# ****DRAFT MINUTE OF THE STATUTORY HALF-YEARLY MEETING OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL HELD ON SATURDAY 26 NOVEMBER 2022 AT 10.30AM IN PARLIAMENT HALL, SOUTH STREET, ST ANDREWS****

The Chancellor, The Rt Hon Lord Campbell of Pittenweem, was in the chair and welcomed 39 members to the meeting.

1. Minute of the last ordinary half-yearly meeting of the General Council held on 2 July 2022.

The minute of the meeting was agreed upon as a correct record. (See [General Council Minutes](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/meetings/minutes)). There were no matters arising.

## **Report by the Convener of the Business Committee – Wendy Russell**

The Convener was pleased to present a short report on behalf of the Business Committee. For information about the Business Committee’s most recent activities, members were referred to the minutes of their last meeting held in April 2022 (see [General Council Minutes](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/meetings/minutes)).  
  
Congratulations were extended to the University on being named the top university in the UK by the Guardian University Guide 2023 and Scottish University of the Year by The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2023.

The Business Committee would be seeking six new members and the Convener asked General Council members to consider whether they might wish to stand for election or encourage other General Council members to do so. Members were asked to look out for relevant communications from the General Council and to take part in the election process by voting for their preferred candidate(s).

In 2022, the Committee had spent time looking closely at its governance arrangements to ensure that it remains fit for purpose. The ‘Introduction to the General Council and its Business Committee’ document would be updated as a result, ahead of the election schedule in 2023. Should changes to the General Council Standing Orders be required, these would be brought to members for approval at a future meeting.

The Business Committee has pledged a joint donation to the St Andrews Forest initiative. The Convener invited members to consider making a donation or planting a tree and referred them to the [St Andrews Forest page on the University’s website](https://forest.st-andrews.ac.uk/) for further information.

Members were encouraged to take part in a short survey via social media channels -Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn - to enable the Committee to gauge interest in supporting a Legacy of the Gown initiative. The proposal is to create a Gown Library from which students would be able to borrow a gown at a low cost to be returned upon graduation and passed to the next generation. Gowns are not currently being collected while storage arrangements are being explored.

The Convener was pleased that Professor Clare Peddie, a critical member of the University team leading the work that enabled students to continue their studies during the pandemic, would be addressing the meeting about how the pandemic has changed teaching and assessment at St Andrews.

In closing, the Convener thanked all those who were participating in and/or who had helped organise the meeting, Business Committee colleagues for their continued support and fellow General Council members for attending and showing such interest in General Council affairs.

*The Chancellor thanked the Convener and members of the Business Committee and invited questions from the floor.*

The Convener was asked what was stimulating the investigation into the governance of the Business Committee. In reply, the Convener mentioned that Standing Orders had continued to be looked at over time. Since the pandemic, the Committee had been meeting virtually and so the way in which meetings are held was being considered, in addition to the frequency with which meetings are held and how it might be possible for members from far-flung countries to attend. Finally, the Committee was looking at the roles and responsibilities of the General Council and its Business Committee to make sure that its affairs are run in line with what is required.

In reply to a question from the Chancellor about virtual meetings, the Convener explained that the Committee had been holding hybrid meetings via Zoom since before the pandemic and so it had been very easy to move to virtual meetings during Covid and to keep to the normal schedule of meetings. The Convener acknowledged that virtual meetings can be difficult in terms of time differences for a few members joining from overseas.

The Chancellor proceeded to ask if the Committee had a final date by which the examination of how the Business Committee works will reach its conclusion. The Convener hoped to have an update for the next General Council meeting in June 2023.

A final question was asked concerning how members who did not use social media would be informed about the Legacy of the Gown initiative. The Convener confirmed that the Committee was looking at other opportunities to make information available more widely.

*The Chancellor thanked the Convener of the Business Committee for the Business Committee report and moved to the next item on the agenda, inviting the Principal to give the University address.*

## 3. University Address – Professor Dame Sally Mapstone DBE FRSE, Principal and Vice-Chancellor

## The Principal welcomed members and was delighted to report that, since her last report in July 2022, there has been a successful return to full in-person teaching. The Principal reassured members that, while the after-effects of the pandemic occasionally make themselves felt, and the profoundly serious issues of the war in Europe and the cost of living crisis mean that the University operates within unsettled times, the last few years have shown that St Andrews is an incredibly resilient institution and can adapt, change and research its way out of even the most testing times.

[The Principal’s University Address to the General Council](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/meetings/minutes/) can be read in full online.   
 *Following the Principal’s address, the Chancellor invited questions from the floor.*In response to a question about activities under the Entrepreneurial and Digital pillars of the University Strategy, the Principal recognised the great entrepreneurial potential for spinout companies and Intellectual Property to offer income streams. However, in budgetary terms, investment has been relatively modest due to the unpredictable nature of funding and the difficulty in ascertaining if companies are going to be successful and what the return will be. In terms of digital potential, the University’s offering of a suite of digital courses is a deliberate, market-tested initiative. Lifelong learning is opening up and people want to upskill, reskill and acquire new qualifications. The University has set itself a challenge to provide digital-only postgraduate courses that have an identity and quality that give them a St Andrews hallmark. The Principal is confident that pilot courses in Computer Science and in Geography and Sustainable Development will be popular and have the capacity to bring in a significant income stream. The capacity to generate additional income has become more important as Government support for teaching and research is dropping exponentially on a year-by-year basis as the Scottish Government itself is experiencing budgetary constraints.

Replying to a query about student accommodation and the status of Albany Park in particular, the Principal reminded members that St Andrews is quite distinctive in providing accommodation for 40% of its students, which is proportionately more than many other universities. The flip side of that is that St Andrews is a small town and there is pressure on accommodation as a result. The University has a number of projects in view in relation to providing additional accommodation, all of which have been impacted by the cost of living crisis and the supply chain and construction issues that are proving a challenge right across the world and not just in the UK. When the University considers the building projects it might undertake, it has to look very carefully at how these are to be resourced and sequenced to avoid passing on unaffordable costs to the student population. Albany Park will be built and, while there is no precise timescale yet, the University remains in constant dialogue with the developer and is working very hard to resolve the challenges it faces in terms of resourcing this project. It is hoped to have a number of housing units on the Grange site onstream in 2023/2024. Accommodation in Leuchars has been leased for several years and the University is also resourcing and renting accommodation in Dundee.

In response to a question about support for staff and students with disabilities, the Principal appreciated the importance of the issue, not least because the University has a great deal of historic estate and is working to improve accessibility. Restoration of the Younger Hall, for example, is now being completed, making that building fully accessible for the first time in its history. Lifts mean that everybody can access the upper floors and it now has accessible toilets. Anyone with mobility issues can be brought onto the stage in a far more dignified way than before. The Principal assured members that the University is very aware of the buildings that need attention. In addition to physical disability, the Principal referred to the extensive work that has been undertaken for those with other disabilities, including learning differences. There had been an opportunity recently to compare support for those with dyslexia now and ten years ago and dyslexia support is now much more equitable, compassionate, sensible and thorough. The Principal encouraged staff and students to share their experiences to help the University identify the support required.

The Principal was next asked what leadership the University is providing on the UK stage to settle as promptly as possible the dispute with the University and College Union (UCU). The Principal pointed out that St Andrews is one of 150 UK universities in which UCU has called on its members to take industrial action in respect of separate national disputes on pay and working conditions and pensions. Stressing that these are national disputes which can only be resolved by negotiation at a national level, the Principal said that the St Andrews’ position was clear: we should strive for national settlements that are fair to staff but are also sustainable for their institutions. The University respects the right of UCU members to take industrial action and fully acknowledges sector-wide concerns about pay and pensions. It will continue to work hard to minimise disruption to its students, many of whom have already experienced disruption due to the pandemic and previous industrial action by UCU. The Principal is on the board of Universities UK and is also currently Convener for Universities Scotland. This provides an opportunity to engage at a national level both with UCU and with UCU Scotland and with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), of which the University is a member. Universities UK represents staff on pensions. In the Principal’s view, much will depend on the results of the March valuation due out in June 2023. Nationally the University is advocating as best it can with the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) to think through what adjustments might be possible, either in terms of contribution rates or changes to benefits, if the March valuation is as positive as it is expected to be.

The Principal felt that there was much more concern about pay, which was entirely understandable. However, because collective bargaining takes place nationally, affordability across the sector has to be considered. UCEA is showing some welcome flexibility in trying to bring forward and put some staging into how the next pay round can work. The University is seeking to encourage that but has always to bear in mind that institutions have to look at what they can afford to avoid putting themselves into situations in which they cannot afford a pay settlement which is then imposed upon them.

In answer to a final question expressing concern about the financial situation of junior members of academic staff, the Principal referred back to the one-off £500 additional payment to all staff, to a 75% subsidy on bus travel that had been arranged with Stagecoach and to half-price meal deals currently being offered to staff, which make a great deal of difference to junior members staff. In addition, staff promotion exercises are run on an annual basis, providing an uplift for those who are successful. Unexpected increases, such as in its energy costs which are likely to go up by £2M a year, mean that the University must always act prudently within its limits.

*There being no further questions, the Chancellor thanked the Principal and invited Professor Clare Peddie, Vice-Principal Education to deliver her presentation.*

## 4. Presentation entitled ‘Is it for better or for worse? How the pandemic has changed teaching and assessment at the University of St Andrews’ by Professor Clare Peddie, Vice-Principal Education (Proctor)

Professor Peddie’s presentation focused on the changes to learning, teaching and assessment as result of the pandemic and what these changes will mean for the future i.e. which of the changes might be retained.

Before the pandemic: A large component of the University’s traditional teaching provision relied on in-person didactic lectures, combined with personal, small-group teaching, the hallmark of teaching provision at St Andrews, where a small number of students meets with a member of staff to talk about the lecture material and other related topics. In addition, there were personal seminar groups, with slightly larger groups of students, with lots of personal encouragement to engage in debates and discussions. In the Sciences, there were laboratory classes in which students work in groups and individually, again in an environment in which there is a lot of encouragement to discuss, plan and engage in practical activities next to each other. Many students were also engaged in travelling overseas.

Where were we when the pandemic hit? Fortuitously, the University had just completed a Technology Enhanced Learning project, which meant that all modules had a digital presence on our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Moodle, which provides a framework for online learning. This meant that there was one place for everything the students needed, including readings, timetables, module handbooks and lecture recordings.

There was considerable innovation in pedagogical practice and some exploration into digital teaching in some Schools and in some modules. Some staff had started to record lectures, but it was very much an opt-in policy. There were pockets of expertise in Zoom and Microsoft Teams but, in terms of providing digital materials on Moodle, expertise was limited. There were also significant attainment gaps, particularly for students with a disability.

While there was some innovation in assessment methods in some modules, for many there was a quite standard way of assessing students, with most modules requiring two essays and a three-hour examination.

What happened during the pandemic? There was a rapid shift to online teaching, with just two or three weeks to get to a position where students could study online. The University Library digitised all required reading materials. All lectures were recorded. Tutorials and seminars moved onto Microsoft Teams. Some staff went to extraordinary lengths, for example, posting out parcels of rocks, and software was purchased to allow students to conduct experiments remotely online. Examinations moved online. Some teaching necessarily had to continue in person, largely in Medicine. The University flipped entirely to being online and then went through two years of gradually bringing back in-person teaching, as and when allowed by the Scottish Government.   
  
Partnership with the students was paramount. A survey carried out when the University was not permitted to do all of its teaching in person found that students were generally happy to have their lectures remain online but wanted tutorials, seminars, computing laboratory sessions and sessions in the wet labs to be in person. That gave the University a very good steer on where efforts should be focused going forward and meant that lectures could remain online for larger groups of students.

What problems did we face? Hybrid teaching proved very challenging for both staff and students who found hybrid teaching less satisfactory than teaching being all online or all in person. The demand for IT provision was also very significant, with IT equipment needed in all classrooms to enable the recording and captioning of lectures.

Online examinations were not proctored which risked academic integrity and challenged traditional modes of assessment. There was a move towards more authentic assessment and assessment that challenges students in a way that they could not answer just by searching on Google. Digital poverty and isolated students and staff also proved problematic.   
  
Thanks to colleagues in the University Library, huge strides were made in the provision of digital material. There was a rapid roll-out of training and support information and additional staffing resource was provided in the form of a new Digital Accessibility Adviser and new Learning Technologists. Significant investment was made in pedagogical software to provide staff with what they needed to be able to teach online. Improvements to automated captions assisted many students. Financial and practical support for IT hardware was provided, including a laptop loaning service and modems for students who were finding it difficult to get online. All of this was found to be a huge benefit for students and was notably beneficial for those whose first language is not English.

Twenty per cent of students declare a disability, most considered hidden or invisible e.g. 36% relating to mental health and 35% to specific learning differences. Some students also have mobility difficulties. Student satisfaction with support for disabled students remained fair, good or excellent throughout the pandemic and the disability attainment gap all but closed. (In 2017/18 it was about .4 of a grade point.)

All efforts were very positively received by the majority of the students. Anxiety about automatic capture disappeared in most (but not all) academic staff. Students were challenged to learn differently. All students, not only disabled students, benefitted from the flexibility of online learning, and others who may also have benefited, include students who are also carers, parents, commuting students, students with part-time jobs, as well as those whose first language is not English.

Professor Peddie referred members to Blooms’ Taxonomy of learning triangle which classifies learning from lower-order thinking skills of remembering, understanding and applying through to the higher-order thinking skills of analysing, evaluating and creating. Comparing in-person to online examinations in terms of trying to preserve academic integrity, Professor Peddie explained that it is in the lower-order thinking skills that it is easy for academic integrity to be breached as the higher-order thinking skills require the student to be imaginative, analytical and critical.

Key terms, including constructive alignment, inclusive assessment and authentic assessment were explained. Constructive alignment involves making sure that assessment is aligned with the course objectives and course learning outcomes; inclusive assessment means that students are not excluded from the assessment process because of disability or any other aspect; and authentic assessment is about assessing in a real way what is going to be work- and life-relevant e.g. being able to use a whole range of resources to then synthesise that knowledge to write a report for an employer versus sitting in an exam hall writing for 1.5 hours without access to any other resources. The other assessment challenge was designing out plagiarism.

During the pandemic, there was a rapid shift to continuous assessment, with many modules no longer being examined in the traditional way and with a shift to authentic assessment methods. There was a wider range of assessment options, including changes to examination formats e.g. giving students eight hours to gather all the information they needed to write a report.

What changes will we keep? Some solutions found during the pandemic are being retained. Often technology is still being used to achieve beneficial outcomes for staff and students. There is more deep thinking and understanding, inclusivity has been enhanced and misconduct concerns reduced. Student satisfaction has increased. The change to continuous assessment has happened across all years with a big increase in the number of modules that now have 100% continuous assessment.

Lecture capture and captioning will remain. The greater flexibility and innovation in assessment are being retained, with many academics enjoying having a choice in how they can assess. The accessibility of digital materials will continue to improve. It is hoped that the reduction in the attainment gap can be maintained.

What has returned? In-person lectures for in-person degrees and small-group teaching for tutorials and seminars are back in person. Experiential learning in the laboratory and in the field is back. There are some in-person proctored examinations for some disciplines for which it is critical to be in that environment to be able to assess them properly, typically Medicine, Maths, Physics and Chemistry.

What next? COVID-19 has driven a huge amount of change. It has taken its toll on academic workload and also on the amount of time available for research. Now is the time for reflection. The narrative that online teaching is poorer in quality or is somehow a cheaper alternative was unhelpful. There has been a huge investment at St Andrews in digital provision and that is not a cheaper alternative. The upskilling that was required throughout the University is providing opportunities for the future.

The last of the pillars in the University’s refreshed Strategy is the Digital pillar.

The University plans to have no more than around 10,000 students in the town and has no plans to grow numbers any furth­­­­­­­­­er in students taught in St Andrews.

Innovation and opportunities for the future include new digital postgraduate taught programmes and new digital short courses, which will enhance the University’s reputation for high-quality education and make a St Andrews educational experience available to students with diverse backgrounds, including those in work who want to upskill. The University will also continue to support staff in digital and pedagogical development.

Staff will be supported by a promotion structure that recognises the balance of activities and will be offered the opportunity to work towards a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. Advance HE has been commissioned to support staff with their career development, with workshops on applying for Senior Fellowships.

Digital innovation will continue to be developed through the recruitment of additional staff and there is a wealth of training materials and opportunities available through the Community for Evidence-Led Practice in Education (CELPiE) and the Inspiration Centre which offers advice and inspiration for how staff might teach.

There are also lots of opportunities for digital collaboration with other institutions around the world.

For better or for worse? In summing up, Professor Peddie reiterated that the pandemic had stimulated rapid change and admitted that it had been a tough time for everyone. However, the University had delivered teaching and assessment very well and the response had been appreciated by staff and students. The changes that resulted have been largely for the better in that, thanks to dedicated and professional staff, teaching and assessment have been enhanced and new skills learned, offering new opportunities.

*The Chancellor thanked Professor Peddie for her presentation and invited questions from the floor.*

The Proctor and her colleagues were congratulated on the University's response to the pandemic in terms of teaching and learning, and the way in which some very effective lessons have been drawn from that time. Mention was made of the Vertically Integrated Project where a small group of students from different years and different subjects work together on a collaborative project. The Proctor explained that this had not been included in the presentation as it was pandemic-independent, but agreed that it was a fantastic innovation and a project that students and staff are really enjoying. It has also received external recognition in the form of awards.

Another member commented on how, from his own experience, he felt the St Andrews’ response to the pandemic was one of the best in the UK because it was practical and supportive without being overinstructed. He requested that the thanks of staff and students be placed on record.

Professor Peddie paid tribute to the work of the huge team of people involved and thanked the member for his kind words.

*There being no further questions, the Chancellor moved to the final item of the Agenda.*

## 5. Any Other Competent Business

## *In the absence of any motions to be considered and there being no further questions, the Chancellor brought the meeting to a close, thanking members for their presence and inviting them to rise for the Benediction.*

**Alastair Merrill**

**Registrar and Clerk to the General Council January 2023**