

Report from the meeting of Senate held on 9th April 2020

1. Chair's Welcome and Opening Remarks

The Chair welcomed Senators, attendees and observers to the 140th meeting of Senate and the first to be held virtually.

It was reported that careful consideration and risk assessment had been given to the most appropriate means by which to hold the meeting, and it had been concluded, for the time being, that Zoom was the most technologically accessible and facilitative option that would support the constructive and open discussions that characterise Senate. Furthermore, it was not considered that any matters of a confidential or sensitive nature would be discussed at the meeting, and, Zoom had very recently enhanced its security measures.

Senate was informed that one of the University's Honorary Doctor of Laws, Dr Richard Brodsky, had died the previous day, in New York, of covid-19. Dr Brodsky had been awarded an Honorary Doctorate for his work in social justice. His career in public service included a 28 year tenure in the New York State Assembly. Senate extended its condolences to Dr Brodsky's family and friends.

The Principal expressed her appreciation at the remarkable work that had been undertaken by all staff across the University, over the last three weeks, to move to online teaching and working. Staff had gone above and beyond their normal scope of working to put changes in place, and to work together to resolve issues where these had arisen. The Executive Board met every weekday, and the Student President and Student President Elect attended these meetings too. Fortnightly meetings with the Trade Unions were also scheduled.

It was acknowledged that this was a very stressful time for all staff, many of whom were trying to combine home working with looking after children and other caring responsibilities. The University was advocating and supporting managers and staff to be flexible in agreeing working arrangements to meet individual requirements. Wellbeing support was in place for staff and students should this be required.

In addition to the move to online teaching, there had been a number of other important achievements as part of the University's response to Covid-19, and a number of nursing students had now joined the NHS workforce. All students in Caledonian Court had been released from their lease.

There would be significant financial challenges ahead for all universities in the coming months and years, and the government was considering the best way to support universities through this period. The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lohead MSP, was due to have individual conversations with all university Vice-Chancellors in the coming week.

2. Statement from Chair of Court

The Chair of Court, Rob Woodward, expressed his appreciation at the exemplary way staff and students had worked together to respond to the current extraordinary circumstances. Whilst there would be further challenges ahead, the University had a strong foundation on which to build and to map out a way forward.

3. Power of Delegation

Senate noted a report that reminded Senate of the provision within Senate's Standing Orders (section 2.4), that supported the delegation of power to the Chair of Senate to deal with urgent business which required a formal decision before the next available meeting of Senate. This would include making urgent, necessary changes to assessment regulations and other relevant University policies within Senate's terms of reference, to enable the University to appropriately and swiftly respond to situations where decisions were required outwith the normal schedule of Senate meetings, such as was currently being experienced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Feedback from Schools, Students' Association and Student Support and Student Life.

Senate received a verbal update from each Dean of School and GCU London. All Deans expressed appreciation at the positive response from students engaging in online learning, and acknowledged the significant amount of preparation that staff from across the University had undertaken to enable and support this. Whilst the situation in each academic area was different, there was broad similarity in relation to areas such as teaching and assessment, especially subjects with a practical element; placements; professional body requirements; ongoing increased workload for academic staff and responding to a large number of queries from students, in a fast moving environment; and research student funding. The need for the University's Quality Assurance processes to be agile to cope with any required changes in assessment or academic delivery was requested, and it was acknowledged that the current situation would encourage an innovative look at pedagogy and how that might shape future academic delivery. Early information on assessment boards and other key dates was also requested.

There was also commonality in the issues that all staff were dealing with, including balancing working from home with parenting and caring responsibilities; managing annual leave; working with new technologies; and information overload. The need for flexibility to suit personal circumstances was reiterated, together with the importance of staff utilising the rest days that had been scheduled.

The Student President reiterated her appreciation of how the University had responded to the situation. Whilst initially there had been a high level of queries raised by students via email and social media, this had slowed significantly, and most issues raised by students had been resolved. The Students' Association was working remotely and providing regular opportunities for students to engage and keep in touch.

The Director of Student Life reported that a helpline had been set up that enabled the University to deal effectively with a very high level of enquires from students, and a number of FAQs had been published which had proved very successful. Student Wellbeing support was still available, although being delivered in an alternative way, and support was also being given to disabled, care experienced and overseas students. Around 150 students remained in Caledonian Court and a support framework was in place to ensure students who were self-isolating had access to food. The hardship fund had provided 80 laptops and dongles for the most disadvantaged students without other access to IT equipment and/or internet.

The Chair expressed appreciation at the way the University community had responded to the situation and gave assurances that the issues raised in the feedback would be considered by the University,

5. Research and Support in Light of Covid-19

Senate endorsed a report by the VP Research that outlined a number of activities that had been undertaken in relation to research and the REF in light of Covid 19. It was highlighted that a Research Continuity Group had been established to mirror the Executive's establishment of its Covid-19 Planning Group, and it had met three times to date. This Group had considered plans to support research within academic departments; support for postgraduate research students, including holding electronic vivas (noting that 6 PhD vivas had been held); and support for existing research projects.

In relation to the REF, it had been announced that the REF submission date of 27th November 2020 would be postponed indefinitely, with universities being informed 8 months before the new submission date. However, it had been decided not to alter the University's REF timetable of work in order to be able to respond promptly once a new submission date was announced.

6. Date of Next meeting

The next scheduled meeting of Senate will be held at 9.30am on Friday 5th June.