

Minutes - University Court

23/10/2023 | 3:00pm – 5:00pm

Stirling Court Hotel

Present

Mr Harry Adam (Chair); Ms Leen Ali; Ms Zoe Crosher; Mr Gary Fleming; Mr Kenny Fraser; Ms Susan Gordon Hardy (Vice Chair); Mr Hamish Grossart; Mr Graham Hastie; Dr Magdalena Ietswaart; Mr Douglas Kearney; Professor Malcolm MacLeod; Professor Sir Gerry McCormac; Ms Catriona Morrison; Mr Julian Roberts and Mr William Stancer.

**In Attendance**

Ms Rose Edwards, Mr Graeme Duff, Ms Cathy Gallagher, Ms Jennifer Harrison, Ms Karen Lawson, Mr Colin McNally, Ms Joanna Morrow, Professor Judith Phillips, Dr John Rogers, Ms Eileen Schofield, Professor Leigh Sparks, Mr Moray Nichol (Clerk), Professor Neville Wylie and Dr Lee Zhuang.

Welcome and Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Dr Mary Allison, Ms Pamela Crawford, Cllr Douglas Dodds, Dr Poonam Gupta and Professor Julie Tinson.

The Chair welcomed Dr Magdalena Ietswaart following her appointment to University Court.

The Chair provided an updated to members on graduation ceremonies held during the summer and the four honorary graduates who were made Doctors of the University in recognition of their outstanding contributions to society: Her Majesty Queen Silvia of Sweden, Grant Reid, Khadija Coll and Robert Kilgour. 

The Chair provided an update on progress with the recruitment process for new lay members of Court and work undertaken to identify the extent of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) across the University's estate and action taken to ensure risks were appropriately managed.

The Chair offered his condolences to the family of Dr Doris Littlejohn who died.  Doris was a former Chair of University Court from August 1999 to July 2007.

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes

Court approved the minutes of the meeting of University Court held on 12 June 2023.

3. Matters Arising Not Otherwise on the Agenda

There were no matters arising not otherwise on the agenda.

4. Remit, Composition and Membership

Court noted the remit, composition and membership of Court for 2023/24.

5. Developments in the External Environment

Court received an overview of developments in the external environment that included coverage of the Scottish Government Programme for Government 2023; the Conservative and Labour Party Conferences; UK Government Regional Innovation Fund; Universities Scotland Budget Case to Scottish Government 2024/25; Horizon Europe and support offered by the University to individuals affected by events in Gaza and Israel.

Court noted the recent developments in the external environment.

INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING AND BUDGETING

6. The Strategic Plan

Court received an overview of the University's new Strategic Plan developed following engagement and consultation with the University community.

Members discussed the proposed institutional vision, mission and values, engagement during development of the Strategic Plan, the five strategic priority areas identified, and the level of ambition pertaining to growth of annual turnover and income over the life of the strategy.  It was confirmed that a monitoring and evaluation framework would be developed, complete with key performance indicators and associated milestones, to enable Court to monitor performance against the Strategic Plan.

It was confirmed that, following approval, the next step was to develop a promotional campaign for a formal launch in early 2024 and a monitoring and evaluation framework, complete with key performance indicators and associated milestones, to enable Court to monitor performance against the Strategic Plan.

Court approved the Strategic Plan 2023-2030.

7. Planning and Budgeting

**i) Quarter Four Reporting**

Court received an overview of the Quarter 4 Management Accounts as at 31 July 2023, an update on the Capital and Major Infrastructure Plan and an update on the University's cash position.

It was confirmed the Quarter 4 management accounts highlighted a 2022-23 outturn surplus of £8.5m. £1.4m better than the approved University Budget and Quarter 3 position which was primarily due to investment income earned by proactive management of cash balances in response to higher bank interest rates.

It was confirmed work continued to finalise the audited financial statements for financial year 2022-23 for presentation to and approval at the December meeting of Court along with a reconciliation of any material changes to the Quarter 4 management accounts position.

Members discussed the preliminary capital spend for 2022-23.  It was confirmed an underspend of £3.7m was primarily due to delays experienced in project delivery, and that associated projects would be rolled forward into 2023-24.  Members discussed provision for capital expenditure and potential re-phasing of capital projects once the extent of remedial work associated with reinforced autoclave aeriated concrete (RAAC) across the University's estate was fully understood, following findings from the investigation.

Members considered the cash position.  It was confirmed the University ended the financial year 2022-23 with cash balances of £73.8m, generated a net operating cash inflow of £9.6m and that the University would be covenant compliant when tested formally against the 2022-23 financial statements.

Members discussed the University's approach to diversifying unregulated student recruitment and risk associated with the University's student fee income as a direct result of government policy.  Members discussed work undertaken to better understand student tuition fee payment behaviours across diverse markets to further reduce the default rate on tuition fee income.

Court considered the Quarter 4 performance update and the Capital and Major Infrastructure update.

Additionally, Court considered and approved the submission of an application to the Scottish Funding Council for Future Transactions Fund of £7.5m loan funding to undertake a full refurbishment of Donnelly House in 2025.

**ii) Annual Review of Performance**

Court received an overview of the Annual Performance Report that is produced and submitted to Court as a review of institutional performance in the previous year.

Members considered analysis of data and comparative performance across the sector or benchmark group. Members discussed student to staff ratios across faculties, student satisfaction across programme levels and the influence of QS World University Rankings on the perception and reputation of the University in a global market.  It was confirmed work was being undertaken to share examples of good practice across the University to improve performance, and better understand areas for improvement identified through findings from student satisfaction surveys and feedback from staff and students on their experiences.

Court considered the report on the University’s performance during 2022/23.

**iii) Student Numbers**

Court received an update on the student population forecast for the 2023/24 academic year for all levels of study and fee status.

It was confirmed that the University was expected to have a strong unregulated student population in 2023/24 that would support an increasingly diverse and vibrant student population, but also contribute significantly to the ongoing financial sustainability of the University in a challenging funding environment.  It was confirmed the overall tuition fee income was forecast to increase as a result of annual increases to tuition fee levels, combined with record levels of international undergraduate students, the largest undergraduate cohort from the rest of UK since change introduced to the fee regime in 2012/13, and a buoyant international postgraduate taught population.

Court noted the update on student numbers.

COLLABORATION

8. City Region and Growth Deal

Court received an update from the University’s City Region and Growth Deal Programme Board that focused on the National Aquaculture Technology and Innovation Hub (NATIH) project.

It was confirmed the notice of endorsement of the full business case for the NATIH was received from the UK and Scottish Governments on 3 October 2023.  With endorsement secured, it was confirmed the full business case proceeded to the Deal’s Regional Joint Committee on 18 October 2023, and was approved.

Members discussed the recommendation and Court approved that delivery of the National Aquaculture Technology and Innovation Hub project by the University may commence in November 2023, and that the necessary contracts for the project may be entered into.

GOVERNANCE

9. Annual Report on Institution-Led Review

Court received an overview of the Annual Report on Institutional-Led Review.

Members discussed the annual submission to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) on our Institution-Led Review activities for the academic year 2022/23.  Court commended staff on the rigour of self evaluation undertaken as part of the process.  It was confirmed that the purpose of the process was focused on enhancement, and the extent to which the University maintains its academic standards and quality was also reviewed externally by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

Court approved the Annual Report on the Institutional Led Review in 2022/23 for SFC and sign off the ‘Annual Statement of Assurance’ included as Appendix 1 of the report, in the name of the Chair of Court.

10. SFC Outcome Agreement 2023/24

Court received an overview the Scottish Funding Council Outcome Agreement 2023/24 that demonstrated the University's contribution to the Scottish Government’s priority outcomes and impact for public investment.

Court approved the 2023/24 Outcome Agreement documentation for submission to the Scottish Funding Council.

POLICY

11. Treasury Management Policy

Court received an overview of the revised Treasury Management Policy.  It was confirmed that the purpose of that policy was to ensure all treasury management activity was undertaken within clear parameters to manage the risks inherent in those activities.  In reviewing and updating the policy, CIPFA’s Treasury Management in the Public Services code of practice (2021 edition) was considered, in addition to recommendations from an internal audit of Treasury Management undertaken in May 2023.

Members considered additional factors to be taken into consideration as part of decision making processes associated with treasury management activity, and discussed the University's approach to ethical investments.  It was confirmed authority for financial transactions, borrowing, lending and investments was set out in the University's Schedule of Reservations and Delegations.

Court approved the revised Treasury Management Policy.

ACTIVITY UPDATES

12. Students' Union Update

Court received an update on recent Students’ Union activities and discussed in particular disruption caused due to the presence of reinforced autoclave aeriated concrete (RAAC) and action taken to mitigate the impact on students experience and lost revenue from commercial trading.   Members discussed opportunities for the current layout of the Union to be redesign in order to provide a space for students that was more conducive to a modern campus experience.

Court considered the activity update from the Students’ Union.

13. Staff and Employment Update

Court received an update on staff and employment matters including coverage of the employee relations landscape, a consultation of Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) members on proposed benefit changes and institutional staff engagement activities.

Court discussed the action short of a strike undertaken by University and College Union (UCU) that included a marking and assessment boycott (MAB).  It was confirmed that on average 1.7% of all staff participated in the MAB between June and September 2023.  Court discussed the outcome of the mitigating actions put in place to ensure any disruption and potential impact on students was minimal.  It was confirmed that, for all students eligible for graduation in the summer, a no detriment approach was applied, all provisional grades were confirmed and there had been no subsequent issues associated with degree classifications.  

On behalf of Court, the Chair thanked all staff involved for their efforts to ensure students received their awards at graduation ceremonies held during in the summer.

Members sought clarification on specific elements of the University's employee relations update pertaining to the approach the University had taken to MAB pay deductions and the nature of assessments that were undertaken prior to actions being put in place.  It was agreed that points of clarification raised on the matter would be submitted to the Clerk of Court and the Chair of Court, and that a response would be circulated to Court.

Court noted the staff and employment update.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

14. Academic Council

Court received an overview of the report from the Academic Council meeting of 13 September 2023 and discussed opportunities and challenges associated with developments in generative artificial intelligence on the University's approach to learning and teaching.

Court noted the Academic Council report from the meeting of 13 September 2023.

15. Remuneration Committee

Court received an overview of the report from Remunerations Committee.

Members discussed the Senior Staff Retention procedure that was revised to reflect the need for an increased degree of agility in the context of a competitive recruitment landscape.

Members considered an update on the Senior Staff Remuneration process and discussed the use of pay gap data modelling that was utilised to enable a greater understanding on the impact of any recommendation made to Remunerations Committee.  Members discussed representation of women in senior positions at the University and it was confirmed Court would continue to receive reports on progress to further narrow the gender pay gap.

Court considered the report from Remunerations Committee.

16. Governance and Nominations Committee

Court noted the appointments and reappointments approved by Governance and Nominations Committee during October 2023.

RISKS

17. Risks Arising

Court considered risks associated with items discussed in the context of the agreed risk appetite statement.

OTHER ITEMS

18. Any Other Competent Business

There was no other competent business.

19. Next Meeting

Court noted the next meeting of Court was scheduled on 11 December 2023.