

MINUTES OF UNIVERSITY COURT

2 March 2021

Meeting held by videoconference

Present: Dame Sue Bruce (Convener), Paula Galloway (Vice-Convener), Professor Sir Jim McDonald (Principal), Virginia Beckett, Dr Jeremy Beeton, Linda Brownlow, Kayla-Megan Burns, Ronnie Cleland, Alison Culpan, Gillian Hastings, Stephen Ingledew, Dr Barbara Keating, Susan Kelly, Professor Scott MacGregor, William McLachlan, Dr Katharine Mitchell, Malcolm Roughead, Marion Venman, Peter Young, Andrew Eccles

Attending: Professor Tim Bedford, Professor Douglas Brodie, Adrian Gillespie, Professor David Hillier, Professor Atilla Incecik, Dr Veena O'Halloran, Professor Ian Rivers, Gordon Scott, Professor Eleanor Shaw, Rona Smith, Professor Iain Stewart, Steven Wallace, Dr Daniel Wedgwood

Apologies: Chelbi Hillan, Heather Stenhouse

Welcome and apologies

The Convener welcomed Court members and attendees to the meeting and noted apologies as above.

No interests were declared.

1. Minutes

Court **approved** the minutes of the meetings held on 26 November 2020 and 25 January 2021.

2. Matters arising

There were no matters arising, other than those covered in the main agenda.

3. Principal's Report and update on COVID-19 pandemic response

The Principal updated Court on recent developments, including management of the impacts on the University of the on-going Covid-19 pandemic, in particular the return to 'lockdown' conditions in the early months of 2021. Key points included the following:

- The Executive Team had maintained oversight of essential operational matters and the continuation or re-introduction of various measures to promote student and staff wellbeing in the current situation. Members noted that the re-introduction of 'rest and recuperation' days had been particularly appreciated by staff, as respite from the challenges of lockdown.
- All essential on-campus teaching and research activity was approved by the Executive Team on the basis of rigorous risk assessments and in line with Scottish Government and public health guidance.
- The University was also looking to the next academic year. Particular support needs were likely to arise, given the reduced on-campus activity during the majority of the current year and the unusual circumstances in which new young entrants would have completed their school education.
- All students who had been on placements abroad when pandemic restrictions were first imposed had now returned home, to the UK or other home countries. The Principal thanked University colleagues who had provided regular support to these students throughout the relevant period.
- Strathclyde researchers had been key members of the team that produced the first national report on the effectiveness of the UK's Covid-19 vaccination programme, which had received international attention and would inform the global response to the pandemic.

The University Secretary & Compliance Officer (USCO) gave an overview of Health & Safety matters, including the following:

- Small numbers of cases of Covid-19 had been recorded among the student and staff populations. There was no evidence of transmission of the virus through on-campus learning activity: there had been three known cases among relevant students and these were not connected to each other.
- There were on-going discussions at sector level to establish whether on-campus quarantine arrangements might be permitted in the future for students arriving from overseas, in place of the current obligatory hotel-based quarantine.
- The lateral flow testing centre at the Barony Hall was operating for two mornings per week during the current lockdown period.
- Following the death of a student, Campbell Hunter, in an accident on campus in December 2020, there had been a full police investigation and the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) had been notified. The HSE had visited to inspect the site of the accident and construction work had begun to remove the risk of any similar accidents. The entire campus was being evaluated to identify and remove any comparable hazards.
- The Independent Review Implementation Group (IRIG) was working to ensure full implementation of all of the recommendations of the review by Craig Sandison QC into historic inappropriate behaviour by a former staff member. IRIG included representatives of the students' union and trade unions and other members of staff and had met twice so far.

The Principal also noted the following:

- The University had been successful in its bid for low-interest 'Financial Transactions' loans from the Scottish Funding Council, which would support a number of capital projects around the University. In total, Strathclyde was expected to receive around a third of the most recent tranche of loans available to the sector through this route. It was noted that this reflected confidence in the University as an investible institution.
- Additional funding had been announced by the Scottish Government for the Further Education and Higher Education sectors, including additional research funding. It was not yet known how the relevant funds would be allocated across the sector.
- The Visioning Groups around which Court's November strategy session had been structured had concluded their work and were to be succeeded by Strathclyde Acceleration Teams, with a focus on identifying and implementing concrete actions. The work of these Teams would be considered in Court's May strategy session.
- Work to manage the impacts of the UK's withdrawal from the EU continued, with on-going support for affected staff and students a priority. Work was in hand to clarify the new fee status of EU applicants, which would depend on individuals' circumstances, and data continued to be monitored to track all relevant impacts and identify any areas of concern.
- The University's REF submission was nearing completion, in line with the detailed briefing and timeline that Court had received at the additional meeting on 25 January 2021. The Principal thanked Court members who had assisted with preparations, including on-going review of selected case studies.
- The process for recruitment of a Chief Information Officer was nearing its conclusion.
- The Principal would shortly begin a new round of engagement sessions with staff from across the University.

Court **noted** the Principal's report.

4. Q2 Business Report 2020/21

The Chief Financial Officer (CFO) summarised the financial elements of the Business Report and Q2 forecast. Taking into consideration the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the University was in a good position, its debt covenants and cash position being secure through the balance of the academic year.

While income and expenditure had both been affected significantly by the pandemic, there had been some recovery in income and improvements in the cost base since Q1: in particular, the introduction of additional January PGT intakes and careful cost control had partly mitigated the previously forecast shortfall to budget.

The value of the University's investment portfolio had seen a significant recovery, approaching pre-pandemic levels. Income achievement had been substantially de-risked, with residences income now reflecting a prudent assumption of c.20% occupancy for the balance of the academic year.

In summary, the Q2 forecast was balanced between risk and opportunity. Initial modelling work had begun regarding the next academic year. While much uncertainty remained, a number of external developments, notably the roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines, gave grounds for cautious optimism.

Members enquired about scenario planning with regard to the financial impact of different levels of student recruitment, given that patterns of applications and conversion under the current conditions were likely to differ from historical norms. It was also noted that a strategic group had been established to review the processes and triggers for any potential mitigation actions.

The Director of Strategy & Policy summarised the non-financial elements of the Business Report. Key points included the following:

- While there had been some slowing in current research activity because of the pandemic, research application value showed a strong upward trajectory.
- There was growth also in the value of research awards, although this was masked in year-on-year comparisons by an outlying high-value award received early in the previous year.
- PGR recruitment was broadly positive in the circumstances. The total PGR population figures were known to include PGRs who had been granted extensions in response to the pandemic, with support from UKRI and from the University; the underlying situation would become clearer and data would be appropriately adjusted towards the end of the academic year.
- Student recruitment data were complicated by the uncertain status of a number of EU applicants in the wake of the UK's withdrawal from the EU (as noted under item 3).
- Intakes for the new January starts for selected PGT courses had been fully evaluated and showed a substantial number of new applicants alongside deferred applications from the previous autumn.
- International student recruitment at PGT level had re-aligned towards more concentration in markets that historically submitted applications later in the recruitment cycle, making year-on-year comparisons more complex. Current numbers were expected to rise in Q3. It was noted that current trends compared favourably with historical performance, although were lower than the exceptionally high levels of applications at this stage in the cycle for entry in 2020/21.
- The number of PGT applications from Home and RUK students was high, indicating reputational strength, including positive perceptions of the University's handling of the pandemic crisis, alongside a reflection of increased demand as a result of the broader economic circumstances.
- There had been a rise in overall entry tariff and a narrowing of the entry tariff gap between Widening Access students and other groups, as defined by SIMD quintiles.
- There had been a marked increase in retention figures, including a narrowing of the SIMD gap. It was unclear at this stage to what degree this reflected the pandemic conditions or would continue in the longer term.

It was noted that offers made to applicants were delayed relative to other years, in part because of an extension to the UCAS deadline and also in order to allow time to assess the fee status of EU students.

Members discussed the potential influence of world events on international recruitment. It was noted that the University regularly monitored market demand, utilising the insights of partners in addition to internal expertise, and was pro-active in identifying new opportunities and educational needs. It was well placed to serve growing and emerging markets.

Graduate employment was also discussed, recognising the likely additional challenges for graduates entering the economy following the impacts of the pandemic. The University had a working group to consider potential actions around employability and career development. Its strong links to industry provided many opportunities to enhance employability, while the University's portfolio of postgraduate courses also provided the means for graduates to increase skills and knowledge and to differentiate themselves in the job market.

Members enquired about and received an update on progress in construction of the Learning & Teaching Building.

Court **noted** the Business Report.

5. Strategic Plan 2020-25: Mid-year progress report 2020-21

The Director of Strategy & Policy summarised key points from the mid-year progress report on the Strategic Plan KPIs, noting that the report fell approximately one year after the launch of the Strategic Plan, and that this period roughly coincided with the greatest impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic to date. These impacts included positive movements in some areas, such as the PGR population and retention, as noted above, which would be monitored to track whether progress would be sustained into the longer term. Similarly, greenhouse gas emissions (KPI 16) had been positively affected by the pandemic context (i.e. reduced emissions). KPI 13, measuring the internationalisation of staff, was on track despite the potential challenges created by both the pandemic and the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

In relation to KPI 14, it was noted that the Gender Pay Gap had narrowed and an action plan was in development to accelerate progress.

Recognising the diverse impacts of the pandemic, members discussed the importance of the stage of emergence from the crisis. Members agreed that the report showed many signs of organisational resilience and agreed that it was appropriate to maintain the current KPIs and milestones for the time being, with time remaining over the period of the current strategic plan to make an informed and duly contextualised assessment of progress. Prioritisation would be crucial on emergence from the pandemic conditions; it was noted that this was an objective of the new Strathclyde Acceleration Teams and would be a theme of the May Court strategy session. The University was well positioned to contribute to the wider recovery and, within this, to address government priorities, given its integral role in both innovation and skills provision in relation to key industries.

Court **noted** the mid-year performance update.

6. Preparations for COP26

The Associate Principal, Research & Innovation gave an overview of the University's preparations for the COP26, the UN Climate Change Conference that was to be held in Glasgow later in the year. This provided significant opportunities for participation by the University and there were plans to showcase the University's achievements, create a legacy in teaching, research and innovation activities and advance the University's own net-zero greenhouse gas emission plans.

Details were given of the internal structures in place for the development of activity in all relevant areas, overseen by an Advisory Group that reported to the Executive Team. The COP26 groups also interfaced closely with Sustainable Strathclyde, an existing framework capturing and stimulating extensive relevant activity across the University's academic and professional services departments.

The overall approach to COP26 was highly collaborative, in particular as members of Sustainable Glasgow but also working individually with a range of industrial partners and with the other universities in Glasgow. At the local level, collaboration with the students' union was an integral part of the approach.

The Centre for Sustainable Development (CSD) would be central to Strathclyde's contribution and was working to ensure a strong academic legacy from the event. This would also be enhanced by Strathclyde's membership of the International Sustainable Campus Network and pending membership of the University of the Arctic network. There would also be a legacy in terms of partnership; a number of potential new partnerships in relevant areas were already under discussion.

A University COP26 communications strategy had been developed, with clearly identified audiences and key messages. This would draw on Strathclyde's history as a pioneer in, for example, efficient and clean energy, alongside current and forward-looking work.

Subsequent discussion covered the following points:

- Organisations across the economy were seeking to make rapid progress towards net zero aspirations but many lacked crucial expertise. Strathclyde was well placed to address many such gaps, whether

through partnership working or supply of appropriately skilled graduates. Involvement in COP26 would help the University to identify needs and opportunities.

- Education Strategy Committee would be assessing ways to further embed sustainability into the curriculum, building on existing initiatives led by the CSD.
- As Scotland's largest provider of teacher education, the University had significant opportunities to promote sustainability at a national level through education.
- The context of COP26 could also provide stimulus for entrepreneurship related to sustainability, which could be pursued under the Strathclyde Inspire strategy. Related activity was already underway within the Doctoral School.
- There might be opportunities to utilise existing national frameworks to boost the visibility of the University's communications in relation to the event, for example the Scotland Is Now campaign.
- Time would be allocated in the May Court strategy session for further discussion of relevant points.

Court **noted** the update.

Items for formal approval

7. Convener's Action: appointment to Remuneration Committee

Court **homologated** the appointment.

8. Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council

- Self-evaluation report for 2017-2020
- Interim Outcome Agreement for 2020-21

Court **approved** the Outcome Agreement Self-evaluation Report 2019-20 and the Interim Outcome Agreement 2020-21.

9. Complaints Handling Procedure

Court **approved** the procedure for implementation from 1 April 2021.

Item for information

Court received and **noted** the following items:

10. Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015): Annual Update

Court **noted** the update.

Committee Reports

Court received and **noted** the following committee reports:

11. Executive Team

12. Senate (relevant approval noted under item 9)

13. Court Business Group

14. Court Membership Group

Court **approved** extensions to the terms of office of Alison Culpan, Susan Kelly and Malcolm Roughead as lay members of Court to 31 July 2023.

15. Audit & Risk Committee

16. Staff Committee

17. Enterprise & Investment Committee

18. Estates Committee

19. AOB

The Director of HR noted that the deadline for applications to the Strathclyde Global Talent Attraction Programme and the Chancellor's Fellows programme had recently passed. Both the overall number of applications and the proportion of female applicants were higher than in the previous year.

Date of next meeting

- Tuesday 11 May 2021