highlighted a number of items of strategic and developmental business, including:

- *Energy Transition and Portfolio Development:* Professor Paul de Leeuw, Director of the Energy Transition Institute had provided a presentation on energy transition with particular regard to portfolio development. Areas were identified for what RGU could do for the energy/climate change transition and contribute to net zero. In particular, the Committee considered the ambition for RGU to deliver a sector-leading energy offer;
- *Student Recruitment:*
 - early indications of Semester 2 enrolment were very positive. In particular, there had been a considerable increase in the number of on-campus international students, with all Schools ahead of target. Aberdeen Business School and the School of Computing Science and Digital Media had exceeded target substantially in this market segment. Nigeria and India were the main markets for the increased numbers, with India showing a significant recovery from previous years;
 - UCAS applications had also increased, with applications for the 2020-21 session at the initial (15 January) deadline for applications up 1.8% on the previous year, whereas competitors and the sector both declined. In terms of Scottish-only applications, there was an increase of 3.4%, whereas competitors and the sector saw declines of 3.4% and 2.7% respectively. Conversion was identified as a key activity to maintain and develop this positive trend.
- *Major business and economic development opportunities:*
 - the Business and Economic Development Department was pursuing a number of significant business opportunities, including in Mexico (where the Associate Vice-Principal would be meeting with those responsible for the Hydrocarbon Fund from CONACyT and SENER). A substantial pre-qualification tender had also been submitted to Sonatrach;
 - recruitment for the 175 Graduate Apprenticeship places awarded by Skills Development Scotland was progressing well, with approximately 100 places filled to date;

- the University had been awarded funding by the Scottish Funding Council to develop and deliver short courses to upskill the Scottish workforce. The response from staff had been agile and as a result seven short courses would be offered, with most of these commencing in April.

5. STUDENT PARTNERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

Council received a video presentation from the Director of Student Life. The video had been developed with the Student Union Presidents, to provide a student-focused means of communicating the *Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) 2020*. In a change to previous practice, the SPA was now running on a calendar year basis to enable the sabbatical officers sufficient time to complete actions and ensure appropriate handover to new incumbents.

6. ACADEMIC QUALITY AND STANDARDS

6.1 Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee

Council considered a report of the meeting held on 12 February 2020, including a report of the *Review, Validation and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body Event Outcomes* for onward submission to the Board of Governors.

Board of
Governors Report
[31.03.20]

The following additional items were noted:

- *Annual Appraisal Process – 2018-19: Progress and Update Reports*: Council noted the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee's consideration of several progress reports relating to actions arising from the *Annual Appraisal Process* for Session 2018-19. Council sought reassurance that a competent *Action and Enhancement Plan* had been received from the Law School following the School Academic Board meeting and this would be pursued by the Committee;
- *Institution-Led Subject Review: Interim Review: Law*: Academic Council noted the Committee's approval of an *Interim Response* from the Law School, in respect of the review of *Law* in January 2017, subject to confirmation that the School Academic Board and Course/Programme Management Teams were now operating in accordance with the respective remits, and the memberships accorded with the required compositions, as defined in the *Organisational Regulations*;
- *Quality Enhancement Theme: Evidence for Enhancement*: the Committee had received an update from the Director for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Access;
- *Graduate Apprenticeships and Academic Regulations*: a meeting had taken place with the Head of Learning Teaching Development and the graduate apprenticeship course leaders. It was confirmed that the *Academic Regulations* in their current form were appropriate to the graduate apprenticeships and no amendments were proposed at this time.
- *School Academic Board Reports*: this was the first occasion the School Academic Boards were asked to report to the Committee, through the Committee members who were the senior academic representative from each School and were *ex officio* members of the respective School Academic Board. The focus had been to provide updates on *Action and Enhancement Plans* and Schools' personal tutorial systems.

QAEC Holding File
[18.05.20]

6.2 External Examiner Appointments

In respect of nominations received from the School Academic Boards, Council:

- **approved** nine new appointments, nine extensions to duties and two re-allocation of duties; and
- **ratified** five new appointments.

Governance &
Academic Quality

7. RESEARCH

7.1 Research Committee

Council noted a report of the meeting held on 26 February 2020 covering the Committee's discussions of recent developments and issues, that highlighted the following:

- the University's preparations for the *Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021*, including development of the first draft of the impact case studies to be completed by May 2020;
- the considerable progress and achievements during the first six months of the year in respect of the Orkney Project;
- the Committee had agreed that a *research culture survey* would be developed and submitted to the Committee for approval prior to implementation. It was believed that conducting a survey would give a strong message that the University cared about research, it would provide baseline data upon which the University could form an improvement plan, and it would also be valuable for the *University-level environment statement required for the REF 2021*;
- work was progressing to create a development proposal for new academic staff, to sit alongside the *Professional Teaching Framework* and academic staff induction;
- the University's *Research Governance and Integrity Policy* had been reviewed to more explicitly address the requirements of the [Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#), and to complete some necessary housekeeping. This was an interim version of the *Policy*, pending a more fundamental review at some point in the near future.

7.2 Research Degrees Committee

Consideration was given to a report of the meetings held on 29 January 2020.

7.2.1 Conferral of Awards

Academic Council **approved** the awards to the undernoted students, and **agreed** the students and their supervisory teams be congratulated:

- (i) The degree of PhD be conferred on Mr John Aldersey-Williams, Aberdeen Business School, with effect from 12 February 2020, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "A Stakeholder-Grounded Evaluation of the "Seven Functions" Model of Technological Innovation Systems Theory in UK Offshore Wind and Marine Renewables".

Graduate School

- (ii) The degree of PhD be conferred on Mr Adamu Ali-Gombe, School of Computing Science and Digital Media, with effect from 15 January 2020, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "Learning from Small and Imbalanced Dataset of Images using Generative Adversarial Neural Networks".
- (iii) The degree of DInfSc be conferred on Ms Clare Dean, School of Creative and Cultural Business, with effect from 13 February 2020, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "Identifying and facilitating a community of practice in information literacy in higher education".
- (iv) The degree of PhD be conferred on Mr Oluwademilade Ogunesan, School of Engineering, with effect from 19 February 2020, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "CFD Modelling of Pipe Erosion under Multiphase Flow Regimes".
- (v) The degree of PhD be conferred on Ms Maja Zeco, Gray's School of Art, with effect from 26 November 2019, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "Placing Sound: A Contextual Exploration of Personal Identities in Sound Art Discourse Through Performance Art Practice".

7.2.2 *Items for Noting*

The following additional items were noted:

- *Items referred by Academic Council:* the Committee had discussed items referred to it by Academic Council in November 2019 in relation to research proposals and the profiling of research students on the University website and *Worktribe*;
- *RDIR June 2018 – Updated Response to Confirmed Report:* the Committee had considered a year-on response that incorporated additional actions from those reported in the initial response;
- *Research Culture Survey of the research student community:* the Committee had considered the outcome of a survey of the research student community within the School of Pharmacy and Life Sciences and considered the benefits of a wider staff and student survey in the longer term;
- *Internal Research Experience Survey (IRES) 2020:* the Committee approved the running of another internal survey for 2020, and considered a comparison report which highlighted common issues between the University's internal survey for 2019 and the *Advance HE PRES 2019* report. It was noted the overall satisfaction of the research student group within the University was higher than the national benchmark.

8. **ACADEMIC CALENDAR AND SEMESTER DATES**

Council considered a paper relating to the Academic Calendars for 2020-21 and 2021-2022, and semester dates for 2022-2023.

In Session 2019-20 the university's *Academic Calendar* was amended to bring the January assessment period to December, prior to the festive break. This change was influenced by a majority vote at the RGU Union Annual General Meeting in February 2016, and further student engagement. At the time, changes were made only to the semester 1 dates; the start of semester 2 was left unchanged in case it impacted negatively on international student recruitment.

Following discussions prior to and at the University Management Group (UMG) meeting in January 2020, the Chair of Academic Council approved the moving of the start of semester 2 one week earlier and a corresponding move forward of semester 3 by one week. Also, at that UMG meeting, it was confirmed that the Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience had identified that the reading week in semester 1 would be week 13; i.e. the week immediately prior to the assessment period. Regarding reading week in semester 2, there was discussion regarding both the reading week and the spring break week. UMG was engaged in a period of consultation that had led to the current proposals. Academic Council **approved** (subject to minor refinements for individual Schools' requirements):

- Semester 2 start date brought forward by one week;
- Semester 2 would have a single reading week, now aligned to the common school holiday week (of Aberdeen City/Shire schools);
- Semester 2 would finish two weeks earlier and this had enabled more teaching time for semester 3;
- Semester 3 examinations and semester 1/2 resit exams would be retained in August.
- Graduation – the reworking of the calendar would enable graduation to be brought forward.
- Reading weeks – where Heads of School had specific course-based requirements during the scheduled reading weeks, then approval from the Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience for exemption from reading week must be sought.

Council reiterated its resolution from its last meeting: "From September 2020, no formal timetabled teaching be permitted within the *Semester 1 Induction/Freshers' Week* [AC/20/1/5.1.3]."

Heads of School

9. **COMMITTEE CALENDAR: 2020-2021**

The draft *Committee Calendar for 2020/21* was noted. This contained dates for meetings of the Board of Governors, Academic Council (and their Standing Committees and Sub-Committees), the Executive, Senior Management Group and Validation and Institution-Led Subject Review Events.

10. **RGU/QAA ANNUAL DISCUSSION**

The notes of the annual discussion with the QAA held on 24 February 2020 were noted.

11. **HONORARY DEGREES**

A special honorary ceremony was held on 9 March 2020 where Nicola Benedetti and Mark Williamson received a *DMus (honoris causa)* and *MUniv (honoris causa)* respectively.

Secretary's Note: subsequent to the meeting, the graduation ceremonies scheduled for July 2020 were postponed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the honorary degrees due to be conferred at the July 2020 graduation ceremonies would be conferred at the next graduation event.

12. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Tuesday 9 June 2020 at 2.00pm in H230, The Ishbel Gordon Building

Professor John Harper, C

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