

## **MINUTES OF AN ORDINARY MEETING OF THE SENATUS ACADEMICUS** held in the Informatics Forum, 28 September 2016

*Sederunt:* Senior Vice-Principal Professor C Jeffery, Professors J Amis, S Anderson, C Bell, R Cann, S Clark, S Cooper, L Cram, H Critchley, S Deacon, K Forbes, P Foster, C French, N Gisborne, J Gondzio, T Harrison, J Hillston, C Iannelli, R King, A Lascarides, W Loretto, C Lyall, L McAra, L March, A Millar, J Moore, A Murray, S Nenadic, J Norman, C O Bradaigh, J Oberlander, D Paton, P Phemister, L Plowman, C Pulham, D Reay, T Scaltsas, M Schwannauer, J Shaw, J Silvertown, A Sorace, C Speed, R Sparks, A Tate, O Taxidou, A Thompson, W Williams, C Withers, Drs S Chan, C Chandler, M de Andrade, G Duursma, A Eshraghi, P Fernandes, L Hamilton, D Jones, T Kaminer, S Kheria, K McCall-Smith, A Maciocia, M Michou, P Norris, G Palattiyil, C Phillips, S Prost, S Rhynas, S Riley, P Sheail, P Smith, E Stevenson, J Turner, P Walsh, Mr H Dingwall, Ms Melissa Highton, Ms J Koszela, Mr A Verhoeven

Associate members: Ms F Barrett, Mr P Garrett, Ms K Heil, Mr J Vercruysse, M Wildasin

In attendance: Dr T Bak, Ms G Blair, M Bugaj, Dr A Bunni, Ms H Bradley, Mrs J Britton, Mr J Broadhurst, Ms N Caron, Dr S Choi, Ms M Corey, Ms L Dobson-Mckittrick, Ms P Ferguson, Dr K Gregory, R Hill, Dr S Hong, Ms T Ironside, Mr G Jebb, Miss L Laumenech, Miss C Llewellyn, Dr Z Marks, Mrs C Mackay, Mr J McAleese, Dr A Nazir, Ms J O'Donoghue, Dr K Overy, Ms M Pierquin, Ms A Scott, Mr E Toro Quezada, Professor C Raab, Ms L Reilly, Mr A Saez, Ms T Sheppard, Ms S Smith, D Stevenson, Dr R Strain, Mr T Ward, Ms P Ward (minutes), Dr M Winskel

Non-Senate members who were in attendance for the presentation and discussion section of the meeting were welcomed. It was noted that the Principal was unable to attend, and the meeting was therefore chaired by the Senior Vice-Principal.

### **1. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION: Interdisciplinarity**

The focus of the presentation and discussion was “Interdisciplinarity”. It considered ways in which we might strengthen our culture and expectations of high performance in interdisciplinary research, learning and knowledge exchange.

Six members of staff shared their experiences of and views on interdisciplinarity:

#### **Research**

##### **Professor Catherine Lyall – Science, Technology and Innovation Studies**

Professor Lyall expressed the view that the term ‘interdisciplinarity’ is used ubiquitously but poorly understood. There are many papers on the topic, but there has been a lack of systematic review of good practice. As a result, research into interdisciplinarity often ‘reinvents the wheel’.

Interdisciplinary research is essential to addressing global and societal challenges, but requires researchers to overcome many obstacles. Early career researchers receive mixed messages about the importance of interdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinary activity is often encouraged at policy level, but discouraged by funding mechanisms.

Professor Lyall concluded that there was a need for better sharing of good practice in this area; identification of administrative barriers to interdisciplinary activity; a willingness to commit more time to interdisciplinary activity; and better training and mentoring for interdisciplinary researchers.

### **Professor Jon Oberlander - Informatics**

Professor Oberlander observed that interdisciplinary research is far riskier than single discipline research. The review process for interdisciplinary research is more complex, and it has been suggested that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) may undervalue interdisciplinary research as compared with the wider academic community. It was noted that interdisciplinary projects require time and space to emerge.

### **Teaching**

#### **Dr Zoe Marks – Global Development Academy**

Dr Marks stated that interdisciplinarity hinges on process and application – it is about how things are done. It requires humility about disciplinary limits. The strongest interdisciplinary activity does not dispose of individual disciplines, but focusses on their strengths.

Attendees heard about the highly successful, issue-driven, taught masters programmes offered by the Global Development Academy. The PhD studentships offered by the Academy were also discussed. Dr Marks stated that the biggest challenge at PhD-level was not developing community within a research team, but issues around the transferability of data and analysis, and ensuring that researchers can also survive within their own discipline.

Dr Marks proposed that more needs to be done to celebrate the creativity and innovation of interdisciplinary work, including creating space both for failure and for the intellectual ‘moonshots’ that interdisciplinary work can make possible.

#### **Professor Chris Speed – Design Informatics**

Professor Speed noted the importance of recruiting the correct people for interdisciplinary work. He observed that academic teams are more likely to be made up of ‘I’ (skilled in a single discipline) than ‘T’ (skilled in a single discipline, but with the ability to collaborate across disciplines) shaped people, but that ‘T’ shaped people are critical to the success of interdisciplinary projects.

### **Conditions and Consequences**

#### **Mr Gary Jebb – Estates and Buildings**

Mr Jebb noted that most researchers and students agree that interdisciplinarity is a good thing, and that isolation comes with risk. However, providing a physical infrastructure that promotes interdisciplinarity becomes difficult when opposing priorities such as requirements for space, noise reduction and possibly status also exist. In the main, we create space that is function and equipment-focussed rather than people-focussed.

Mr Jebb expressed the view that with growing student numbers and developing technologies and pedagogies, change was essential. He encouraged the University to embark on new conversations about the importance of the academic unit, and to consider how forthcoming estate developments might help to deliver a paradigm shift.

#### **Professor Christine Bell – Global Justice Academy**

Professor Bell spoke about the Political Settlements Research Programme, a four-year research programme undertaken by a consortium of five organisations. The programme had secured significant funding on account of it being interdisciplinary and high-impact. Professor Bell outlined those factors which she considered to have contributed to the success of the programme, and the challenges that had been encountered. She discussed the need for institutional workarounds when engaging in interdisciplinary activity, and long-term, the need to make changes to ensure that interdisciplinary work fits within mainstream structures.

## **Discussion**

The following points were raised during the discussion:

- The work of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), which supports innovative research and public engagement activity across the arts, humanities and social sciences through a range of interdisciplinary programmes and projects was highlighted.
- Virtual University Edinburgh (VUE), a virtual educational and research institute bringing together those with an interest in the use of virtual worlds for teaching, research and outreach, was also introduced.
- Attendees were encouraged to take a longitudinal view and to consider the way in which our existing disciplines emerged – in many cases, from collaboration between more traditional disciplines - in addition to thinking about ways in which we can transcend disciplinary boundaries.
- Several of those present expressed the view that there was significant appetite amongst early career researchers to be involved in interdisciplinary work.
- The lack of social spaces and dining facilities at Kings Buildings was identified as a barrier to interdisciplinary activity. Conversely, the high-quality communal space within the Queen's Medical Research Institute had been a significant factor in developing strong, interdisciplinary teams.
- The lack of support available for 'self-interdisciplinary' researchers (as opposed to disciplinary researchers working within interdisciplinary groups) was highlighted.
- The view was expressed that the term 'interdisciplinary' can be unhelpful when used internally as it retains the link to disciplines and implies that only disciplines do research. Attendees were encouraged to find different ways of thinking and talking about open research.
- Recruitment processes, and the need to hire for interdisciplinarity, were discussed. It was noted that Edinburgh has a strong history in this respect, and attendees were keen to see this continue.

## **2. National Student Survey 2016: Results and Responses**

Senate noted that the results of NSS 2016 were disappointing, with the University falling back on each of the Primary Themes. There was no obvious reason for the general drop, and many other sources of information suggested that teaching within the University was of genuinely high quality. However, it was important for the University not to become either complacent or demoralized, and the Senior Vice-Principal outlined immediate action that was being taken in response to the NSS results:

- NSS free text comments showed that some students had had poor experiences during their time in Edinburgh. This was unacceptable, and it was important to address staff under-performance where this was identified.
- Recruitment, annual review, and reward processes would continue to highlight the importance of and recognise excellent teaching.
- Work would be done to increase engagement between staff and students at all levels of the institution, including the introduction of a mid-Semester feedback event for all Honours-level courses.
- A more sustained and creative approach to communication with students would be adopted.

- Plans to introduce a reliable and comprehensive lecture recording system would be accelerated.

Discussion with Heads of Schools had also highlighted that:

- more needed to be done to ensure that the University estate allowed staff to deliver the best possible student experience;
- improvements to the University's digital systems were necessary;
- there may be benefit in having further discussion about academic roles, and specifically considering the merits of teaching-focused career paths.

The following points were raised by Senate attendees in relation to the NSS results:

- In general, NSS results for smaller Schools were better than those for larger Schools. Further thought needed to be given to ways in which a greater sense of community might be fostered in larger Schools.
- The University had undergone rapid expansion, and the development of institutional structures and teaching style had not always kept pace.
- There may be benefit in looking again at the content of the University's Open Days to ensure that students' first impressions of the University were positive. The matter would be referred to the Director of Student Recruitment and Admissions. **[Action: Secretary]**

## **FORMAL BUSINESS**

### **3. Report of E-Business**

The report of the e-business conducted between 6 and 14 September 2016 was noted.

### **4. Special Minutes**

Senate adopted the Special Minutes for Professors George Gretton, Falconer Mitchell and Bonnie Webber.

### **5. Knowledge Strategy Committee Report**

The report was noted.

### **6. Development of Policy for Lecture Recording**

The Assistant Principal Online Learning advised members that existing University systems for lecture recording had reached the limits of their usability. There was high student demand for lecture recording. Evidence from comparator institutions showed that lecture recording was particularly important for non-native English speakers and those with disabilities, and was heavily used during revision periods. There was no evidence to suggest that lecture recording impacts negatively on lecture attendance.

On this basis, Senate Learning and Teaching Committee had supported the case for University investment in lecture recording, and the business case had been approved by the Court. The University was embarking on a procurement process, and was aiming to equip around 400 teaching spaces over a 3-year period, with the potential to capture almost all lecturing activity. The system would be integrated with Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and timetabling systems.

A University-level policy to support lecture recording now needed to be developed. This would involve widespread consultation with staff and with campus unions. It was noted that the policy would need to be consistent with other related policies, particularly the Accessible

and Inclusive Learning, Open Educational Resources, Timetabling and Data Protection Policies.

Attendees were very positive about the planned developments. It was noted that further thought would need to be given to copyright-related issues and to the provision of recordings in alternative formats. Senate members were invited to submit further comments to the Assistant Principal Online Learning. **[Action: Senate members]**

### **7. Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)**

The Senior Vice-Principal advised Senate members that the UK Government's response to the Technical Consultation and specification for Year 2 of the TEF would be published shortly. A Universities Scotland working group was considering the way in which Scottish institutions might engage with the TEF. It was recognised that the Scottish quality enhancement framework and higher education system differed from the system in England, and that this distinctiveness needed to be taken into account. Discussions were continuing about the way in which a subject-level TEF might be implemented.

### **8. Edinburgh University Students' Association Priorities for 2016/17**

The Students' Association Vice-President Academic Affairs outlined priorities for 2016/17. Senate members considered the priorities to be ambitious and encouraging. There was much that the University and Students' Association could work on collaboratively, and the Senior Vice-Principal was keen to involve students in the work being done to tackle poor NSS results and improve the student experience. The priority being given to mental health issues was welcomed, and it was suggested that there would be benefit in giving further thought to the ways in which those living in student accommodation with mental health issues were supported.

### **9. Further Report from the Honorary Degrees Committee**

The recommendation for the award of an Honorary Degree was approved.

Senate Clerk  
12 October 2016