

General Council – 28 November 2020 Principal’s Address

Introduction

Good morning everyone. My last address to the General Council was delivered almost one year ago on 30 November 2019, and our regular summer session this calendar year was cancelled as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic which has substantially changed our lives and the University’s operations. The University’s response to the crisis has been widely written up in the materials we have distributed to alumni and members in the past six months; therefore, whilst I will address the pandemic and its consequences, it will not be my primary subject. The core of my address will, as usual, be an update on our 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 – which have been a robust guide throughout this crisis and continue to shape our planning.

Context

First, some contextual updates to foreground our activities. We started the new decade as UK University of the Year in the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide and have maintained our third place ranking in that table in the new academic year. We also ranked in second place once again in the Guardian University League Tables for 2021, this time to the University of Oxford, and we rose four places in the QS World Rankings to 96. These are outstanding successes for an institution of our size and subject distribution, and these successes are consolidated by yet another first-place ranking for student satisfaction in the National Student Survey. This is the fifth consecutive year that we have come first, and we have been ranked either first or second thirteen times in the past fifteen years. It is a particularly bolstering result this year as the survey took place during the onset of the pandemic last semester, including the time in which teaching took place exclusively online; despite this, we were the only UK institution to register over 90% student satisfaction, which is a terrific endorsement of our digital provision.

My last General Council address was delivered the day after the election of the new Senior Lay Member, Dr Catherine Stihler OBE, and Dr Stihler assumed that position on 1 August – replacing the outgoing Senior Governor, Dame Anne Pringle, for whose service we are immensely appreciative. Since then, we have this semester seen the election of a new Rector, Dr Leyla Hussein OBE, a gender equality campaigner and psychotherapist of distinction. Dr Hussein competed against two alumni, Dr Fiona Hill, an international security expert, and Mr Ken Cochran, formerly a General Council assessor on the University Court. Since the election, I have met with Dr Hussein and am pleased that she shares the aspirations of the University Strategy and will bring her considerable skills to bear upon it, particularly the Diverse St Andrews theme.

Although it feels now like a distant memory, last December also saw a General Election in the UK and the Liberal Democrat candidate, Wendy Chamberlain, was elected as the Member of Parliament for North East Fife. The year since has necessitated close working with Mrs Chamberlain and her Scottish Parliamentary equivalent, Willie Rennie MSP, and I greatly appreciate all they have done to support our University and community. The outgoing MP for North East Fife, Stephen Gethins, joined my office in March as Strategic Adviser on External Relations as well as Professor of Practice in the School of International Relations, and his contributions during the pandemic have been invaluable. Also in my office, Professor Brad MacKay, Vice-Principal International Strategy and External Relations, has been promoted to the role of Senior Vice-Principal, and I am pleased to confirm that I have accepted an offer from the University Court to extend my Principalship until September 2026.

In this capacity, I have presided over two graduation sessions since we last met: the Winter Graduation last December, and the Summer Graduation held virtually in July of this year. In December 2019, we conferred degrees upon 980 students from 73 countries, and presented three honorary degrees: to Diana Nammi, founder of the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation; Dame Sally Davies, former Chief Medical Officer for England and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge; and Liria de la Cruz Hernández, a social anthropologist and leading expert on Roma women's rights. The Summer Graduation session could not be held in person, although we have promised students who graduated as part of our virtual ceremonies that they can return to experience an in-person ceremony when circumstances allow. I conferred degrees via video upon 1,965 students from 84 countries. Whilst we did not confer any honorary degrees at those ceremonies, students benefitted from a graduation address provided by Dr Fiona Hill who has accepted the offer of an honorary doctorate from the University, to be bestowed in due course. The virtual ceremonies were positively received by graduands and their families, and we will thus replicate the format for the Winter Graduation session which will take place next month, and at which I will confer degrees upon a further 979 students from 88 countries.

Turning now to the pandemic: from January of this year the Vice-Principal for Governance, Alastair Merrill, convened a Coronavirus Planning Group which assessed our preparedness and implemented contingencies – this stood us in good stead when the UK entered a national lockdown on 23 March. Before lockdown was formally announced, we encouraged students who wished to return home to do so and closed down the bulk of our estate. Some halls of residence remained open in which we provided for students who chose to stay, and we amplified support for students in private residencies in town. Teaching and assessment continued remotely, and staff and researchers worked from home for the remainder of the semester, with the exception of scientific researchers who were authorised by Government to undertake essential Covid-19 related research, and professional service staff who

continued to work in-person to sustain vital services and operations. The summer months were spent preparing for the large-scale return of students to campus, and every part of our estate was risk assessed using an internal process which has been recognised as sector-leading and replicated by other institutions. This academic year we are adopting a programme of 'dual-mode delivery teaching' – a blend of traditional, in-person classes; pre-recorded content; and interactive online provision. We estimate that about 40 per cent of our teaching is being delivered in-person, defaulting to online provision for the remainder, and this will continue next semester. Our students have largely been a credit to the University since returning and we have had few reports of students flouting social distancing rules.

Safe conduct is being supported via major messaging campaigns and the 'Covid Code' – eight behavioural principles all students and staff must adopt. Other precautionary measures include the National Health Service's introduction of a testing-hub in the centre of St Andrews for symptomatic cases as a result of extensive University campaigning – ours was the first walk-in centre in Scotland; the establishment of a 24-hour Covid Rapid Response Team to deal with potential and confirmed cases, and an accompanying Covid Helpdesk to address concerns. Case numbers in St Andrews have been significantly lower than many other universities in the UK as a consequence of our quick contact tracing and household lockdown procedures. To prevent outbound transmission during the winter break, we are providing free asymptomatic Covid tests to all students planning to leave St Andrews over the inter-semester period, in partnership with the UK and Scottish Governments. The University test centre will be located at the Sports Centre and will open by the end of this month. We are supporting student activity primarily through our Can Do project led by the Provost, Dr Monique Mackenzie, in partnership with the Students' Association. Can Do identifies what group social activities students *can* engage in within Government guidelines and supports them in setting up these activities – including through the provision of a specially erected marquee on Lower College Lawn which provides a safe space in which events can take place.

As a Board member of Universities UK and Vice-Convener of Universities Scotland, I have advocated throughout this crisis to both Governments for substantial aid for the HE sector, and I am in daily contact with politicians – including the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, and other external stakeholders and sector representatives. I am also one of three Scottish Principals who are part of a Covid-19 Ministerial Leadership Group, led by the Scottish Minister for Further Education, Higher Education, and Science, Richard Lochhead MSP.

Like the majority of institutions, and all universities, St Andrews took a significant financial hit as a result of the crisis, but careful planning and outstanding community support has enabled us to turn our financial situation around – offsetting financial losses of around £10M caused principally by loss of accommodation fees, the

suspension of commercial activities, and the cancellation of conference, summer school, and tourist activities through the summer. In addition, buoyant student recruitment, at all levels and in all fee statuses, has steadied our financial situation for this academic year. I must acknowledge the colossal efforts of our Admissions team and our academics to bring this in. Additionally, contributions to the University Covid Response Fund by alumni and friends of the University have now amounted to over £1M, for which we are immensely thankful. The solidarity shown by our staff, students, and global family, and how our community members have gone above and beyond to support one another in the characteristic St Andrews manner are inspirational.

World-leading St Andrews

The Strategy continues to inform our work across the University and we continue to be world-leading in both our research and teaching activities despite the pandemic. At the end of the last academic year, total research awards stood at £46.4M which is £2.3M higher than the previous year and £2.9M above the average over the last three years – a positive trajectory.

I am equally pleased to share that the University was this autumn visited by an Enhancement-led Institutional Review panel which assessed the quality of our academic provision and environment as part of the ELIR programme, overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland. This was initially scheduled to take place earlier in the year but was postponed until October as a result of the pandemic. A full report on the findings will be released in January, but an early letter to the University indicates exceptional performance and high commendation of the quality of the education we offer at St Andrews.

Central to our world-leading developments is planning for the New College to be located on the site currently occupied by Madras School – about which I have spoken to the General Council before. We remain on track to receive the site into University ownership in 2021 when we will advance our plans to build a suite of high-quality buildings whilst preserving the existing Madras quadrangle – with the vision being to create a Social Sciences Hub through the co-location of the Schools of Management, International Relations, and Economics & Finance. This development will be supported by our next philanthropic campaign, planning for which was initiated by the formation of a Campaign Steering Group in September.

As evidenced by our New College plans, supporting our World-leading theme means providing the best possible resources for our staff and students. One year ago, I opened the Willie Russell Laboratories to rehouse researchers displaced by the fire at our Biomolecular Science Building. These laboratories are serving our biochemical researchers well whilst the BMS redevelopment progresses its final phase; those of you who have visited the North Haugh recently will see that the finishing touches are

currently being made to the new façade, following which attention will shift to fitting out the interior.

I am also delighted to report that after slight pandemic-induced delays, three major new developments have completed: the Laidlaw Music Centre, the Wardlaw Museum, and Walter Bower House at the Eden Campus. The Laidlaw Music Centre is now in use and is scheduled formally to be opened by Lord Laidlaw next April. Whilst there are currently restrictions on live singing and performances which limit our capacity to host events in the Centre, the inaugural concert was given by members of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in September and live streamed online. The venue for this was the superlative McPherson Recital Room – the only one of its kind anywhere in the world. We so look forward to welcoming people into the space to see – and hear – for themselves in due course.

The Wardlaw Museum is now fully equipped with artefacts and exhibitions: we will offer limited preview sessions for staff and students this semester, with a public launch scheduled for early 2021. A sneak preview of our lead debut exhibition, 'The Death of Marat & the Birth of the Lobster' by alumnus and neo-pop artist Philip Colbert, was available last month in St Salvator's Quad which was, for a few days, presided over by a giant inflatable lobster sculpture replete with fried-egg emblazoned pyjamas.

Walter Bower House, our new state of the art office building located at the Eden Campus in Guardbridge, opened earlier this month and staff have commenced relocation to that site as they transition from working-from-home. The impressive facilities include an on-site gym and café and complement a huge programme of work at the Campus to transform it into a hub of activity.

The developments at our Eden Campus were visited in February by Sir Mark Sedwill, our alumnus and the then Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, who has since demitted office and been made Baron Sedwill of Sherborne. Lord Sedwill also participated in a programme of events with students and researchers from our Strategic Studies MLitt and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, and his visit concluded with a town hall event which I hosted. The world-leading expertise at Handa CSTPV was also the subject of a celebratory conference and programme of events to mark its twenty-fifth anniversary in Washington DC in January, including a reception at the British Embassy which I attended with the Chancellor.

Other distinguished visitors to the University have included Lyse Doucet, honorary alumna and Chief International Correspondent at the BBC, who delivered a superb Carnegie Lecture in February; and Sir James MacMillan who delivered the inaugural St Margaret of Scotland Lecture Series hosted by our School of Divinity. That lecture

was followed by a choral mass presided over by His Grace, Archbishop Leo Cushley, Archbishop and Metropolitan of St Andrews and Edinburgh; both the lecture and this mass are scheduled to be repeated annually and are a major contribution to our calendar.

Whilst capitalising upon our existing expertise is important, progressing our World Leading theme means identifying and developing further areas of potential. This is happening across our Schools but we have at an institutional level identified Engineering as a cluster of strength within the University, and we are planning to develop a coherent identity in this field by fostering interdisciplinary work and maximising our existing skillsets. We have also recruited a founding Professor of Chinese Studies, Professor Gregory Lee, in anticipation of the introduction of this subject with the first student cohort expected in September 2021.

Diverse St Andrews

As ever, the commitment to diversity and inclusion expressed in the Diverse St Andrews theme informs all that we do at the University. I lead on Diversity as head of the institution supported by the Assistant Vice-Principal for Diversity, Professor Ruth Woodfield; however, cultural change is something which can only happen with cross-community buy-in and support. As such, transparency about where we are doing well and what remains to be improved is essential, and to enable this we have published a suite of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion webpages which provide statistics across a range of protected characteristics in relation both to staff and student populations. These are publicly available online alongside information of steps we are taking to redress existing inequalities. This year also saw the establishment of a Race, Equality, Religion and Belief Working Group chaired by Professor Woodfield which aggregates our diversity projects and monitors their effectiveness.

To support women in our community, I was pleased this semester to launch the fourth cycle of the Elizabeth Garrett Mentoring Programme which I introduced four years ago and continue to oversee. Our work in this area is augmented by continuing progress with the Athena SWAN Programme, a charter organised by Advance HE which mandates universities to set and achieve meaningful gender equality objectives. The School of English attained its first Bronze award last December; the School of Philosophical, Anthropological & Film Studies followed in April; and the School of Divinity in September, meaning that 18 of our 19 Schools are now accredited at either Bronze or Silver level by Athena SWAN.

Two other external successes have furthered our Diversity portfolio: in March, the University was one of 20 UK universities made a partner of the Employ Autism Higher Education Network, an initiative led by Santander Universities which broadens support for our students with autism and Asperger's. Also in March, the University was formally awarded Sanctuary University Status by City of Sanctuary,

which recognises our robust provision for and safeguarding of refugee and asylum-seeking scholars.

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement encouraged each of us, personally and institutionally, to reassess our provisions for BAME people. To this end, I engaged extensively in spring with the then Rector's Assessor, Papa Obeng and together with colleagues we hosted a roundtable meeting attended by over 20 BAME students and alumni of the University. As a result of this meeting, we are furthering our diversity awareness training, developing our study abroad guidance, and expediting an inclusive curriculum audit – amongst other outcomes. I have engaged similarly with the University's Staff BAME Network.

Over the summer, the University's Equally Safe group launched a student culture review, conducted in partnership with the Students' Association and tasked with identifying what elements of our student culture work well and should be preserved, and which parts should be eliminated. There is a particular focus here upon looking at cultural practices which exceed the parameters of safe behaviour. This project will also ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place pre-emptively to curtail gender-based violence and to support survivors. One successful outcome already has been the launch of a Report + Support scheme which enables students and staff to report incidences of discrimination or assault to the University, anonymously or otherwise.

Global St Andrews

The diversity of our community is the source from which it derives strength: we currently have around 2,960 staff from 71 countries, and 10,100 students from 142 countries. That speaks to how truly global our small Scottish town is.

Despite the travel limitations imposed by the pandemic, our activities under the Global St Andrews theme progress as we strengthen our international partnerships. In January, the Senior Vice-Principal visited both Stellenbosch University in South Africa and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel. Also in January, a Strategic Letter of Intent was signed with Charles University, Prague, which supports further collaborative developments with a University with which we already have valuable links, and in February the Director of the Global Office, Samantha Lister, visited the University of Padua to strengthen links with our key Italian partner. I hosted guests of global importance here in St Andrews pre-pandemic, including the President of the Republic of Ghana, His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, who visited in February with a delegation of 40 Ghanaian guests to speak at the student-organised St Andrews Africa Summit; and in March, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Kingdom, His Excellency Simon Smits.

We continue to build strategic relationships around the world with institutions that fit with our mission and values, such as the Universities of Melbourne and Emory.

Central to our international strategy is our relationship with the University of Bonn: last year, I hosted Bonn's Rector, Professor Michael Hoch, and the University's leadership team for a two-day conference in St Andrews – which would have been returned this summer in different circumstances. Instead, we participated in an online Strategic Board meeting in August, now a standing event, and this month co-hosted with Bonn a series of virtual events for parliamentarians and stakeholders in Brussels. Bonn will be central to our international collaborations in upcoming years and marks our serious commitment to working with European institutions, researchers, and students in a post-Brexit environment.

Brexit has been displaced in the public arena by Coronavirus, but its urgency is no less pressing and the UK's transition period as we withdraw from the EU ends on 31 January 2021. We have been preparing for this for four years via our Brexit Preparedness Group, chaired by the Senior Vice-Principal, although it is an unfortunate reality that some aspects of our future relationship are unknown until details of a deal emerge, if indeed one is to be agreed. This is particularly pertinent for our student mobility schemes such as Erasmus, and universities hope that an international agreement can be made which facilitates our continued engagement in that programme. Should this continued participation fail to materialize, Government have committed to drawing up an alternative mobility scheme although we are underpinning this with a clear commitment to our international partners that the University of St Andrews will continue its institutional relationships and transfers, overseen by our Global Office.

Entrepreneurial St Andrews

In a post-Brexit and post-pandemic UK, universities will be judged partly by their capacity to produce cutting edge research with the potential for industrial and commercial application. The Entrepreneurial St Andrews theme expresses our commitment to facilitating such research, and there are two particularly compelling developments in this regard, both focused upon our Eden Campus site. In July, the Scottish Government announced a £300,000 investment into a hydrogen accelerator at the Eden Campus, drawing on research from our School of Chemistry and intended to prosper innovations in hydrogen technology and sustainable transport. And, in September, we received news that the Scottish and UK Governments have endorsed the Full Business Case for the Eden Campus, thereby releasing £26.5M of funding from the Tay Cities Deal to the University – new capital which will turbocharge that site's transformation into a regional hub of industry and business.

The post-pandemic world will also need skilled graduates ready to apply their education to solve tangible and pressing societal issues. So, we are seeking also to foster entrepreneurial thinking amongst our student body by weaving it through our curricula and assessment formats, through the foundation of the Start-Up Stories Speaker Series to inspire students, and via the establishment of the Summer Teams

Enterprise Programme, or STEP – a six-week internship via which students embark upon an interdisciplinary research project with impact potential.

Social Responsibility

The Eden Campus and its Energy Centre are key to our sustainability agenda, which is, in turn, a fundamental part of the Social Responsibility statement which underpins the University Strategy. Last November, I announced the foundation of an Environmental Sustainability Board to oversee sustainability projects and initiatives across the University, chaired by Professor Sir Ian Boyd. Applications for the Board equalled 14 per place, signalling strong community-wide interest in environmentalism. The ESB has since commenced a University-wide consultation on a new Environmental Strategy which will support the University Strategy, position us as a sustainability leader in the UK, and outline our ambition to become carbon neutral for energy use by 2035.

At the heart of our environmental initiatives is the St Andrews Prize for the Environment and we hosted the 2020 final in February; first place was awarded to Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka and her non-profit, Conservation Through Public Health, a Uganda-based organisation which recognises the synergies between human and gorilla health and improves both simultaneously. The Prize has been supported by ConocoPhillips since its inception in 1998, and in its over two decades of operation has attracted almost 6,000 applications and awarded over \$2.1 M in prize money. 2020 marked the final year of ConocoPhillips's partnership with the University, and we are using this opportunity to reorient the Prize by refining the types of projects it seeks to support, streamlining the application process, and further integrating it into our academic and community activities. Applications for the 2021 Prize launch on St Andrews Day, 30 November, and the final will take place in autumn 2021 – deliberately aligning with COP26 which will take place in Glasgow, and with which the University is actively interfacing.

Also part of our social responsibility commitments is our recognition that the University must operate at all times with the best interests of the wider community in mind – and we have demonstrated that commitment in the past months. In February, I was pleased to host for the first time the St Andrews Community Lunch in Lower College Hall, in partnership with the Community Council, as well as the third annual Town and Gown Reception which brings together representatives from community groups and celebrates their work in making St Andrews such a special place.

At those events, I announced the launch of two keystone community engagement initiatives: a University-community newsletter entitled *The Loop*, to be released quarterly with information on University developments and events; and the University Community Fund, a financial resource to which community organisations which foster town-gown relations can apply. When the pandemic struck, it became

apparent that a quarterly newsletter would not facilitate the level of engagement required and we have thus postponed its release until the pandemic no longer has such pressing effects. In the meantime, we have been in constant contact with community organisations and members: Lesley Caldwell, our Community Engagement and Social Responsibility Officer, and Professor Stephen Gethins meet frequently with stakeholders; I have written several letters which have featured in local publications; information is shared widely on social media; we deliver monthly updates at Community Council meetings; and we respond to every query or email which is received. Conversely, plans for the Community Fund progressed on course: it launched in April and the first tranche of awards were made in May. The organisations we have supported thus far include: The City of St Andrews Pipe Band which was awarded funding to support online music education; Community Action St Andrews which received funding for their face-covering production programme (which has in turn generated the profits needed to sustain the organisation); and Saje Scotland, a Fife wide charity based in Lochgelly which supports people who have experienced or are currently subject to domestic abuse. We really are so pleased to support these organisations and many others, and in so doing, to foster partnerships with community members and organisations.

Conclusion

Like many of you, I was excited to hear news of advancements in the development the first effective vaccines against Covid-19 this month, and the promises therein of a return to public life and resumption of meaningful in-person interactions once more. But we must not be complacent and our planning is predicated upon the assumption that we will be operating under our present circumstances – with varying levels of restriction – for some time to come, and we will plan as such until a vaccine programme has been successfully rolled out.

Even in a post-Covid world, we will not return to ‘normal’ because we have learned things during the pandemic which have irrevocably shaped our University. We know that high-quality teaching can be delivered remotely and that we have the in-house expertise to fulfil this, and that there is potential for greater growth in the breadth of remote and digital learning opportunities we offer. We know that our staff are not dependent upon office environments to work effectively and that offering flexible working where possible is part of a modern and inclusive work environment. And, we know that through technology we can strengthen our international partnerships and relationships without ever stepping foot on a plane – and that reshaping the way we engage with the world will be central to achieving continued growth and competitiveness whilst meeting our sustainability ambitions.

So, we must proceed carefully and continue to use the Strategy as our guide – but excitement – cautious excitement – is there. Thanks to the exceptional endeavours of our staff, the adaptability of our students, and the support of members of the general

council and friends of the University, we have come through a year of existential crises intact and braced for the opportunities that await us in the new year – in which we will continue, as ever, to excel.