**General Council**

**Principal’s Address**

Good morning, everyone. It is so good to speak to you all in person once again. My last in-person update to the General Council was delivered almost two years ago, on 30 November 2019. The standing meetings since then were suspended due to the pandemic, in-lieu of which I have provided written updates specifically for the General Council which were circulated to members – the last of which was issued in June 2021.

This update will thus focus primarily on University activities since June of this year. Our ongoing response to the pandemic will no doubt be of interest, but details of the University’s responsive measures over the past 20 or so months have been widely publicised to alumni and members. Therefore, whilst I will speak to the effects of the pandemic on contemporary University life, it will not be my primary subject.

The core of my address will be an update on current activities under the pillars of the University Strategy for 2018 to 2023 – World-leading St Andrews; Diverse St Andrews; Global St Andrews; and Entrepreneurial St Andrews. The Strategy will be familiar to most of you, and I invoke it repeatedly because it is the essential outline of our trajectory and mission, and of the principles which guide our perennial pursuit of excellence. Our successes despite the pandemic are owed to the clarity and unity provided by the Strategy’s vision which has kept us on track in the most difficult circumstances by guiding every decision we make.

We are currently undertaking a review of the Strategy in light of our renewed and much-changed University and society. Global St Andrews will be folded into the World-leading St Andrews pillar, recognising the emerging overlaps. Diverse and Entrepreneurial St Andrews will remain autonomous alongside World-leading, and we will introduce two new pillars – Sustainable St Andrews and Digital St Andrews, both of which represent areas of enlivened and important opportunity. The refreshed Strategy will build upon our existing one to create a vision for 2022 to 2027, and we expect to publish a version in autumn 2022 following approval by the University Court.

Good strategising is an extensive process, but its rewards are manifold and our successes this year attest to that. We have long been Scotland’s best University, and we are now the premier University in the United Kingdom – as per our first-place ranking in the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide for 2022. That is the gold standard of domestic league tables, and this is the first time in the history of this, or any other UK league table, that an institution other than Oxford or Cambridge has come first. The editorial which accompanied the announcement from the Sunday Times acknowledged that this success has been a long-time coming, and that recognises the purpose with which we are consolidating our existing excellence in a way that is visible to both national and international audiences.

This attainment is paralleled in other league tables. We are routinely third behind Oxbridge in other domestic rankings, and we are up five places in the QS University World Rankings to ninety-first. Considering the relatively small scale of our University in people and financial terms, that is a really significant feat.

League tables should always be treated with some caution, but these attainments recognise years of putting our motto, ever to excel, into practice, by offering the very highest quality education and support to our students, and by supporting researchers to produce their best possible work for maximum societal benefit. The fact that our first-place ranking bookended 18 months since the pandemic hit our operations is an inspiring recognition that we did not compromise on the quality of our delivery.

Indeed, and in quintessential St Andrews fashion, we improved despite the challenges. Following excellent feedback from students at the end of semester one last year, the results of the National Student Survey for 2021 confirmed not only that we are first for student satisfaction for the sixth year in a row, each one of my Principalship, but that we improved our satisfaction score despite a significant drop in the national average. With 93% overall satisfaction against a sector benchmark of 75%, we remain the only University that is registering over 90%. A lot goes into that – teaching, of course, but also the general wellbeing of our population, their sense of being valued as part of an academic family, and the quality of the pastoral support and social activities available to them – including our Can Do programme.

Can Do is an initiative we started in semester one last academic year to enable student activity within stringent and changing legal guidelines on in-person interaction. It continued this semester due to its popularity, but student life has also resumed its pre-pandemic form in almost every way. Raisin Monday returned for the first time in two years, complete with a traditional foam fight on Lower College Lawn for our first-year cohort and an additional foam fight for second-year students who missed out last year. We modernised that tradition this year by asking students to bring a donation to the St Andrews food bank instead of the conventional Raisin receipts, speaking to our increasing premium on sustainability. And we are currently in the midst of preparations for our Winter Graduation session, with ceremonies scheduled to take place in person for the first time in two years on Tuesday and Wednesday next week. These ceremonies will include the awarding of honorary degrees to the celebrated UK journalist and broadcaster Andrew Marr, the musician Joanna MacGregor, and the mathematician Caroline Series, and we are delighted that graduating students will have the opportunity to be inspired by these outstanding figures during their graduation ceremonies. No account of our successes or student life this semester is complete without recognising our victory in the Scottish Varsity men’s rugby match for 2021, which took place on home turf at the University Sports Centre in September.

The resumption of such traditions is only possible because over 95% of students have returned to St Andrews in-person, enabled by eased travel restrictions through the summer. We have just over 10,400 students this year – accounting still for an unexpected increase caused by late Governmental changes to school leaver outcomes in the summer of 2020. That bulge will take time to work through the system, but our numbers will eventually level out and we have no plans further to expand. Undergraduate students comprise just under 80% of this population, with the postgraduate cohort split evenly between taught and research students. 44% of our students are British, 26% of whom are Scottish; the remaining 46% of students are international from over 140 countries, with students from North America constituting almost half of that cohort. We were able to accommodate students from what were then red-list countries in halls of residence for the mandatory ten-day quarantine this summer to ease the return of international students, and the safety of both students and community members was secured through the provision of a free University transport service which collected students from airports and train stations.

We have viewed this semester as one of transition out of the pandemic. We recognise that many people wish to exercise caution whilst also recognising that, to quote the First Minister, ‘there has not been an increase in cases coinciding with the return of universities’. We are nevertheless taking precautions to safeguard this, and we have demonstrably limited transmission on campus by conducting rigorous internal contact tracing. All classes and University activities are set up to enable one metre of physical distancing, and we are asking all people to follow our Covid Code when on campus. Teaching for the semester has now concluded, with revision and examination weeks ahead, but the majority of seminar and class teaching took place in person. Online provision was available for those studying remotely, and all lectures for more than 35 people were hosted online. In practice, that means that of over 3,200 lectures, seminars, tutorials, and lab sessions, 66% were delivered in person. This arrangement also recognised that online lectures have been popular with students because of the accessibility advantages, and we are carefully monitoring feedback to determine how we can integrate online learning into our future pedagogy – a key question in the development of the Digital St Andrews theme.

A start of semester survey showed that 97% of student respondents had received one vaccination jab and were awaiting a second, and at least 76% were fully vaccinated – and those percentages will have improved since, with some students receiving their boosters. We continue to be prudent and have a backup plan to which we can pivot should that prove necessary, and the Scottish Government are gesturing towards increased precautionary measures in light of consistently high cases nationally; however, we are very aware that this uptick is symptomatic of the pattern of a virus moving from the pandemic to the endemic phase. So, we are moving carefully while intending further to re-introduce in-person teaching next semester, including the resumption of some in-person lectures.

This semester has thus been a historic and extremely busy one, and those of you based in St Andrews will have shared in the pleasures of our revitalised streets. Emerging from the isolation of the pandemic years has required all of us to re-socialise and adapt to the pace of public life – and that has been pleasurable and exhausting in equal measure. I have resumed business travel when necessary, and the eighteen months spent near constantly in St Andrews have significantly reduced my tolerance for the Caledonian sleeper! But right across the institution, our staff and students have risen with remarkable aplomb and enthusiasm to the demands of the semester, and I want to pay tribute now to the superb efforts of people in our academic family. Our students inspire us every day, and the care our staff demonstrate toward them as well as the quality of their own work is responsible for the way we continuously spin gold from straw to assume our place as one of the world’s finest institutions of learning. I will now share examples of this under the Strategy’s pillars.

*World-leading St Andrews*

The World-leading pillar expresses our commitment to bolstering our international excellence, and it bears a particularly strong influence upon our capital programme because attracting world-leading students and staff requires the provision of resources at that same standard.

In that context, this summer saw the reopening of the Wardlaw Museum which was closed for almost three years – first for extensive redevelopment, then due to Covid. The reopening has ushered in greater teaching capacities and revitalised and expanded exhibition spaces, the latter of which played host to a superb debut exhibition by our alumnus, Philip Colbert, over the summer. An exhibition entitled ‘Dive In!’ opened at the Wardlaw at the beginning of October, curated in partnership with researchers at our Scottish Oceans Institute, to mark the advent of COP26.

The new Laidlaw Music Centre has also opened for the first time for teaching, personal use, and public performance, a year after its completion just before the pandemic started. The concerts in the McPherson Recital Room are a sight – and sound – to behold, benefitting from an acoustic chamber in the ceiling, a unique automated floor system that can change configurations for any musical setting, and an 1868 T C Lewis organ that was gifted to the University. The Centre is amplifying the success of our musical programmes, including the flagship new initiative, St Andrews Music Participation, otherwise known as StAMP. StAMP is working to encourage a culture of brass playing in schools across Fife, and it has hosted weekend workshops in the Laidlaw to unite secondary school musicians with members of the Wallace Collection and the National Youth Brass Band of Scotland. StAMP has already been recognised with an award for best music education and communication project from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland at the 2021 Scottish Awards for New Music, and the Laidlaw itself has been shortlisted for a World Architectural Festival Award in the completed cultural buildings category.

The Wardlaw and Laidlaw demonstrate that quality resources and spaces are essential in enabling our people to reach their full potential – a principle that is the driving force behind our planning for a New College in St Andrews. Our intentions to co-locate the Schools of International Relations, Economics and Finance, and Management on the eight-acre site of what was formerly the Madras College on South Street are advancing at pace with two key developments: first, we have absorbed the site into the University estate; and second, we have surpassed the initial £10 million needed of an overall £100 million goal thanks to outstanding philanthropic support. Following the question and answer session at the end of my remarks, we will be joined by the Project Sponsor, the Assistant Vice-Principal Dean of Learning and Teaching, Professor Frank Lorenz Müller, for a full presentation on the development of the New College.

Evidence of staff excellence abounds, but I want in particular to recognise the success of two faculty members: Professor Andrew Pettegree of the School of History, for his appointment as a Fellow of the British Academy; and Professor Sir Ian Boyd for his appointment as a Fellow of the Royal Society – the UK’s two leading learned societies. These appointments entitle Professor Pettegree and Sir Ian to the honorific title, Bishop Wardlaw Professor, and they will both be formally appointed as such during next week’s graduation ceremonies.

Sir Ian’s attainment swiftly follows his appointment to the Board of UK Research and Innovation, the UK’s primary public funding body for research, and his appointment by the First Minister as Co-Chair with her of the Scottish Environmental Council. I am also pleased to share that I have been re-elected to a further three-year term as President of the Saltire Society, and that I became Chair of the Higher Education Policy Institute Board in October.

*Diverse St Andrews*

Diverse St Andrews continues to underpin every area of our operations and our work in this area was recognised at the Times Higher Education Awards for 2021, the results of which were announced at a ceremony in London on Thursday, where we were shortlisted for the Outstanding Contribution to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion award. We were shortlisted in two further award categories: Outstanding Estates Team, and Most Innovative Teacher of the Year for Dr Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis from the School of Classics.

In an outstanding milestone on our path towards gender equality, the School of Biology successfully attained its Athena Swan Gold award at the start of May. Athena Swan is a globally acclaimed programme designed to address gender imbalances at academic institutions. It is a marker of cross-community support for gender equality that all our Schools have now achieved Athena Swan status – 16 at bronze level, two at silver, and one at gold. I continue to lead on gender equality through my sponsorship of the Elizabeth Garrett Mentoring Programme, which is now in its sixth year supporting the development of female academic leaders at our University, and by showing leadership in engaging with the trans-rights activism currently taking place on campus. In that context, I have made it clear that we are an institution where discrimination will not be tolerated, and where transgender people will be celebrated and supported, whilst also protecting the academic freedoms which reside at the heart of our institutional mission. I have also announced that the University’s Carnegie lecture for 2022 will be delivered by Professor Jack Halberstam of Columbia University, a leader on queer and trans theory, in St Andrews next autumn.

In other areas, we were successful in renewing our Carer Positive Employer accreditation at the Exemplary level in June, and we remain one of only two Scottish HEIs recognised at this highest level. We hope to attain Race Equality Charter status in the next two years – an area of work that we supported through a special session of the University Court in September focusing on the experiences of BAME staff members.

I continue to lead at St Andrews and nationally on widening access, as Principal but also as Vice-Convener of Universities Scotland, a board member of Universities UK, and a trustee of UCAS. In my further capacity as Access and Admissions lead for Universities Scotland, I joined Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, for a widening-access student roundtable on 28 September. In September, I hosted a panel on ‘Fair access to higher education’ in-person at the UUK annual conference, and in October I participated in a virtual ‘in conversation’ event on equality, diversity, and inclusion, hosted jointly by AdvanceHE and Wonkhe. I have also accepted an invitation to join the newly formed senior leaders’ group of Universities of Sanctuary, an organisation dedicated to supporting refugee and asylum-seeking scholars, and through which we were accredited as a University of Sanctuary in 2019. That role complements our ongoing work to support refugee scholars, and we are undertaking a fundraising campaign specifically to support displaced Afghan scholars.

*Global St Andrews*

Limitations on travel posed an obvious challenge to the Global St Andrews theme and our aim to build connections with like-minded institutions and networks around the world. But we have managed to build alliances regardless – as evidenced by the memoranda of understanding we have created with institutions such as the Indian Institute of Technology Madras in Chennai, and the Institute of European Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. With the approval of the University’s Academic Senate, we have joined both the Magna Charta Universitatum, a network of over 900 universities focused upon fostering academic freedom and cooperation, and the University of the Arctic network to create collaborative opportunities on north-focused research.

As a trustee of the Europaeum, a network of eighteen universities including St Andrews, I delivered the opening address at the Europaeum’s annual conference in September, entitled Crises as an Opportunity for Europe, and chaired a subsequent discussion between Lord Patten of Barnes, Chancellor of the University of Oxford and the last Governor of Hong Kong, and Professor José Manuel Barroso, the former President of the European Commission.

These networks and partnerships foster the transmission of research and the creation of academic and professional links, whilst enabling the broad study abroad opportunities for which we are renowned. Only around 100 students studied abroad for the last academic year due to travel difficulties, but we are seeing a resumption of study abroad programmes as vaccines become globally ubiquitous. The reacceleration of these programmes is accommodating a transition away from Erasmus following the finalisation of the Brexit deal and the introduction of the UK Government’s new domestic mobility scheme, Turing – from which we have been allocated just over £500 k to support student mobility.

*Entrepreneurial St Andrews*

Many of you will know that work to support the Entrepreneurial St Andrews theme was transformed by the approval of our Full Business Case for the Eden Campus at Guardbridge by the UK and Scottish Governments in September 2019, thereby releasing £26.5 million of funding from the Tay Cities Deal to the University**.** Our work in support of the theme has since accelerated, primarily via St Andrews Applied Research, or StAAR.

StAAR is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the University that provides oversight of all our entrepreneurial, spin-out, and commercial activities. The goal of StAAR is not only to encourage innovative thinking, but to facilitate the commercialisation of ideas by providing the skills and support structures required to capitalise upon inventions that arise from research activities. Several developments have moved this goal along, and we have formed an ‘Industry Club’ around the Eden Campus led by Professor John Irvine of our School of Chemistry to unite companies and academics with the potential for shared working.

Professor Irvine leads in this by example. Irvine is a world authority on the development and implementation of hydrogen fuel cells as a clean-energy alternative to fossil fuels, and his JTSI Group recently showcased their hydrogen-powered train as part of COP26 – an enterprise that builds upon the hydrogen accelerator work located at the Eden Campus. The train is just one example of Irvine’s impact and he has led and engaged with other pioneering infrastructure projects, including the H2 Aberdeen project which saw £21 million of investment to develop the world’s largest hydrogen-powered public transport system – a model which is being spread across Scotland. Having conquered road and rail, Irvine and his team are now focusing on a £25 million project to deliver the world’s first zero-emission ferry. The Eden is a catalyst for this utterly transformative work.

A Centre for Entrepreneurship also launched in September at the Campus’ Walter Bower House, which trains and supports academics and students in turning their start-ups into scalable and impactful businesses. The Centre’s first programme, FastStart, easily attracted over 100 staff and students to its first wave of courses.

Entrepreneurial activities are just a small part of the work taking place at the Campus. The £25 million biomass plant provides clean energy to 43 buildings and 2,500 student rooms in St Andrews, and a solar PV presence has been established this year to provide the Campus with its energy supply. Elsewhere onsite, we have completed our relocation of some Library collections to a purpose-built storage centre via a ten-week programme that moved 14 km of books and journals. And Walter Bower House, an office space that opened on the Campus last year, has been so popular with staff for its quality provision, and onsite gym and cafeteria, that I am struggling to keep members of the Principal’s Office from evacuating College Gate.

*Social Responsibility*

Sustainability is central to the social responsibility statement that underpins the Strategy. Our commitment to that was reaffirmed at the beginning of the year when the University Court approved our new environmental strategy and its headline aspiration to become ‘Net-Zero by 2035,’ with net-zero referring both to carbon emissions as well as all forms of environmental degradation.

The Environmental Strategy is the product of extensive inter- and extra-University consultation and it provides a sustainability vision around which we can collectively mobilise. Our work in support of this continues to be led by the Environmental Sustainability Board and its Chair, Professor Sir Ian Boyd. St Andrews-based leadership on sustainability was recognised through our attainment of Observer Status at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, which enabled us to send a delegation to the landmark event.

Our international environmental leadership continues via the St Andrews Prize for the Environment, our flagship global initiative, now in its twenty-third year, which rewards innovative approaches to environmental change. I lead on this at St Andrews and the 2021 final, which took place online at the beginning of October, saw Snowchange Cooperative receive the $100,000 grand prize for its landscape rewilding work focusing on indigenous communities in Finland.

St Andrews has, itself, been recognised with several awards for the quality of our environmental work. I am delighted to share with you that just last week, the University was announced as the winner of both the Sustainability Institution of the Year award and the Student Engagement award at the Green Gown Awards which recognise environmental work in the UK and Irish higher education sectors. We have also received £1.2 million from Scottish Enterprise’s Low Carbon Challenge Fund, in partnership with the University of Strathclyde, to support the development of Scotland’s hydrogen energy industry at the Eden; and a grant of £140K from NatureScot to support the creation of urban meadows and woodland across eight hectares of University land. This rewilding programme will contribute to the St Andrews Forest which was formally launched by Their Royal Highnesses The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on their visit to the University in May.

*Conclusion*

What I hope you are gaining is a sense that we are moving forward with great momentum and ambition, boosted by external recognition and supported valuably by our alumni and friends. The past two years have required us to look at our operations, to examine what we do and how we do it, and to ask ourselves where and how we can improve. The result is the continuation of the teaching and research for which we are renowned, and an affirmation of our aspiration to be global leaders in terms of sustainability, digital, equality and inclusion, and student and staff learning and development, and to lead in these areas by example.

Next week’s graduation ceremonies serve as a reminder of our mission and its rewards. As Vice-Chancellor, I will bestow degrees upon 1078 students from 82 countries. The optimism and ambition with which these new graduates collect these and venture toward careers and further study – despite the gravity of the social and climate challenges their generation inherits – is an inspiration to us all.

This University undoubtedly does not quite look the way it did when many of you were its students. That is necessary. Great universities never stand still, but people do and indeed must, and we all deserve to take stock and rest. The festive season ahead will be marked by the joyful return of much-missed in-person traditions, including the Alumni Carol Service on 6 December and the University Carol Service on 11 December. To members of the General Council here and across the world, I hope that the season ahead is one of happy respite and pursuits and that 2022 proves to be an excellent vintage for you all.