



School Presidents Forum

St Andrews Students'
Association

Meeting date: 25/02/2021 (6pm) via MS Teams

Present: Amy Gallacher (chairing), Iona Baillie (minuting), Joseph Horsnell, Chloe Fielding, Clare Peddie, Frank Muller, Stella Ezeh (observing), Abi Whitefield

Geraint Morgan, Callum Irvine, Lucy Matthews, Sarah Johnston, Jeanne Adam, Ursula Goldsmith, Elinor Layne, Belinda Hawes, Lindsay Nielsen, George Watts, Camiel Leake, Brynne Stewart, Murray Whyte, Imaan Kotadia, Rachel Neighbour, Hannah Koegler, Sanjana Ramaswamy, Lowell So

Apologies: Ryan Gibb

AGENDA

1. Introduction & Welcome (5 mins, Amy Gallacher)

AG: Welcomed the group and the Rectors Assessor who is attending in an observational capacity in the Rector's absence. Explained that from now on the Rector will be chairing the group and will be supported by the Academic Executive team. Congratulated FM on his new role as Assistant-Vice Principal for Learning and Teaching. Asked FM to explain his new role to the group as the change has caused confusion among student representatives.

- **FM:** The role of AVP Learning and Teaching is essentially the remit of the previous Dean positions rolled into one. The new Decanal roles are line managed by the Master and are more focused on staff and School issues than has previously been the case. The move was taken in order to streamline workload and provide support to the Proctor on enhancing the learning and teaching experience for students.
- **AG:** Thanked FM on behalf of the group for the explanation.

2. Graduation Plans (10 mins, Lucy Matthews)

LM: A lot of 4th years are in limbo right now, waiting to hear what is happening with graduation, though they are aware it all has to wait for the government regulations to solidify. It would be helpful for us to know if the University has any plans in

development even if they are not set in stone yet. Could student representatives be told in advance or be involved in making these plans?

- **CP:** Any plans for graduation are controlled by the Scottish Government guidance on social distancing etc. The most recent updates from Boris Johnson and Nicola Sturgeon differ hugely with regards to what the situation will be like North and South of the border at the time of graduation. The Scottish guidance also doesn't go all the way to graduation. It does also show that the right decision was made regarding telling students that no more in person teaching would happen this semester. There are such different opinions about where we'll be in summer. Lots of discussion is going on and the decision will come out in the next 10 days. It would be with great reluctance that graduation would be postponed but the decision will have to be made soon to allow for travel planning. It is largely out of their hands.
- **FM:** Current guidelines say that we shouldn't have more than 5% of students being taught on campus at any one time, and also try to limit the amount of travel going on across the border. This makes it hard to see an outcome where all students (plus families) will be able to travel from all over the UK and overseas to come for graduation. It doesn't look like it will be allowed, and even if it is, they would also have to manage the risks themselves to avoid any knock-on effects.
- **CI:** In terms of making plans both feasible and safe, could there be student input to put something together, eg breaking down graduations down into smaller groups/rooms. Maybe that would make something possible.
- **LM:** Agreed that it cannot happen as usual, but as opposed to cancelling (which will snowball the more cohorts are cancelled), could there be student only events with masks and social distancing and having family streaming from home?
- **CP:** It is not just crossing the stage, its collecting gowns, the procession, having so many people involved as well. The Principal has been trying to leave the decision as long as possible in case the situation changes. We'll take back these views and the desire for student involvement, but it is all just so reliant on very fast changes coming from the Scottish Government. These also play into the issue of travel and having to potentially cancel travel plans if the situation would change. The Scottish Government won't allow them to do something which encourages students to come back to St Andrews (such as offering up a graduation event) so as things are *right now* nothing would be possible. It might get better but promising something and planning for something that is so distant, given how much could happen between now and then, is very difficult.
- **FM:** Will feed back the strength of views on this and try and see what can be done. So far, not a single member of the University community has been lost to COVID and this has to be protected.

Action: FM and CP to take this away to Fiona Thompson.

3. University COVID IT Mitigation Fund (5 mins, Camiel Leake)

CL: In their SSCC, the audio quality for some lecturers was brought up as being really poor. The School said there was no money in the budget to provide better quality microphones even though CL knew of a pot they could use. When this was brought up, the DOT was surprised and none of the lecturers present had heard of the fund or knew University support was possible. Staff have been using their own money to improve the quality of their lectures by purchasing higher quality hardware.

SJ: School of Physics had the same issue as a lecturer struggled with teaching from home. The students didn't want to pressurize them into coming to the School building when they knew they weren't comfortable doing so which led to a compromised audio quality situation. They weren't aware of any fund being in place either.

- **CP:** Staff can get headsets etc. through IT services so this shouldn't be happening. If you mean in the context of delivering lecturers to in-person classes simultaneously to online, this has been worked on by IT Services who have gone around the spaces with poor audio pickups to improve this. Staff should contact IT Services if they need a mic and headset to work from home.
- **FM:** They sent out laptops, dongles, headsets, microphones, printers etc. This can be done, it is fairly inexpensive. What school is CL in?
- **CL:** Chemistry. Can I email DOT saying that if there are any hardware requirements to email IT Services directly?
- **FM:** Yes.
- **AG:** Could an email be sent out to the DOTs directly from your end to spare the student representatives trying to communicate the resources to staff themselves?

Action: CL to email DOT

Action: FM/CP to ensure an email reminder is sent before the next DOT lunch about this to increase awareness.

CP: There is an issue with people working from home and being able to travel in. Not sure what the solution is. We have advised staff working from home with children just to do their best, hoping that students can show similar understanding, and that if they really need to use another space, they can come into work. But it has to be absolutely essential to fit with the guidelines. It has to be demonstrable that it is essential. Hopefully this will get better as the children start going back to school. We appreciate how hard they are trying.

- **AG:** SJ, was that situation that they needed to come in?
- **SJ:** The person in question didn't have the confidence to set up in the technical aspects required for online teaching, but felt more comfortable in the Physics Building. It is still an active thing so will direct to IT Services.
- **CP:** IT Services for hardware but if it is help learning to use Panopto etc, they have Live in the Hive, Q&A sessions etc... There are a lot of resources out there.

4. Plans for Academic Year 2021/22 (10 mins, Sarah Johnston)

SJ: Realise that everything is very much in flux, but they've had their first offer holder's day and prospective students are trying to make decisions and are asking questions about the next academic year. Of course, concrete answers are difficult, but is there any information regarding ongoing planning or things they might expect? Eg is there going to be staggered return or full online or any plans around this?

- **CP:** There is a lot of ongoing planning regarding this including specific meetings for scenario planning. Social distancing limits the campus and availability of space. If social distancing is still in place, which seems likely, there will not be enough building/classroom space to accommodate the

increased space required, meaning that there will have to be online teaching. Some decisions will be made early but some will have to be made much closer to the time. They are going to try and make a 'road map' of what decisions can be made when, and this should be in place by Spring Break. They are in consultation with DOTs and trying to also think of the mitigation measures which will have to be put in place. There are so many unknowns. There will be students in red list countries at the beginning of the year who will be late arriving so it is more than likely that the beginning of the semester (at least) will have to have some form of online provision. Admissions need guarantees so they are aiming to have lists of what will be in place.

- **FM:** No one knows what will happen, but even optimistic views will have some students arriving late due to their own health concerns, location etc. We have to look after these students. Hopefully most students will be here though. Large indoor gatherings (eg. large IR lectures) will probably not be allowed until after the winter if the aim is to get through the winter safely. But hopefully by then, even the students will be vaccinated. All DOTs have been sent a list of questions to try and come up with everything that needs to be thought of.

CI: It might be helpful if there was a commitment to retaining recorded lectures as it has been a benefit for this situation but it will continue to benefit those who won't be able to come in next year due to health reasons etc. Lecture capture and online submissions would be worth prioritizing, especially if some students are naturally allowed this because they are overseas.

- **CP:** Wholeheartedly agree. The guidance the DOTs will look at next week will include this. These changes have definitely been a benefit. When we get out of emergency powers, we'll have to put through a paper on this.
- **FM:** The case for both is strong and it shouldn't have taken a virus to get to where we are.

SJ: If students ask SPs what next year will look like, what do you want them to do?

- **CP:** Would be comfortable with SPs just laying out the different options and saying that everything is just dictated by Scottish Government Guidelines. They will always try and maximize in person teaching within the guidance. SPs can talk about this.

SJ: For practical science degrees, elements needed for accreditation have been pushed back. In Physics they are talking about bringing cohorts back early in the summer. Students have raised concerns about what will happen if this is not able to happen and also ask whether the University will be in hand to help with accommodation (bearing mind coming an extra 2 weeks for quarantining).

- **FM:** Junior honours coursework requirements for Physics and Chemistry will take place in April or at least before September for those who can't make April. Students will be supported both in April and in the summer period w.r.t accommodation. RBS have been contacted to help with this. It will likely work similarly for those needing accommodation to quarantine in as last year. There is also a discourse going on about accreditation with the various relevant bodies. St Andrews has done well at preserving teaching towards accreditation and the bodies have also been pragmatic about this.

- **CP:** If any students are in financial difficulty because of having to come back for these pieces of work, get in touch with the Money Advisor in Student Services as the Scottish Government has given them money to support students in this predicament.

5. Staff Recruitment EDI Language (10 mins, Imaan Kotadia/Sarah Johnston)

IK: This relates to the wording on the staff recruitment documents. It says that they would especially welcome applicant's from BAME backgrounds' and this is something which has raised questions in our department. This kind of wording might deter staff of minority backgrounds as it makes it look like the University is only looking for staff members from these backgrounds to fulfill the institution's EDI aims. This wording was changed in Physics through HR but we feel this should be done more as a University-wide thing. We would like to know what the University is doing to be supportive of departments recruiting staff from wide backgrounds. Maybe there should be connections made with communities from other Universities? This might help students who are looking to get into academia if they can relate better to the staff around them. Hopefully it would also then encourage students of a wider background to apply.

- **SJ:** The separate issue of wording can maybe be looked at after this initial discussion.
- **CP:** They have an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee which is working really hard on these issues. The recruitment of staff issue should maybe be raised in another forum as this is not within our remit. But agreed. They do spend a lot of time trying to think on how to improve diversity. It is something which is a real focus right now. Can feed this back but the best way of doing this is to go to the DoWell who sits on the Committee.
- **FM:** The point of having appropriate role models for all communities is really important and inclusivity and diversity are real focuses. HR specialists would advise on the wording and how to maximize encouragements so that applicant's want to be involved, and if this is backfiring, I'm sure they'd want to know and fix this. That will need to go through the Committee though.
- **SJ:** One key point to raise is that PG students also receive the same wording which is why it does come within the SP remit. Most institutions use the same wording. The new wording is broader. It is not within our remit to tackle the staff front of this issue but the student issue very much is. The HR staff we spoke with (as well as Sukhi Bains, the Head of Equality andn Diversity) were very positive about the changes.
- **CP:** Re PGR students, this is really helpful. This needs to be taken on, and the support of HR is also very useful.

Action: AG to support IK and SF in picking this up with the President and DoWell.

6. Gender Studies Motion (10 mins, Joe Horsnell/Amy Gallacher)

JH: This has been brought up at Educom twice now. As Reps, we should focus on academic situation rather than the individual staffing situation. It would be good to hear about what is being done by the University to try and help the students?

- **FM:** Spoke to the Provost recently for an update. Only one module is being changed in terms of staffing. The program is led now by the head of the Graduate School and she is meeting with the students each week for a catch up to see how things are going. It seems the cohort are happy with how teaching is going. For the module and program, everything is as it should be.

There is a wider issue surrounding this which will be disruptive to be in the middle of. The teaching and delivery is high quality and well received however and the University is committed to keeping running this program so will aim to keep this high quality.

- **CP:** That is my understanding too.
- **JH:** Will get in touch with any issues that come up. The thing that is perturbing students seems to be the communication/administration side rather than the teaching so that is worth keeping in mind. The continued lack of communication about their degree has led to some considering taking leaves of absence as it has and continues to have affected a significant portion of their St Andrews experience.
- **CP:** Their teaching will continue; their degree is not in jeopardy. They seem happy with the teaching. Acknowledge that the surrounding issues might be perturbing but the teaching is not at risk.
- **JH:** The reason this is coming up here is that a motion was passed in Councils which mandated certain Reps to get in touch with students about this.
- **FM:** They are absolutely committed to protecting the students' interests who may be affected by this, as well as the continuation of the course more broadly.
- **AG:** This is encouraging to hear as this was something the students were worrying about.

7. AOCB

CP: When we made the decision about in person teaching, it was a balance between certainty and possibility. Do you think that students would rather have one more than the other?

- **CI:** This came up in the English SSCC. Students were happier with certainty. It was noted that as the decision was reached, the resources needed to be there, e.g. support to the library etc. Students appreciated the certainty.
- **GM:** Same in Classics. Students and staff were supportive of the decision made.
- **BS:** For someone on a non-accredited but practical-based degree, students appreciated the maximum chance for any practical teaching. Students were glad the time was used to see if it would be possible. Students were glad St Andrews didn't wait until later in the semester (e.g. week 6), but compared to US Universities who cancelled their courses months ago, it was appreciated that St Andrews has acted on a good time frame for decision making.
- **GW:** The issues found with the communication were more around first years (and MLitts) who weren't sure if they were allowed to come back. It would have been good if the University had been clearer on what a 'good reason' to come back is. There were different responses to these questions going around. The issues stemmed from this rather than when the decision was made.
- **CP:** The reason that strong advice wasn't given was that they couldn't. The government did not give strong rules here and they couldn't guarantee the response of the police to a given reason. They were in a difficult position because they didn't know about what was acceptable and what wasn't.
- **FM:** There were strong legal questioning going on (at the governmental level rather than the University level) about how students moving house

was any different to other citizens moving house which at the time was allowed. On top of that which wellbeing issues counted as serious? They wanted to avoid drawing a line and allow students to decide for themselves as they are best placed to make the decision on what is serious and how it relates to their individual circumstances. There is also the issue that the University can't protect you from fines or the police if they are wrong.

- **GW:** Thank you. The way you explained there was much more reassuring than some of responses other people seem to have had.
- **BH:** It was very helpful to know when the decision was going to be made because then they could plan fieldwork around the dates given. Saying when a decision will be made (if this occurs again) is great for enabling students to plan.

CP: This has been a very useful conversation. Will try and do as much as possible to give as much guidance as possible ahead of time.

Meeting adjourned 7.15pm