

Autumn Meeting of the General Council: Saturday 25 November 2023

University Address by Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dame Sally Mapstone

Introduction

Good morning, everyone, and thank you all for coming on this rather frosty November morning. The core of my address today will consist of an update on our current activities under the pillars of our University Strategy for 2022 to 2027, including our new Business School and the New College which will house it, and of course our cutting-edge research and outreach initiatives in the areas of digital technology, entrepreneurship, and sustainability, with the latter being an area that Professor Ineke De Moortel, Master of the United College, will then speak to in her presentation on 'Sustainable St Andrews: Strategies, Challenges and Impacts'. I will also provide an update on our recently launched People Strategy, designed to attract and retain talented people with a broad range of backgrounds. First of all, however, I would like to speak to a series of other developments and successes that have taken centre stage in St Andrews this semester.

League Tables

Since my last update to the General Council on 17 June, the University has commenced the Martinmas semester in fine form, attaining a historic double first as the University ranked top in both *The Times* and *The Sunday Times Good University Guide 2024* and *The Guardian University Guide 2024*, published in September. This is, of course, a remarkable moment in our history, as no university other than those of Oxbridge has ever topped both principal UK rankings in the same year. This double top ranking marks four times in the last three years that St Andrews has disrupted what had been a longstanding Oxford and Cambridge duopoly.

Our academic schools and subjects were also hailed individually by both *The Guardian* and *The Times*. In *The Times*, six of our subjects were ranked top in the UK, and in *The*

Guardian, no fewer than nine – Art History, Chemistry, English, History, International Relations, Management, Modern Languages, Neuroscience, and Psychology – attained this top spot.

On an international scale, the University of St Andrews also placed in the top 7% of institutions ranked globally by the QS World Rankings, a leading international league table. This is a very strong rating that places us with some of the finest institutions in the world.

These accomplishments are a great compliment to our excellent academic and professional services staff, and our remarkable students. They reflect a deep institutional commitment to a critical balance of world-leading research and teaching, the engagement and academic potential of our students, and collectively, the ways in which we all try to support each other and constantly improve this great institution.

Our sense of community as a University is all the more important in the context of what are challenging times both locally and globally. Recent weeks have been marked by the sombre mood that followed the escalation of the conflict in Israel and the Palestinian territory of Gaza since October.

St Andrews, like so many other communities across the world, is profoundly distressed by these events. Our priority is to ensure that the University remains a safe and supportive environment for the well-being of all our students and staff, to provide practical and pastoral help where required, and to signal very clearly that there is no place for antisemitism or islamophobia in our University. The University has said repeatedly and unequivocally that we take no side but the side of humanity. It is our role as education leaders in these immensely distressing times to ensure that all our students in this vibrant and diverse international community feel respected and heard.

Universities, however, must also continue to be places where the most difficult issues can be discussed and debated, within the law. This is not easy, but we are working it through within our community, by encouraging dialogue with faith and

representative groups and by facilitating vigils at which Jewish and Palestinian voices have joined to call for peace and an end to violence.

As a community, the town and University of St Andrews are also contending with the impacts of climate change which are making themselves felt around us. Storm Babet in combination with tidal swells caused significant damage to the St Andrews Harbour, including limiting access to the Pier. The St Andrews Harbour Trust has launched a £1.5m fundraiser, and the University is engaging with the Trust to explore how best to support the repairs needed, in line with our commitment to social responsibility and our keen sense of connectedness to our local environment and the communities who share it.

In line with this commitment, the University also continues to support grassroots organisations and projects across Fife through the University Community Fund. As many of you will be aware, the University Community Fund was launched in early 2020. As of November 2023, the Fund has operated nine funding rounds, providing more than £230,000 to 140 projects, groups, and organisations across Fife that deliver tangible benefits for local communities. Successful applications from the most recent round include East Neuk Lighthouse to support the provision of their Books for Children project, weekly Foodbank activity sessions, holiday activity lunch clubs, and family learning events.

Finally, this semester, like so many schools, colleges, and universities across the UK, the University has faced challenges brought on by the discovery of RAAC roof panels in Purdie lecture theatres A, B and C. The lecture theatres have been closed on the grounds of safety. Replacement venues for Purdie B and C were made available in the Willie Russell Laboratories from 23 October and have been well received. The lectures scheduled for Purdie A have been re-timetabled across the wider teaching estate so as to minimise the number of lectures that will have to be delivered online. Work by Estates and external engineers to establish whether Purdie A can re-open for Semester

2 is ongoing, and we are also preparing contingency plans for maximising the delivery of in-person lectures should this venue not be available.

As recent events thus show, we are operating in a rapidly changing environment impacted by factors ranging from local challenges such as the maintenance of our Estate to global challenges in the form of war in Europe and the Middle East, and the climate crisis. However, it is in times such as these where the University of St Andrews can provide vital leadership in thought and action, particularly under the five pillars of our University Strategy, which outline our mission to be World-Leading, Digital, Entrepreneurial, Sustainable, and Diverse.

World-leading St Andrews

As part of our commitment to strengthening our international excellence and impact under the World-Leading St Andrews theme and to providing facilities that befit the standard of our excellent staff and students, significant progress continues to be made on our New College site on South Street. As many of you will know, this will be the first College to be established at St Andrews since 1747, when St Salvator's and St Leonard's merged to form the United College. It marks a major moment in the University's history and is a key way of putting a new configuration of subjects on the University map.

We are currently working through the first stages of consultations, preparations, and briefings with our architect, WilkinsonEyre, whom we appointed to the New College project after an exhaustive selection process, as some of you will recall I mentioned in my last update.

A final project brief will be available in the early spring of 2024. The site itself, again as many of you will know, has already been fully cleared and remedial work on the listed buildings is in progress, so that the New College can begin to take shape from the spring of 2025 onwards, with the aim of a 2027 opening.

Upon completion, the New College will house our highly ranked School of International Relations and our New Business School. The University's School of Economics and Finance and the School of Management merged on 1 August this year, starting a 12-month transition process to the official launch of the Business School in August 2024. The transition process is being led by the School's Interim Dean, Professor Brad MacKay, who is of course also currently my Deputy Principal, and we are working with the Higher Education consultancy, SUMS, on an in-depth consultation, which is bringing staff and students together to define the new School's strategy, mission, and values. The aim of this consultation is to ensure that the school we build has a uniquely St Andrews identity.

Indeed, the decision to collocate the Business School and our School of International Relations – with its impressive range of expertise in fields such as area studies with a focus on Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Central, South and East Asia – will give a dynamic infusion to the character of the Business School that we are creating.

Digital St Andrews

Alongside the Business School, the University is also taking an innovative approach to the delivery of education through the Digital strand of the University Strategy. During my last update in June, I explained that the University was in the process of launching a suite of innovative digital only programmes offering flexible learning opportunities to people who are currently in employment and who are looking to develop their skillset, with pilots taking place at Master's level.

The courses currently on offer include postgraduate degrees in Data Science from the School of Computer Science, in Data Literacy for Social and Environmental Justice from the School of Geography and Sustainable Development, and in Health Professions Education from the School of Medicine. The first of these, Data Science, launched at the beginning of the semester with 24 fully matriculated students and student feedback regarding the quality of the course's content and delivery has been excellent. Our digital portfolio of programmes and short courses continues to grow,

and work is progressing on two new programmes, Digital Art History and Digital Humanities, with the goal that these will launch in the next academic year.

The rise of digital technology, particularly generative AI, will impact the Higher Education sector enormously in the coming years. As we all know there has been a lot of unsettled feeling in the sector in the past year over ChatGPT and other large language models, particularly around the ethics of student assessment. However, as the UK Department for Education in its “Generative Artificial Intelligence in Education” statement in March this year affirmed: “Although generative AI technologies can produce fluent and convincing responses to user prompts, the content produced can be factually inaccurate. Students need foundational knowledge and skills to discern and judge the accuracy and appropriateness of information, so a knowledge-rich curriculum is therefore all the more important”.

The University is thus taking an informed and innovative approach to incorporating generative AI technologies into the curriculum. Recently, academic and professional service members of the University of St Andrews Community for Evidence-Led Practice in Education produced a guide on Large Language Model Artificial intelligence for educators at the University of St Andrews. The guide supports our staff to embrace the opportunities brought about by LLMs and AI while ensuring that our students continue to uphold the highest of academic and ethical conduct, through high-quality teaching and assessment design and effective dialogue with the student population.

Digital is also a driver of innovation and diversification within other parts of the University, enabling our academics to seize the opportunities offered by new technologies to transform research agendas and accelerate progress on tackling global challenges, an objective that is exemplified brilliantly by researchers in our School of Modern Languages, whose work to preserve vulnerable archive collections in Ukraine won an award in one of Europe’s top heritage awards – the Europa Nostra awards – in June. Supported by the University of St Andrews’ Global Challenges Research

Fund, Professor Victoria Donovan of the Russian Department led the creation of a vast digital archive of endangered industrial heritage materials from the east of Ukraine, including the partly occupied Donbas region. This important work has proved timely and invaluable, as originals of many of the digitised materials have since been looted or destroyed by Russian armies waging war against the country.

Sustainable St Andrews

Our researchers are also leading nationally and internationally on work that targets the climate crisis, in line with our strategic goal to be leaders of sustainable change at St Andrews which, in this context, Professor De Moortel will present on this morning. To give but one example at present of an initiative which reflects our commitment to supporting a sustainable future through world-leading research, Dr Michael Byrne from the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences is leading a new international climate change research project known as GLOBAL-EX, which aims to advance fundamental understanding of the physical drivers of heatwaves.

We also look to create change through our everyday actions. Over the past year, a pilot scheme between the University of St Andrews and bus firm Stagecoach, which gives staff and students 75% off bus travel, has helped the University to reduce its carbon footprint by 448 tonnes of CO₂e – which corresponds to 2,231 return flights from Edinburgh to London – in just nine months. Taking the bus instead of travelling by car has resulted in staff and students cutting their own footprint for each journey by 37%. It is important to understand that this is not something that has been without cost to the University. Over the last 12 months, the University has invested over £400,000 in supporting the scheme. Stagecoach has contributed over £250,000 to the cost, ensuring the amount paid by staff and students has remained at just 25%.

As a result of its success, the bus scheme will be extended. The University has driven forward a deal with local bus operator Moffat & Williamson to offer the same level of discount. Our actions look to empower our staff to make the necessary changes to

reach our goal of net zero by 2035 - to remind you, 10 years ahead of the Scottish Government itself and 15 years ahead of the UK government.

Key to our sustainability objectives is also the St Andrews Prize for the Environment, with this year marking the 25th anniversary of the Prize. Since its establishment in 1998, the St Andrews Prize for the Environment has become a major international competition that celebrates innovative responses to the most pressing environmental issues of our day. Over the past 25 years, the Prize has awarded over \$2.5 million in funding to over 70 organisations whose work is crucial in addressing the climate crisis, protecting the environment, and encouraging a more sustainable society.

This year we received more than 180 entries from across 50 countries. The calibre of the finalists was exceptionally high as ever and their work is a shining example of the impact that environmental initiatives, informed by quality research and supported by a dedicated team, can have on the world. This year's winner of the \$100,000 prize, enabling the further development and implementation of their project, was Alianza Ceibo, who are empowering their indigenous communities in the Upper Amazon of Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru, to conserve their rainforest territories and to keep their cultures alive.

[Entrepreneurial St Andrews](#)

Our work at the Eden Campus in Guardbridge also plays a crucial role in advancing both our sustainable and entrepreneurial objectives. The Eden Campus aims to bring academia and industry together and has become a growing centre of excellence for low-carbon technology, all underpinned by commercial and entrepreneurial activities.

Indeed, this semester, we celebrated the official opening of the Colin Vincent Centre for Battery Technology at the Eden Campus, our facility for the production of commercial-scale batteries. Some of you may remember the Centre's namesake, Professor Colin Vincent, an eminent electrochemist and the Head of our School of Chemistry from 1990 until 1996, after which he took on the role of Master in the

Principal's office and temporarily served as Vice-Chancellor and Acting Principal in the year 2000.

The Centre's dry lab – the first of its kind in Scotland – is open to both researchers and companies, facilitating collaboration between our academics and wider industry. The Battery Centre is enabling projects like the development of the next generation of sodium-ion batteries in Scotland, the production of which is central to many models of future grid networks based on renewable energy.

As some of you may also be aware, the Eden Campus is also home to the University's Entrepreneurship Centre, which opened its doors at Walter Bower House in September 2021, with the core mission of nurturing an entrepreneurial spirit within the University and beyond. Since its foundation, the Centre has inspired over 1,200 people to realise the commercial potential of their ideas, helping a number of start-ups and spinouts to secure collectively over £1.2 million in non-dilutive funding.

Our students are succeeding brilliantly in their entrepreneurial endeavours and one of the Principal's medals – an award that recognises students who display exceptional endeavour and achievement – presented during our summer graduation ceremonies this year was awarded to Simone Korsgaard Jensen. Simone founded her own start-up, SmartBooks, in her second year at St Andrews. SmartBooks brings learning to life by creating primary school maths books paired with augmented reality apps. As testament to Simone's brilliant endeavours, SmartBooks has received over £28,000 in start-up awards and merit-based scholarships.

[Diverse St Andrews](#)

As the examples that I have given throughout this update demonstrate, our people and our community are our most important and powerful asset, and so we must carefully consider how best to support them and to create a culture in which every individual can realise their full potential – a central aim of the Diverse St Andrews theme.

This was the focus of our quite recent Court Away Day, on the theme of 'People, Community, University'. As you all know, the University Court is the governing body of the University and has oversight of all aspects of strategic planning and the management of our resources. Held annually at the start of each academic year, Court Away Days provide the University's senior leadership team with a pool of knowledge and ideas on a particular theme, from which we can draw throughout the year when considering key decisions. A major focus of the Court Away Day was our new People Strategy, which was launched at the beginning of October. The Principal's Office lead for this is Dr Rebekah Widdowfield, whom I appointed to the new post of Vice-Principal People and Diversity just over a year ago and who spoke at the summer meeting of the General Council in June.

The People Strategy, which can be found on the University website, holds at its core the certainty that people *are* St Andrews, and sets out the steps we are taking to support, develop, and reward our staff, and create an environment in which they can excel.

As you can appreciate, there is a lot of activity taking place within the five pillars of the University Strategy. What I hope you have gained from this update is a sense that we are really moving forward with great momentum and ambition, boosted by external recognition and supported generously by our alumni and friends.

Staff Changes

Before I conclude my remarks, I would like to update you on several key changes to our University Court. Since my last address, a new Senior Lay Member of the University Court has been elected, Ray Perman, who took up the post on 1 August, replacing the outgoing Senior Lay Member, Professor Stuart Monro, for whose service we are immensely appreciative. Additionally, this semester, we have seen the election of a new Rector, Stella Maris, with whom some of you may be familiar from her previous role as Rector's Assessor.

Beyond the Court, we must also extend a warm welcome to the new Director of the Byre Theatre, Julie Ellen, previously Artistic Director and CEO of Macrobert Arts Centre at the University of Stirling. Julie takes over the Byre following the successful tenure of Kally Lloyd-Jones and Jessica Richards, who have jointly held the post since September 2019.

I would like to express my thanks to Kally and Jess for their leadership of the Byre, particularly during the global pandemic. I am sure that many of you present today will remember the Byre team's incredible commitment to providing access to film and theatre culture and to promoting wellbeing during the national lockdowns, through the Byre@Home initiative, which included Kally's Chair Exercise series, a virtual Death café, and the online Byre film club.

More recently, as we have emerged from the pandemic, the Byre has begun to thrive again and is looking to the future with renewed vigour. For that we really do owe our thanks to Kally and Jess, who have been instrumental in launching a variety of exciting projects, which have bolstered the Byre's national and international reputation. 2021 saw the launch of the St Andrews Playwriting Award, which offers a major career development opportunity for emerging playwrights in Scotland.

Then in 2022, Hollywood came to St Andrews in the form of the inaugural Sands: International Film Festival of St Andrews, which has now become an annual feature of our cultural calendar with a successful second instalment taking place earlier this year and Sands 2024 already in the making.

Kally and Jess's tenure as co-directors of the Byre forms a wonderful chapter in the theatre's 90 years of history. An important part of our co-director's legacy lies in their successful development of the Byre's unique strength as a creative home for everyone who lives, studies, and works in St Andrews, ensuring that the Byre's historical and current links to the town continue to be cultivated and cherished.

Looking Forward

Before I finish my remarks today, I would like to mention a few upcoming events that we hope you will consider joining. The St Andrews Alumni Carol Service will take place on Monday 4 December in St Salvator's Chapel. For those who might be in London on Wednesday 13 December, we will be hosting our annual London Alumni Carol Service in St Columba's Church on Pont Street. And of course, those of you who are in St Andrews this coming Tuesday and Wednesday might witness some of the joy of our winter graduation ceremonies, which will see over 1,000 students from nearly 80 countries cross the stage at Younger Hall before processing along North Street to St Salvator's Quad.

Thank you for your attention today. I am, as ever, happy to respond to any questions or comments.