**BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL**

**MINUTE OF MEETING HELD VIA ZOOM VIDEOCONFERENCE**

**Saturday 23rd January 2021 at 10.00am**

**Present via video link:** Iain Anderson (IA, General Council Assessor), Alison Baverstock (AB), Alan Chalmers (AC), Annabel Hamid (AH), Jonathan Hewitt (JH, General Council Assessor), Grace Lyon (GL, Vice-Convener), Alastair Merrill (AM, Registrar and Clerk, VP Governance), Gregory Newman (GN), and Wendy Russell (WR, Convener)

Abbreviations: BC = Business Committee of the General Council, GC = General Council

**1. Introduction**

WR welcomed IA to the BC upon his nomination as General Council Assessor and subsequent appointment in that capacity to Court. The agenda was agreed and the closure of the Barron Theatre was added as an item of competent business to the agenda.

AC was appointed minute secretary.

**2. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies had been received from Sally Mapstone (Principal), Stuart Bryan, Adrian Greer, Stephanie O’Rourke.

**3. Minute of BC Meeting on 19th September 2020**

The minutes of this meeting were approved following a discussion to better reflect the decision around an entrepreneur bursary or prize.

Under matters arising it was agreed to advance the proposal that the red gowns of alumni be passed on to new students by forming an ad-hoc group comprising IA, AH, JH and WR which would liaise with the Students’ Association.

**Action:** IA, AH, JH, WR to design a proposal for the re-use of alumni gowns by new students and bring a paper with recommendations to the next meeting.

**4. University Update**

AM provided an oral report of the process for the appointment of IA as General Council Assessor to the University Court. He noted that there were three roles to be filled, the other two non-executive roles being taken by Lord Duncan of Springbank, a St Andrews graduate, and Jenny Stewart. He commented that the quantity, quality and diversity of the applications for this role was very good.

AM provided commentary on the recent aspects of the response of the University to the Covid-19 pandemic. The priorities of the University have been: i) the well-being of staff and students, ii) maintaining a high level of teaching and iii) maintaining a high level of performance commensurate with the University’s high reputation. Prior to Christmas there were 108 instances of students and 15 members of staff testing positive for Covid-19, which is a low percentage of the University community relative to many other groups. Work by the Covid-19 testing group had resulted in a clear understanding of the track of the transmission of the infection. The effectiveness of the University’s Covid-19 transmission prevention activities have recently been reviewed by statutory bodies in Scotland and found to be effective which is testament to the hard work put in by many individuals. Over the Christmas and New Year period about 1000 students had remained on campus due to an inability to travel.

The new semester will begin on schedule on 25th January. All teaching will be done remotely with the exception of a number of, largely, science students whose work will need to be done on site. Some essential research work will continue to be done on-site. Students are being discouraged from returning to St Andrews at the beginning of the semester and those students who would have been in University accommodation will not be charged. This will result in a significant loss of income to the University but is viewed as the correct course of action. The student testing centre will remain open until at least the end of March.

Amongst staff actions associated with the pandemic have been i) an undertaking of no compulsory redundancies other than those arising out of activities such as restructurings which would have occurred in normal times and ii) an undertaking to make up staff salaries to 100%, above the level of furlough compensation.

Major non Covid-19 occurrences have been i) endorsement by Court of the environmental strategy committing the University to carbon-neutrality by 2035, ii) an extremely favourable outcome from the SQA’s Quinquennial Review last October and iii) there has been no drop in applications for either undergraduate or postgraduate places.

The forthcoming Professional Medical Qualifications Bill will give St Andrews the ability to award medical degrees once more - this will be the first time students can complete their qualification at St Andrews since the split with Dundee University in the 1960s.AB asked whether the university had made representations to private landlords to consider what they can do to alleviate pressure on student finances. AM explained that St Andrews does not have large accommodation providers e.g. Unite, rather they are small landlords letting a property which may have belonged to their parents and the income is used to supplement their own earnings. However the Student Association is engaging with landlords across town in support of students with hardship issues. Hardship funds are also available to students facing financial difficulties as a result of Covid. In response to a question from AH about the continued furlough of staff, AM responded that flexible furlough is now in place for staff and that as before the university is honouring its commitment to pay staff’s full salary, recognising its investment in people and maintaining goodwill which, despite the financial hit, is critical to surviving the crisis.

**5. Revision of Standing Orders**

WR had prepared a paper detailing changes to GC Standing Orders. Items had been discussed at previous meetings or were minor updates. All six items were approved after an amendment to item 1 to remove the sentence:

*No member of the Senatus Academicus is entitled to take part in the nomination of any Asssessor of the Council*

These changes will be considered by the Governance and Nominations Committee of the Court and will then be voted on by the GC at its June meeting.

**6. General Council Meetings**

Following the internet-based version of the GC meeting in December, the format of future meetings needed to be considered. The BC agreed that the production of the December meeting was excellent, and thanks are due to all involved. Unfortunately the viewing figures were poor both on the day of the meeting and subsequently. As a result it was felt that the time and cost could not be spent on a similar production for June and an alternative must be found. WR will speak with AM, consider options and subsequently communicate with the BC. (Parliament Hall has been booked for the June meeting and if government rules permit the meeting will be held there in person.)

**Action:** AM, WR to develop proposal(s) for the June GC meeting to be held on-line.

**7. Director of Development Update and Discussion**

Robert Fleming (RF), Director of Development, joined the meeting for this item for an oral report.

RF spoke to Development’s response to the pandemic over the past year. An early step was to establish a twelve-point plan, central to which was to provide interesting content over the internet to alumni, families of students and other interested parties. The core of this has been the Saints talks by academics many of which have drawn hundreds of viewers and will continue drawing on the rich availability of contents from staff. There are proposals to broaden these talks to include content from alumni. There is the potential for a series of podcasts and for Q&A sessions featuring honorary graduates. Videos with cultural and sports content have been distributed, e.g. the new Laidlaw music facility and the refurbished Wardlaw Museum. All the content is available on YouTube so can be accessed at any time.

RF and his team have undertaken multiple welcome meetings globally for new students and their families with good feedback on the level of engagement this has created. They are working with the University Careers Service and Saint Connect to provide information on potential career paths for students, who are particularly interested in hearing from alumni in their late 20’s. The Covid-19 appeal to support students was particularly successful: not only being the first Scottish University appeal to raise £1million but for the breadth of participation from the entire University community. Face-to face engagement by Development staff will recommence when possible but it is intended that the on-line offering will continue.

RF stated that he would welcome regular interaction with the BC and in response WR and AH will discuss how the BC can develop useful suggestions for alumni engagement.

**Action:** AH, WR to consider further how Development and the BC work together.

**8. Business Committee Initiatives**

Given the time which had been spent on prior items this topic was limited to brief updates:

Entrepreneurial: AB, AC and WR will pursue this with the University for a follow up to the paper submitted last year.

Diversity: WR asked for suggestions from the BC on how it could assist the University on this strand of its strategy.

**Action:** i) AB, AC, WR to pursue advancement of the Entrepreneurship work with the University
 ii) All members to provide suggestions on how the diversity agenda can be advanced

**9. Business Committee 2021 Elections**

The terms of four members of the BC come to an end in 2021. Ordinarily WR, as Convener, would lead on the election but as she is one of the members whose term is ending and may wish to stand again, the conflict of interest means another should take that role. GL and GN agreed to take this on, with input from AH.

**Action:** GL, GN to manage the elections of new BC members this year, liaising with Development Office.

**10. General Council Assessor’s Report**

JH provided an oral report, adding to the University Update already provided.

JH has met the new Rector Dr Leyla Hussein and it is clear that she will be actively engaged with the student body.

The Court has approved plans for the Byre Theatre (see AOCB) and for the Molecular Biology Building which was damaged by fire. In the case of the latter this will be “built back better” to provide a more up-to-date environment for the subject.

The increase in the student numbers at the University, and in particular the rise in the numbers for this academic session (pre-lockdown) has led to pressure on class sizes. This should be partially alleviated by the commissioning of a new 500-seater lecture hall at the Younger Hall.

The Court has received the report of the Audit and Risk Committee and there are no significant issues.

**11. Programme of Future Meetings**

The future dates of GC and BC meeting was approved as set out in an accompanying paper. The next meeting of the BC is on Saturday, 17th April and the next GC meeting is scheduled for Saturday, 26th June.

**12. AOCB**

AH raised a question about the intended closure of the Barron Theatre in North Street. The Barron Theatre is a multipurpose arts space used for theatrical productions and exhibitions with storage for costumes and sets. The Theatre is managed by students and is one of only three such venues in the UK. It also provides a facility for the development of technical skills such as sound and lighting.

A number of alumni, some in the arts industry who developed early skills at the Barron Theatre, have expressed concern at its closure without alternative provision and without a process of broad consultation.

AM responded that there had been consultation with the Student Association. The Byre Theatre, which has been incurring losses, will cease to be a commercial theatre venue and will be redeveloped as a student arts centre. A benefit will be an upgrade in the quality of the building as there has been more investment in the Byre than the Barron. As yet no decision has been made on the future use of the Barron Theatre space.