

University of St Andrews' Student Association
Meeting of the
Students Representative Council and Student Services Committee
Tuesday 19th February 2008, Senate Room, 7:30pm
Minutes

Question and answer session with Professor Keith Brown (Deputy Principal) and Derek Watson (Quaestor and Factor)

SRC Accommodation Officer: What stage is the Fife Park redevelopment at?

Derek Watson: There has been extensive consultation over Fife Park but there is no developer at present. The new accommodation will be a mixture of catered and self-catered, en-suite and standard accommodation. Units will have five to six beds. Ten to twelve bed units would have been cheaper but were unpopular at the consultations. A planning application will be put in within the next two to three weeks but building will not start soon. Cost is a problem. The University is seeking a partner but does not want a private developer to be in charge.

SRC Accommodation Officer: What are the long-term plans for providing sufficient affordable accommodation?

Derek Watson: The University intends to adhere to its resolution to keep one quarter of beds in the lowest quartile. A 36-week let in the new accommodation will not be less than £100 per week, including all services. We are looking into target bursaries to help students pay for their accommodation. This will be the best solution in the long-term because it is difficult to build cheap accommodation and this would have to be subsidised from the teaching budget, which the University is not prepared to do.

How many low-cost beds will be lost?

Derek Watson: 30-40%. At present there are just over 700 beds in the lowest quartile; after the redevelopments there will be just under 500. Overall 153 beds will be replaced with 781. The budget for means testing is small, which is the main problem with target bursaries. We have tried to benchmark accommodation costs with private accommodation and university accommodation is cheaper. Having more beds will take pressure of the town and lower the cost of private accommodation.

Hannah Jade Ormisher: The Widening Access department is funded by the Scottish Government, but many St Andrews students are English. What do you intend to do to widen access for all students?

Derek Watson: Unlike other universities, St Andrews does not do favours and access is controlled by academic standards only. Financially, widening access is a difficult issue because of rules based on whether a student is European or non-European, etc. I have no answer as to how to widen access for all students.

With the growing students population, is 500 beds in the lowest quartile enough?

Derek Watson: The student population is not growing. It has stabilised at around 6800 and may rise slightly but will not go much above 7000. Providing more beds will lower accommodation costs for all students and widen access.

Are you saying that even though the new beds will be more expensive they will help bring down the cost for all students? The price difference will be around £30 per week.

Derek Watson: Fife Park rent is now unrealistically low. Fife Park is near the end of its useful life. In

2010, 10% of it will be lost because of HMO regulations whatever happens.

SRC Member for International Students: What can be done to provide wireless access in buildings where this is not currently available?

Derek Waston: Wireless can be extended, let me know where this is a problem. The IT strategy will consider this. It is also part of the library redevelopment. I have been told that Science students do not use the library as much so we will improve access in other buildings.

SRC Member for International Students: I have had complaints from international students about scholarships: there are not enough scholarships, applicants should be able to apply for scholarships directly through the University, not an external organization, and the scholarship form should be included with the application form.

Keith Brown: The University has an almost complete draft of its Strategic Plan, which focuses on a ruthless pursuit of academic excellence, which means attracting the best students.

Derek Watson: Fundraising is a challenge. People complain that there are more scholarships in the USA, but these are usually from alumni and the UK culture is not to give back to universities, and it will take a long time to change this culture. There are also problems with this because many of the Government's priorities are Scottish.

Director of Representation: What is the University's anniversary fundraising strategy?

Keith Brown: To raise £100 million by the 600th anniversary. There will be a programme of events which are to be a combination of celebration and fundraising leading up to the anniversary.

Education Officer: When will students become involved in the anniversary plans?

Keith Brown: Very soon. It is important students are involved, not just staff. All schools should be involved as students tend to have fonder memories of their school than of the University as a whole.

Education Officer: What will you do if the financial crisis continues?

Derek Watson: There is no financial crisis. Scottish universities are well funded compared to English universities. The issue is what will happen when the cap comes off fees in England and fees there rise to £6000-£8000 per year. When that happens the situation in Scotland will change. The current strategy is to convince the Scottish Government that this is going to happen. At present they refuse to discuss the issue or possible ways of covering the cost such as raising taxes. There is a crash coming if no agreement is reached.

Do you intend to pay for the new library by increasing fines?

Keith Brown: No, fines will not be raised to pay for building work.

If there is enough money for library development, why are accommodation costs going up?

Keith Brown: The library is part of learning, teaching and research. Accommodation has to pay for itself. It would not be right to use the learning, teaching and research budget to pay for accommodation.

Association President: Many universities offer academic excellence, therefore is it right that this is the focus of the Strategic Plan, and will it be enough to maintain its status and level of student satisfaction?

Keith Brown: Academic excellence means that the best students will come to the university and the

best students graduate. The small size and attractiveness of the town give St Andrews an edge. For academic excellence we need to have a good and well-funded library. We want students to have a good student experience but the main focus should be academic excellence.

SRC Member for Absent Students: What consultation will there be with students over the Strategic Plan?

Keith Brown: The Strategic Plan is being formulated. It will go through the University Court and will go to students for consultation soon. It will be sent to schools, units and made available for the student body. It has to go through the Court first so that there is a final document to hold consultations on.

How does the body of books compare to that of other universities?

Keith Brown: We have been putting more money into the library for the last three years and are improving electronic resources. The main priority at present is the facilities, and then we will be able to focus on books. I am aware that in some subject areas the stock of books is not as good as it should be.

Given the difficulty of finding accommodation, why is Fife Park being demolished?

Derek Watson: The plans are for immediate expansion. Another 300 beds will be built before Fife Park is knocked down.

Member for Societies Elections: Sustainable Development was promised a building two years ago. What are the plans for a building and new staff for this department?

Keith Brown: We have been trying to find a professor for a long time, but the subject is so interdisciplinary that the staff often seem over-stretched on their CVs and we would rather take the time to do the search well and find someone suitably qualified. There was no promise of a building.

Derek Watson: One member of staff has asked to be able to build an earthship. We are waiting for her to bring us proposals.

Debates Officer: Are there any plans to sell off any buildings in the centre of town, and are there any buildings that the University would like to buy?

Derek Watson: There are currently no plans to sell any buildings. There are some buildings I would like to buy but they are not on the market yet so there is nothing we can do, but we are keeping an eye on the situation.

SRC Accommodation Officer: You said it was wrong for learning, teaching and research to fund accommodation. How would bursaries be funded?

Derek Watson: We will look for funding. The main issue is how to target the bursaries. In the past it was suggested that rent should be the same for all accommodation, but the Association President at the time argued convincingly for a differentiated scale. There are no plans to increase rent other than those that have already been agreed.

Broadcasting Convenor: Regarding the Strategic Plan, do you not think that things such as sports facilities are becoming more important for attracting students?

Keith Brown: There is a section about that in the Strategic Plan.

Derek Watson: There are plans to build a swimming pool and common areas. However, nothing should get in the way of academic excellence.

Postgraduate Officer: Postgraduate students have said they would like to have a dedicated building, as other universities such as Nottingham have. Are there any plans for this?

Keith Brown: There are already some designated spaces for postgraduate students. A single facility is not a high priority and is not likely to be. I have been told that most postgraduates would rather be closer to their own schools than to each other. There is a draft Postgraduate Strategy, part of which deals with what could be done with the Eden Court complex, etc. I am not rushing on this at the moment.

Work on the library has already been delayed several times after we have been given dates. Will work start on target in 2009?

Keith Brown: We are working towards a plan for the library. We cannot commit that it will start in June 2009 but that is the programme we have at the moment. There are still questions such as whether there will be a new wing on the existing library or whether people will be pushed into other spaces and final plans have not been agreed yet.

Derek Watson: We should have a plan within the next few months. The current plans are to build next to the existing library, but we need to make sure that that is the right place. We want to make sure we have the right plan before starting the work.

SRC Member for Third Year Students: Recently the onus has been on students for cost as the library switches to e-books, etc., but e-books it is difficult to read from a screen so many students print them and print costs are high. Are there any plans to cover these costs?

Derek Watson: Students do have a responsibility to buy books.

Association President: Would the University be prepared not to make a profit on printing?

Derek Watson: The cost of printing is not unreasonable.

SRC Member for International Students: What does the University plan to do in the next four years? For example, some Universities already have branches in other countries.

Keith Brown: We have no interest in expanding; the St Andrews experience is being here, and having other campuses means diluting your brand and losing control.

Will departmental libraries also be modernised?

Keith Brown: With investments in the Main Library we will have to question whether departmental libraries are necessary at all.

Member for Societies Grants: What features will you be looking for when recruiting the new Principal? Will Dr Lang have an official portrait painted?

Keith Brown: Neither of us is involved in the recruitment process. There will be a portrait.

Debates Officer: The work on University Hall was unsatisfactory. What will be done differently to ensure these problems do not occur with future building work?

Derek Watson: The work was not satisfactory from anyone's perspective. The biggest problem was that it was done in a rush, so we are trying to get ahead with the next renovations and leave more time to have them done. The contractor we used for University Hall will not be used again.

What was the cost of the work?

Derek Watson: £4 million was projected, the final cost will be around £4.7 million. We knew the cost would be high so we have not overspent.

SRC Member for Students with Special Needs: What plans are there to make the new library more pro-actively accessible to students with disabilities? At present special arrangements have to be made for these students, such as changing where their classes are held. There should be more e-books and better access to buildings. Students with disabilities should also have easy access to historical buildings as well as new buildings, and the university should fight to be allowed to make the necessary changes to historical buildings.

Derek Watson: The Government will not change the law regarding listed buildings. The University often has battles with Historic Scotland over changing historical buildings.

SRC Member for the Faculty of Science: What plans are there to make the University more open, transparent and accountable to students?

Keith Brown: None. The University is not accountable to the students; it is accountable to the University Court.

SRC Education Officer: One of the reasons for the problems fund-raising from alumni might be that alumni are not willing to donate because of the costs they incur when they graduate, such as gown rental and videos. The University could work harder to improve the experience of students as they leave.

Keith Brown: We can and we would like to. Give me ideas suggestions of how you think we could improve, although I do not promise to follow them all.

Societies Officer: What influence would student support for buying 100% green energy have?

Derek Watson: We have a quote on how much it would cost. However, ultimately we are trying to decrease energy consumption. If all of the University's energy is green, it could weaken the message we are trying to send to students to use less energy.

With regard to academic excellence, are there plans to recruit more professors so that first and second year students are not taught by postgraduate students?

Keith Brown: We are more heavily staffed than before and cannot take on any more. We ensure that lectures are given by professors. Sub-honours teaching, especially in Arts subjects, is sometimes done by postgraduate students, but these are still dynamic people. All students are taught by professors in third and fourth year. Staff have to balance teaching with research, and many would probably leave if they were forced to teach more hours.

SRC Accommodation Officer: There was a great lack of quality in the consultation over University Hall. How will the University's strategy change in the future?

Keith Brown: The second will be fairly rushed, but the third will be more complete and will give more opportunities for students to give their opinions. However, Wardlaw is a listed building so there will not be as many options as with DRA.

How do you rate the University's relationship with the Town Council?

Keith Brown: Good; better than it has been in the past. We are now not only listening but also telling them what the University wants to do. There is now more of a two-way, regular dialogue, which we will see the benefits of in the future.

Broadcasting Convenor: What can be done to encourage schools to embrace new technology? Not enough are using the technology that they have available.

Keith Brown: We ensure that the facilities are there, but we do not tell anyone how to teach. Students can complain about bad teaching, but many of the best and most memorable teachers use old-fashioned methods. Technology does not always improve education. We did offer money for digitalizing slides but ran into problems with copyright laws.

SRC Environment and Ethics Officer: If students vote in favour of 100% green electricity and the plans went ahead, where would the money come from? Would it be passed on to the students in any way?

Derek Watson: Green energy would not be a direct threat to services. The additional cost would be a pressure just as rising energy prices, etc., are a pressure, and would be dealt with without affecting services.

SRC Environment and Ethics Officer: If the University moves to 100% green energy, would plans for renewable energy production be put on hold?

Derek Watson: It would not be a deciding factor.

SRC Member for Sexualities and Gender: St Andrews was recently ranked in a student survey as the second best university in Europe for homosexual students. What is your opinion on this?

Keith Brown: It is a good thing and will probably attract more students.