THE ROBERT GORDON UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC COUNCIL

Minute of the meeting held on 14 March 2018 (2.00pm – 3.45pm).

Present: Professor F von Prondzynski (Chair), Mr F Antoniazzi, Dr I Arana, Mrs M Buchan, Professor D Cairns, Mrs K Close, Dr N Connon, Mr J Dunphy, Ms J Guest, Professor P Hagan, Mrs E Hancock, Professor J Harper, Ms K Harrison, Mr M Ife, Dr A Lamb, Mrs A Lawani, Ms J Leith, Dr M Leon, Professor K Mackinnon, Professor J McCall, Mr B McCann, Professor D McClean, Dr J McConnachie, Professor G McConnell, Professor I Murray, Ms L Sharp, Mr M Shepherd, Ms J Steed, Professor J Steel, Mrs V Strachan and Professor S Vertigans.
Apologies: Professor D Ashall, Ms L Curtis, Professor E Gammie, Mr M Lewis, Ms J Royle, Mr M Sollis and Dr A Weidmann.
In Attendance: Dr D Cockburn, Ms H Douglas (Secretary) and Mrs F McLean Whyte (Clerk).
Welcome: Professor McConnell was welcomed to his first meeting of Council.

		Action
1.	**MINUTE**	

Academic Council **approved** the *Minute of the meeting held on 4 December 2017 [AC/18/1]*, and noted a *Matters Arising Report*.

1.1 **Research Committee – SciVal Research Performance Software**

A presentation on *SciVal* had been given to the Senior Management Group at its meeting on 21 February 2018.

2. **CHAIR'S REPORT**

In his routine report, the Chair highlighted:

– *Public funding:* the Scottish Funding Council published the *indicative university outcome agreement funding allocations for 2018-19* on 27 February 2018. This had unexpectedly revealed an increase in real terms of the university's allocation when, at best, a flat cash settlement had been expected. While this settlement was welcome, prudence was still required. The likely outcome of the next spending review was currently unknown but initial signs for the higher education sector were tentatively positive. It was inevitable that future funding settlements would continue to place increasing emphasis on delivery of key government priorities, such as access, skills, and gender-based violence prevention, and the university was well placed to respond to these.

– *Brexit:* the Scottish Government had confirmed that EU nationals admitted to Scottish universities and beginning their studies in September 2019 would not be required to pay tuition fees for the duration of their studies. It was not yet clear what would happen after 2019.

– *Industrial Strategy:* following the publication of the UK Government's *Industrial Strategy* in November 2017, which he recommended members read, the Principal of Heriot-Watt University, Professor Richard Williams, had convened a group identified as the *University-Business Leaders' Forum*. The *Forum's* aim was to secure, through consortia, *Industrial Strategy* funding (private and public) for projects based in Scotland. The *Forum* was focusing on two areas of potential benefit: the 'Blue Economy', to be led by Heriot-Watt University, and 'Data

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Analytics' coordinated by RGU. There was potential for significant research funding and members were encouraged to advise him or the Vice-Principal for Research if they were interested in participating.

– *Oil and Gas Technology Centre (OGTC):* the OGTC and the two Aberdeen universities had agreed on a framework for developing the two initial *Centres of Excellence*:

   ▪ *decommissioning*, led by the University of Aberdeen; and

   ▪ *subsea and underwater*, led by RGU, and which could involve engineering, computing, business law, and dynamics, amongst other disciplines. There was potential for this to extend into renewable energies. A significant resource would be provided to support the *Centre* which, it was anticipated, would be established within the next 12 months, with OGTC devolving it to RGU after three years.

   The *Centre's* scope was still to be finalised, not least in light of the very significant *oil and gas sector deal* currently being negotiated with the UK Government and stemming from its *Industrial Strategy*. In the meantime, a business plan was being developed by the Vice-Principal for Research and the Director of the Oil and Gas Institute.

– *North East Scotland College (NESCol):* the university and NESCol had agreed a new framework for strengthening their strategic collaboration, that would be launched in the spring with its own branding. Staff would be encouraged to incorporate the new logo into all RGU materials.

– *Bénédict Schools:* the Board of Governors had approved the status of the Bénédict Schools in Switzerland (Zürich and Lucerne) as an associate college of the university, and this would subject to a formal launch.

3.   **STRATEGIC PLANNING**

3.1   **Business Plan 2017-18**

Council noted a second quarter update on the *Business Plan 2017-18*.

It was noted the *Employability and Professional Enrichment Hub* and initiative had received strategic investment from the Board of Governors. This had facilitated the establishment of the Hub's physical presence on level 3 of The Ishbel Gordon Building, including a new informal seating area.

3.2   **Outcome Agreement**

Council noted the mid-year progress report on the *Outcome Agreement 2017-18*, and the final draft *Outcome Agreement 2018-21*. Council noted this would be the last specific mid-year report on the *Outcome Agreement*, although monitoring would continue.

The university had received feedback from the Scottish Funding Council on three of the targets contained in the draft *Outcome Agreement 2018-21*:

– the retention rate (measure 6) target had been increased to 93% over the period of the *Outcome Agreement* – given recent improvements in retention rates this small increase of 1% from the target in the initial draft should not be of concern;

- the numeric headcount target for articulation with advanced standing (measure 1) had been increased over the period of the *Outcome Agreement* to reflect the university's historic performance. The university might revise the headcount target for this measure down in future years to take account of two factors:
  - the potential increased regional competition for articulating students;
  - the university's medium-term desire to increase its STEM subject intake which traditionally had less articulating students. The current over-achievement of this target was due, in part, to over-recruitment in business subjects and this had been fully discussed with the SFC Outcome Agreement managers;
- The target associated with MD20 entrants amongst full-time Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants (SDUE) had been revised upwards from earlier drafts. The advice from the SFC Outcome Agreement managers was that the university should demonstrate its commitment to the national aspiration of '10% by 2021-22' and undertake all possible actions to achieve this target. If under these circumstances the university failed to reach its target then the regional circumstances would be acknowledged. The university was already engaging in greater use of unconditional offers to MD20 students who would ordinarily be given conditional offers, and was examining how it could arrange accommodation discounts to attract MD20 students from outwith the region.

Meeting the MD20 targets, under the new *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 2016*, would be increasingly challenging due to the socio-economic profile of the North-East Scotland, and the increased competition within the Scottish higher education sector, as all institutions faced similarly challenging targets while also having to retain or improve retention targets. Although the Scottish Funding Council accepted the challenges facing the region (in which only 6% in Aberdeen city and 2% in Aberdeenshire of school leavers were identified as being in MD20 postcode areas) which arose due to the areas of deprivation in the region not matching postcode areas, it was obliged by the Scottish Government's 'intensification' priorities to ensure all institutions were committed to making all reasonable efforts to meet targets. As a consequence, the university might need to become a 'net importer' of MD20 applicants from other areas of Scotland.

The Academic Development Committee would be reviewing existing access measures, and exploring alternative targeted measures, that might enable the university to achieve its challenging '9% by 2021' target. Efforts would also be made to ensure the university was driving the future agenda for widening access beyond the mere achievement of metrics and targets, into identifying innovative solutions for the whole Scottish higher education sector.

The university's internal Student Recruitment Group was mindful that the student recruitment process was becoming more complex and challenging as the university had to address market demands, and the requirements of its *Outcome Agreement* and its concomitant Scottish Funding Council targets.

It was confirmed that entrants had to remain with the university until the end of the stage in order to avoid impacting on retention targets.

There were early signs of improvement in meeting research targets, although it was anticipated the targets would not be achieved in the current session.

On behalf of Council, the Chair thanked the Director of Planning and Policy Development for his extensive efforts in preparing the *Outcome Agreement 2018-21.*

Dr D Cockburn

3.3 Semester 2 Enrolments 2017-18 and Applications for 2018-19

Consideration was given to a paper from the Director of Planning and Policy Development, for onward reporting to the Board of Governors. This highlighted:

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− The university had experienced a 9.62% decline in application numbers against last year's figures, and a 8.64% reduction in applicant numbers. In both cases, this was greater than either the UK sector generally, or the university's competitor group. Despite declines in application numbers, there was confidence that overall undergraduate SFC numbers would be reached.

− The university remained open for late applications and processes such as a 'gathered field' if and when it was felt necessary to meet target numbers in the following Schools: Aberdeen Business School; Applied Social Studies; Creative and Cultural Business; Computing Science and Digital Media; Gray's; Health Sciences; Law and Scott Sutherland (for Architecture and Architectural Technology).

− The university actively processed all late applications as received in the following Schools: Engineering; Nursing and Midwifery; Pharmacy and Life Sciences; Scott Sutherland (for Construction Management and Surveying).

− The practice of making unconditional offers to all MD20 and MD40 applicants, who the university would ordinarily make offers to, had been extended to all Schools across the university.

− A decline in applications from students studying at the North East Scotland College (NESCol) was being urgently followed up.

− The recent downturn in the local economy was leading to many employers being reluctant to pay for full-cost postgraduate taught MSc courses. This was having a detrimental effect on the university's ability to achieve its fee-paying home/EU target.

− The paper also highlighted a number of recruitment and marketing activities, including monthly meetings of the Student Recruitment Group, that involved the Deputy Principal and representatives from Planning, Student Recruitment, Marketing, DELTA and Academic Administration.

It was confirmed that 'Fee-paying home/EU' related mostly to postgraduate taught provision, both on and off campus, and 'Fee-paying rUK' referred predominantly to open and distance learning (ODL) provision.

The Academic Development Committee had been discussing the need for different levers for different areas, and selective interventions had been made in some Schools. It was also acknowledged that going rates might need review, as these had largely been set five years ago.

The hotcoursesabroad.com website listed the university as 27th in its *Employability World Ranking.*

3.4 **Academic Development Committee**

Council noted a report of the meeting held on 1 February 2018 and, in particular, the following, which highlighted the Committee's discussions of a number of items of strategic and developmental business:

– *SFC applications 2018-19:* the Committee was disappointed to note a further decline in application numbers for SFC-funded places in 2018-19 although it appeared that recruitment would meet targets. The Committee agreed to a range of recommendations to support recruitment.

– *September 2017 international intake:* the Committee had sought further information about the potential impact of changes to admissions in 2017-18. This related, in particular, to changes to English language testing and postgraduate entry requirements. The introduction of an RGU English language test had been successful in securing the recruitment of students who were too late for IELTS and equivalent formal testing. 21 students had undertaken the RGU English language test for entry in September 2017. Confirmation of English via Skype for Cambridge O-Level students, a further change to the English language testing arrangements, had facilitated recruitment of a further two students. Postgraduate entry requirements had been amended from 'a good honours degree' to 'a 2:2 or higher', and this had resulted in the additional recruitment of 20 students, mainly in Law and Engineering.

– *Graduate Apprenticeships:* following successful tendering for five new Graduate Apprenticeships, development of the courses was in progress and recruitment figures already appeared promising. The Committee approved the following proposed award titles to go to a joint validation event on 6 June 2018:
  ▪ BSc (Hons) Construction and Built Environment;
  ▪ BEng (Hons) Engineering: Design and Manufacture;
  ▪ BEng (Hons) Engineering: Instrumentation, Measurement and Control;
  ▪ BA (Hons) Business Management; and
  ▪ BA (Hons) Business Management: Financial Services.

  Council was informed that the Course Development Leaders involved in these developments had fully embraced and welcomed the multi-disciplinary discussions. The university would continue to ensure that all future Graduate Apprenticeships offered by the university would retain the unique and distinctive features of the Graduate Apprenticeships already being delivered.

– *Early student withdrawals:* The Committee reviewed data on student withdrawals. There was no evidence that the number of students withdrawing following the first five weeks after enrolment was increasing; however, the Committee had requested a further report, to cover withdrawals up to the end of Semester 1, in order to explore the matter further.

The Committee's Convener informed Academic Council that, with the Heads of School presence, the Committee was able to adopt a more strategic and institution-wide approach to prioritising and developing products.

Due to the significance of the Scottish Government's priority area of skills, it was **agreed** this would be a topic for strategic discussion at Council's next meeting.

4.   **ACADEMIC QUALITY AND STANDARDS**

4.1   **Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee**

Consideration was given to a report of the meeting held on 28 February 2018.

4.1.1   *Organisational Regulation O5: School Academic Boards*

Academic Council **approved** amendments to *Organisational Regulation O5: School Academic Boards*, for implementation from September 2018, that reflected recent organisational and procedural changes.

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4.1.2   *Organisational Regulation O7: Assessment Boards*

Academic Council **approved** amendments to *Organisational Regulation O7: Assessment Boards*, for implementation from September 2018, that were designed to provide increased clarity around the principal functions of Assessment Boards.

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4.1.3   *Academic Regulation A1: Courses*

Academic Council **approved**, for implementation from September 2018, an amendment to *Academic Regulation A1: Courses*, *Schedule 1.1: Awards of the University* to clarify that, unless a professional, statutory or regulatory body precluded it, an aegrotat award might be conferred in lieu of a Bachelor's Degree and a Bachelor's Degree with Honours. Provision for aegrotat awards was already made in paragraphs 6.1(v), 6.4(iii) and 10.3(iii) of *Academic Regulation A4*.

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4.1.4   *Quality Events*

Academic Council **endorsed** the *Validation, Review, Approval and Professional Body Event Outcomes* for onward submission to the Board of Governors.

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It was noted that learning outcomes not reflecting their level was a recurring issue arising from quality events. DELTA was now supporting course development and management teams in this area in advance of validations or re-approvals.

4.1.5   *Wellbeing*

The Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee had highlighted that a number of complex issues were being raised in discussions of the *Personal Tutor System* and the *SPA*, including mental health, and the impact of student mental health issues on staff, as well as students.

The Chair informed Council that he was a member of a Scottish sector-wide working group that was part of the Scottish Government's *Equally Safe 2016 - A National Strategic Approach to Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls* initiative. The group had commissioned the University of Strathclyde to develop an *Equally Safe in Higher Education Toolkit*, developed with funding from the Scottish Government, and that would be made available to all Scottish higher education institutions.

The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee had agreed guidance and support mechanisms for staff would be developed and that, following implementation of the guidance, School Academic Boards would be asked to specify what approach/practice they were adopting in response to the guidance. The Student Life Directorate was leading these developments to support both students and staff, in liaison with other central departments. This included reflecting on the *Equally Safe in Higher Education Toolkit* within its own *Mental Health Framework*, receiving input from NUS Scotland, and the creation of supporting guidance and training for academic staff. Council emphasised the importance of ensuring that the training was effectively cascaded to frontline academic staff.

Mr F Antoniazzi

The Committee had also agreed the updated *University Policy on Personal Tutoring* would be submitted to its next meeting, prior to its consideration by Academic Council in June 2018.

4.1.6   *Items for Noting*

The following items, in particular, were noted:

−   *Annual Appraisal Process: Session 2016-17:* Council noted the Committee's consideration of several progress reports relating to actions arising from the *Annual Appraisal Process* for Session 2016-17;

−   *Institution-Led Subject Review: Interim Reviews:* the Committee approved an interim response from the School of Health Sciences relating to the review of *Diagnostic Radiography; Occupational Therapy; Physiotherapy; and Sports and Exercise Science* in November 2014; and an interim response from the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture and the Built Environment relating to the review of *Architecture; Architectural Technology; Surveying; Construction Project Management; and Energy*, also in November 2014;

−   *Academic Quality Handbook:* the Committee considered revisions to two sections of the *Academic Quality Handbook*. It approved, in principle, the revised *Section 3: Institution-Led Subject Review* subject to further minor refinements, and endorsed proposed developments to *Section 2: Annual Appraisal Process*;

−   *Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF):* the Committee considered a paper from the Director of Planning and Policy Development regarding the *TEF Year 3 Metrics*.

4.2   **External Examiner Appointments**

In respect of nominations received from the School Academic Boards, Council **approved** seven new appointments and three extensions to duties; and **ratified** four appointments, and two re-allocations of duties.

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5. **RESEARCH**

5.1 **Research Committee**

A report of the meeting held on 14 February 2018 was also noted and, in particular, the following:

− *REF 2021: Open Access Compliance:* the observation that the university's level of open access compliance was increasing, at 92%, suggesting improved staff awareness and engagement. Given the university's relatively low levels of publication, however, it could not afford to risk losing any by failing to ensure compliance. Until recently, the university was losing in the region of 25% of outputs due to non-compliance;

− *Strategic Investment in Research:* the update to the Committee on the proposals approved by the Board of Governors for strategic investment, notably for research, at its meeting on 14 December 2017;

− *Orkney Project:* the significant number of developments arising under the auspices of the Orkney Project. The Principal and Vice-Principal for Research would be joining the Principals of Heriot-Watt University and the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) on a two day visit to Orkney in the following week to, amongst other things, further the development of the *Islands Deal* application. The Vice-Principal for Research was instrumental in preparing a supporting document for the *Islands Deal* outlining HEI strategy in this respect;

− *Research Asset Management Project:* recent developments with the implementation of the *Research Asset Management Project*.

5.2 **Research Degrees Committee**

Council considered a report of the meeting held on 21 February 2018.

5.2.1 *Conferment of Research Degrees by the Robert Gordon University*

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

Mr M Simpson

(i) The degree of PhD be conferred on Mr Ibrahim Alwawi, School of Computing Science and Digital Media, with effect from 9 November 2017, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "Cognitive Modelling and Control of Human Error Processes in Human-Computer Interaction with Safety Critical IT Systems in Telehealth".

(ii) The degree of PhD be conferred on Mr Sulaimon Bashir, School of Computing Science and Digital Media, with effect from 16 November 2017, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "Change Detection for Activity Recognition".

(iii) The degree of PhD be conferred on Ms Olivia Robertson-Gray, School of Pharmacy and Life Sciences, with effect from 30 October 2017, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "Studies on the Role of GPR55 in Cardiovascular Physiology and Pathophysiology".

(iv) The degree of PhD be conferred on Ms Aigul Salina, Aberdeen Business School, with effect from 7 December 2017, in recognition of a programme of work entitled: "Financial Soundness of Kazakhstan Banks: Analysis and Prediction".

5.2.2   *Items for Noting*

The following items, in particular, were noted:

− *SITS Continuous Improvement Project/eVisioning the PGR journey:* As part of the above project, the Committee noted development of an eVisioning project for the postgraduate research student journey, to be implemented during 2018, as part of Phase 2.

− *Expectations of supervisors:* The Committee considered the development of a guidance note for staff/students, that would clarify roles and responsibilities and be transparent to all parties.

− *Equivalence of Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2018:* The Committee noted development of an equivalent survey to be run by the Graduate School in conjunction with DELTA during May 2018, to assess if research students' perceptions of their study experience had improved since the 2017 survey.

− *Developing Research Culture within RGU:* The Committee considered a note of the key issues around research students' perceptions of research culture and what potential steps could be taken in the longer term to enhance it for the community.

− *Progress Monitoring – Interim Review:* The Committee reflected on the implementation of the interim review process during February 2018 and its added value to the research student monitoring process.

− *Research Degree Internal Review (RDIR) – June 2018:* The Committee noted work currently being undertaken as part of the preparations for the Review.

− *Development of a Mentoring System for those new to supervision:* The Committee considered ongoing progress with the development on an initiative between the Graduate School, the Human Resources Department and DELTA.

6.   **HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE (SCOTLAND) ACT 2016**

Academic Council was asked to consider, and make a recommendation to the Board of Governors in relation to, proposed changes to its composition, some of which were required in order to implement the requirements of the *Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016*.

The Act required that the composition of Academic Council must be composed of:

− the Principal of the institution;

− the Heads of School of the institution;

− persons appointed by being elected by the academic staff of the institution from among their own number;

− persons appointed by being elected by the students of the institution from among the students of the institution;

− such other persons as are appointed:

(i) by virtue of an enactment;

(ii) in accordance with the governing document of the institution; or

(iii) in accordance with a decision of the governing body of the institution.

In addition:

- more than 50% of Academic Council must be made up of elected staff and students;
- at least 10% of Academic Council must be made up of elected students (though there was a cap at no more than 30 student members required).

Council **endorsed** the following composition, subject to it being clarified that the four student members of Academic Council should include at least one undergraduate student, at least one postgraduate taught student, and at least one research student:

Ex Officio
Principal
Deputy Principal and Chief Academic Officer
Vice-Principal for Commercial and Regional Innovation
Vice-Principal for Research
Vice-Principal for University Advancement
Heads of School/Graduate School

Elected
2 members of staff from each School (preferably 1 male, 1 female, and not including Graduate School)
4 students (at least one undergraduate student, at least one postgraduate taught student and at least one research student)

In attendance
Other officers may be in attendance at meetings.

This gave a total of 43 members. Assuming approval by the Board on 22 March 2018, the relevant *Organisational Regulations* would be amended and taken to the next Board meeting on 28 June 2018 for approval, with the new structure Academic Council being operational from the start of the 2018-19 session.

Council also noted the inherent challenges associated with trying to achieve gender balance amongst an elected membership and was informed proposals for the election process would be submitted to its next meeting, ahead of elections for the Academic Council positions in autumn 2018. A view was expressed that there was a fine line between affirmative action and potentially positive discrimination and the university would need to be mindful of this in its development of the election processes.

Board of Governors [22.03.18]

Ms A Goodbrand/Ms F McLean Whyte

7.   **ACADEMIC CALENDAR AND SEMESTER DATES**

Consideration was given to a paper relating to the *Academic Calendars* for 2018-19 and 2019-20, and semester dates for 2020-21.

Council had previously approved the proposals for the *Academic Calendar 2018-19*, which incorporated the move of the January assessment period to December, prior to the festive break, following the *RGU Union Annual General Meeting* in February 2016. The practical logistics of introducing the revised *Calendar* had led to further discussions of the more detailed aspects. On reflection, however, Council **agreed** that no further changes would be made to the timings of the *Academic Calendar 2018-19* that it had approved in March 2017.

Council **approved**, in principle:

− the *Academic Council 2019-20*;

− the semester dates for 2020-21.

It was possible, however, that further discussions might result in slight modifications to the timing of the start of semester 2 in future *Calendars*.

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8. **COMMITTEE CALENDAR: 2018/19**

The draft *Committee Calendar 2018-19* was noted. This contained dates for meetings of the Board of Governors, Academic Council (and their Standing Committees) and the Executive, Senior Management Group and Operations Management Group. Dates of Sub-Committees meetings would be added to the *Committee Calendar* in due course and uploaded on the web.

9. **ACADEMIC COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP**

Nominations would be sought to fill vacancies, for a three year term from August 2018, in the following Schools: Engineering, Gray's School of Art and Health Sciences. Arrangements would, however, be influenced by the decisions of the Board of Governors at its meeting on 22 March 2018 (refer to item 6 above).

10. **HONORARY DEGREES**

The following had been conferred at a ceremony on Wednesday 8 March 2018:

Alice Brown   *DEd (honoris causa)*
Sheila Rowan   *DSc (honoris causa)*
Edel Harris   *DBA (honoris causa)*

11. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Academic Council would next meet on Wednesday 20 June 2018 at 2.00pm in room H230, The Ishbel Gordon Building, Garthdee.

Professor F von Prondzynski, <u>C</u>
28 March 2018

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