

Minutes of the Business Committee Meeting held on Thursday 29 February 2024 at 5.15pm, in the Raeburn Room, Old College

Present

Dr William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council	
Sir Philip Mawer, Convener of the Business Committee	
Mr Gordon Cairns, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee	
Ms Alison MacLeary, Assistant Secretary of the General Council	
Mr Arron Ashton	Ms Kirsty MacGregor (online)
Professor Alice Brown	Professor Francis McManus
Ms Manya Buchan (online)	Dr Bruce Nelson
Lady Joyce Caplan	Professor Graeme Reid
Mr John Clifford	Mr Devin Scobie
Ms Ann Cormack	Ms Krystyna Szumelukowa
Ms Candice Donnelly	The Hon. Sarah Wolffe KC
Dr Frances Dow	
Ms Elisabeth Feldstein (online)	
Dr Mary Gunn	
Professor Stephen Hillier	

In Attendance Mr Simon Fanshawe, Incoming Rector of the University

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone to the first meeting of Semester 2.

Apologies - Douglas Alexander, Almira Delibegovic-Broome, Alistair Dunlop, Jock Millican and Brian Smith.

2. a. Minutes of the Meeting of 7 December 2023

The minutes were approved.

b. Matters Arising from the Minutes of the Meeting of 7 December 2023

- Item 3 – The Secretary and Convener will meet with Chris Cox and Rebecca Jones (D & A), and VP International Prof. James Smith on 21 March;
- Item 4.4 – Christina Boswell will speak to the BC meeting on 10 October 2024;
- Item 7 – The Secretary has not been given a definitive figure re how many continuing students were affected by the Marking and Assessment Boycott but expected that the number would be higher than anticipated;
- Professor Colm Harmon, VP Students, will speak to ASC in more detail about this topic at its meeting on 28 May.

3. a. Minutes of the extra-ordinary Meeting of 22 January 2024

The minutes were approved.

b. Matters arising from the Minutes of 22 January 2024

Item 2 – A substantive response from Court to the Business Committee’s comments on PA Consulting’s External Review on People and Money is expected after the Court meeting on 22 April. The Principal had spoken to this issue at the recent GC HYM on 17 February, which indicates its ongoing importance.

4. Observations by General Council Assessors

- The Convener gave a report on the open items from the Court meeting on 26 February, a note of which had been provided by Jock Millican who had attended the meeting.
- A demonstration organised by members of EUSA had greeted Court members as they made their way into the meeting (see Paper 10). The morning seminar was about progress being made with the Curriculum Transformation project, building on best practice already established within parts of the University and which is being rolled out more widely and consistently;
- Principal's Report
 - Highlighted the current pressure on finances across the university sector and made mention of the recent UUK report. Edinburgh is better placed to cope than most other universities;
 - People and Money had been addressed in various University communications and Town Hall staff meetings and the Principal had updated on various priorities for action arising from the external review. The Convener added that the letter sent to Court from the General Council Business Committee re lessons learned from the PA Consulting report will be presented to the 22 April Court meeting, along with a response from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), and a response will be received from Court thereafter.
 - A positive report from Development and Alumni including a £14.25m donation received for the Engineered Genetic Control Systems for Advanced Therapeutics Hub;
 - Artificial Intelligence (AI) remains a key area of substantial investment;
- Student Experience
 - There has been a concerted effort by SLT to deal with the issue of assessment and feedback. Heads of Schools have agreed a three-week turnaround to be implemented across all Schools and Colleges with data collection and spot checks to escalate this requirement when required;
 - An evaluation of the Student Support model has begun and, while reviews have been positive, there are areas for improvement. These are being developed by Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary, Students and will be rolled out across the University;
- EUSA letter to Court on Student Experience Concerns
 - The Convener drew particular attention to Paper 10, previously circulated, which was a letter from EUSA sent to the University Court, to highlight students' dissatisfaction with three key issues which are negatively impacting on student experience at Edinburgh; viz. the student housing crisis; the impact on students of the wider cost of living crisis; and gender-based violence on campus.
 - In relation to concerns about how gender-based violence incidents on campus were being handled, it was recalled that the Business Committee had previously recommended to Court there should be a comprehensive review of the Code of Student Conduct;
 - It was noted that the EUSA letter referred to a proposed 8% rent increase in 2024-25 for student accommodation and the appropriateness of this was queried;

ACTION – it was agreed to write to EUSA President explaining how the Business Committee and Standing Committee work programmes related to the issues of concern raised in the EUSA letter
- Ordinance 186
 - The Committee was pleased to hear that the proposed changes to Ordinance 186 about membership of the General Council had been approved by Court and these will now proceed to the next stage in seeking Privy Council approval;
 - The Secretary took the opportunity to thank The Hon. Sarah Wolffe KC for her support in co-authoring the paper sent to Court;
- Rector

At her final Court meeting, Debora Kayembe was warmly thanked for her contribution as Rector.

5. Reports from the Standing Committees

a. Academic Standing Committee

- SH reported on the meeting on 23 January with Professor Michael Rovatsos, School of Informatics, who spoke on the theme of AI;
- Highlighted that the University is internationally respected in this field and it is important to maintain this perception and to work with issues which are continually developing;
- There has been an exponential explosion of data/applications of AI and the ethical and social issues raised by it are not adequately explored at this time;
- The University is aware that it needs to provide greater guidance to staff and students around the governance/controls when using new applications of this technology;
- The Convener reminded the committee that this theme will be explored at the HYM on 15 June 2024.

b. Finance and Services Standing Committee

- In the absence of the FSSC Convener, PM referred to Paper 4, which was the minutes from the meeting on 30 January with the Director of Finance;
- The Principal had covered the University's Annual Report and Accounts to July 2023 during his presentation to the GC HYM on 17 February.

c. International Standing Committee

- KS reported on the meeting of 18 January (Paper 5) which was a closed meeting to review progress on the University's draft Global Strategy;
- Further consideration of the key issues from this meeting will be followed up with Chris Cox and James Smith on 21 March;
- Dr Rebecca Jones, Director of Alumni Relations, will also attend this meeting and was praised for her constructive, proactive and encouraging work to date;
- Highlighted Edinburgh Global initiatives such as the "Education Beyond Borders" scheme, supporting students and staff dealing with the consequences of displacement;
- Representatives from the Brussels Alumni Club, Gabriel Goldberg and Victor Loewenstein, had attended the recent February HYM and had persuaded the Principal to travel to Brussels to engage with their work across Europe;
- The final meeting of ISC in May will focus on developments in South East Asia.

d. Public Affairs Standing Committee

- CD spoke about the PASC meeting on 5 February with Chris Bruce, Managing Director of the Lane Agency, which had focused on General Council communications, in particular improvements to the format of Billet and ambitions for a new digital concept, which will need to be supported by the University.

Discussion

- AC raised the security implications surrounding the Exascale supercomputer which is to be hosted in Edinburgh;
- The Convener reminded the committee that the Principal is the lead member on the Russell Group Board for national and international security issues in higher education and, given the University follows elaborate risk assessment procedures within its own Audit and Risk Committee, is reasonably confident that appropriate arrangements to safeguard security concerns will be made;
- Acknowledged the significance of the point made by AC and will keep a watching brief on this issue;

- BN reported that issues of cybersecurity are currently being addressed by the SLT.

6. Process and timetable for election of Convener and Vice-Convener: Role and responsibilities of Convener

- Paper 7, circulated for information, outlined the process and timetable for the elections which had been approved at the BC meeting on 12 October;
- Paper 7a, contained some reflections from PM, WD and Ann Smyth, former Secretary of the GC, on the role and responsibilities of the Convener and is intended to be indicative and not prescriptive.

7. Comments and Reflections on February 2024 Half-Yearly Meeting

- The annual February HYM is an important and helpful opportunity for the Principal to convey to the GC membership any key messaging from the SLT;
- The committee agreed with an observation by the Secretary that basement rooms in McEwan Hall were not ideal for the HYM meeting and if the facilities in Edinburgh Futures Institute were more suitable these could be used for future meetings;
- It was not possible to provide livestream data because of the move to G4 analytics, which is not currently supported by the University;
- Gabriel Goldberg from the Brussels alumni group circulated a blog of his experience of the HYM to his networks via social media;
- It was agreed that allocating BC hosts to tables during lunch in the Playfair had worked well;
- The Convener thanked the after-lunch Speaker, Douglas Alexander, and Gordon Cairns who gave the Vote of Thanks, for their stimulating contributions which ended the meeting on a high note;
- The GC office was congratulated the excellent arrangements for an enjoyable event
- Members of the committee were encouraged to provide any other feedback to the Secretary.

8. Draft Resolutions of the University Court

Steve Hillier, Convener of ASC, had spoken to the following resolutions at the meeting of ASC on 23 January and which are being reported here for information. No further resolutions had been received.

Draft Resolutions: No. 1-2/2024

These had been received after the BC meeting on 7 December and were considered by the BC electronically. A letter had been sent to Court on 19 February approving these resolutions.

9. Report from the Secretary of the General Council

- Paper 8, previously circulated, was for information;
- WD drew attention to Paper 8a and asked members to note the dates of forthcoming Business Committee meetings in 2024/25 and 2025/26; these were agreed

ACTION – Secretary to notify newly elected members of the dates of future meetings

- The Committee recorded its thanks to Dr Lewis Allan, Senior Governance Adviser to the Vice-Principal and University Secretary, and The Hon. Sarah Wolffe KC, for their input into the report to Court with proposed changes to Ordinance 186.

10. Meeting Simon Fanshawe – next Rector

- Paper 9, previously circulated, was a copy of Simon Fanshawe's election manifesto;
- The Convener extended a warm welcome to the new Rector and led the introductions;

- The Rector iterated that, in his role as Chair of Court proceedings, he will spend time listening and gaining an understanding of the large and multi-faceted institution that is Edinburgh University;
- A central priority will be helping the University to open up the space for academics to express their views, using respectful dialogue to exchange ideas, and he will work with Court and the SLT to re-emphasise the importance of universities as a forum for international debate;
- The Rector has the power to convene discussions across the University, to allow staff and students to be able to speak their mind and express their views while listening respectfully to others;
- The General Council Business Committee can help to reinforce this key purpose and feedback to its own networks;
- The Rector's freelance background will allow him to assume various Court commitments and to pace his workload effectively.

The Convener thanked the new Rector and, on behalf of the Committee, wished him well in his role.

11. Any other competent business

There was no other competent business.

12. Date of next meeting

The next meeting would take place at 5.15pm on Thursday, 2 May 2024 in the Raeburn Room. Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member of the University Court, is expected to attend.