

Minutes of the Business Committee Meeting held on Thursday 10 October 2024 5.15pm in the Raeburn Room, Old College

Present

Mr Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee	
Dr Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee (online)	
Dr William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council	
Ms Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council	
Dr Nikhil Agarwal (online)	Professor John Gillies
Professor Richard Andrews	Ms Kirsty MacGregor
Mr Arron Ashton	Ms Tamara Raidt (online)
Dr Lucy Blackburn	Mr Alan Ross
Professor Alice Brown	Rt. Rev. Brian Smith
Ms Ann Cormack	Dr Dorothy Welch
Almira Delibegovic-Broome	Lady Sarah Wolffe (online)
Ms Candice Donnelly	
Alastair Dunlop	

In attendance Professor Christina Boswell, Vice-Principal Research and Enterprise

1. Welcome and Apologies

The incoming Convener of the Business Committee, Mr Gordon Cairns, welcomed all attendees to his inaugural meeting, particularly new members: Nikhil Agarwal, Richard Andrews and Max Browning (ISC); Lucy Blackburn and Alan Ross (FSSC); John Gillies, Judy Hardy and Dorothy Welch (ASC); and Tamara Raidt (PASC). Almira Delibegovic-Broome and Graeme Reid return to the committee for a further four-year term, and Bruce Nelson takes over as Vice-Convener.

Apologies had been received from Max Browning, Mary Gunn, Judy Hardy, Jock Millican, Graeme Reid and Devin Scobie.

The Convener introduced Professor Christina Boswell and invited her to speak to the committee about the University's Research and Innovation Strategy.

2. Presentation from Professor Christina Boswell, VP Research and Enterprise

CB began her presentation by referring members to prior circulated notes which gave an overview of the University's Research and Innovation Strategy, which is available to view on the University's website:

[Research and Innovation Strategy 2030 \(ed.ac.uk\)](https://www.ed.ac.uk/research-and-innovation-strategy-2030)

Rationale

- Since beginning her role in August 2022, CB had observed strategic gaps and the need for internal prioritisation, acknowledging existing key programmes like the data-driven innovation initiative (DDI) and various micro-strategies across Colleges, Schools and departments, and the need to introduce a mid-level strategy to prioritise resource investment, decision making and deliverability within the University's devolved organisational structure;
- Highlighted the success in securing funding following a strong performance in the 2021 Research Excellence Framework. This allowed strategic investment in research and

innovation, with the majority of the £27m top sliced over a 5-year period dedicated to awarding more Chancellor's Fellowships as a means to support emerging research leaders;

- Noted the necessity of having a clear external strategy visible on the University website and the benefits of a unified internal and external strategy framework, with ongoing adjustments in the communication of the strategy to external stakeholders and partners to ensure clarity of the University's priorities and initiatives.

Process

- Established fortnightly meetings with College Deans and Heads of Schools to maintain strategic alignment and co-ordination;
- Set up bespoke groups such as the Innovation Working Group co-chaired with Dr Catherine Martin, VP Corporate Services, and engaged in wider consultation across the University, with a focus on systemic support for impact and research culture;
- Described challenges in aligning diverse University activity within existing infrastructure.

Key Features

- Mission areas have three broad themes, which encompass the University's expertise and distinctive areas of excellence in research: Shaping the future of health and care; Tackling the climate and environmental crisis; Harnessing data, digital and AI for public good;
- Emphasis on maintaining a robust commitment to foundational, disciplinary and blue-sky research and also support for early career researchers across the disciplines, for example the Chancellor's Fellows.

Innovation

- Government and other funding bodies now place a strong emphasis on universities engaging with business and commercialization;
- Focus on innovation as a means to measure and enhance intellectual property impact and create financial returns from commercial and industrial partnerships; Innovation Development Scheme is supported by Edinburgh Innovations (EI);
- Innovation Engines – identifiable areas of research which are good investments;
- Aim to double to 400 the number of innovation-active academics and provide enhanced support for them – launch of a Capabilities Framework, developed by Kirsty Collinge, (Research and Enterprise), to outline skills across career stages and encourage recruitment into roles of reward-based activity;
- Updates to promotion criteria, and public recognition via a campaign to celebrate colleagues, to incentivize innovation-oriented academic roles, including creating a 3-year Innovation Fellowship scheme supported by Edinburgh Innovations.

Implementation

- Tracked through a detailed plan of priorities and actions involving various University departments and teams e.g., HR; Edinburgh Innovations; Edinburgh Global; Department for Social Responsibility and Sustainability;
- Developed a viable framework for assessing the impact and effectiveness of strategic initiatives through, for example, narrative and KPIs.

CB concluded her presentation by emphasising the importance of strategic investment in research and innovation amid current financial challenges and highlighted the need for ongoing assessment of strategy implementation to ensure alignment with the University's goals.

Discussion

- In response to a question from DW, CB said that a research culture action plan for PGR students is being developed to ensure supervisors are trained and equipped, with pathways in place to report challenges; support for issues regarding hardship and welfare overlap with provision already in place for UG students;
- NA and AC raised the issue of practical support for engaging with alumni hubs and groups and a strategy for leveraging alumni networks worldwide to support university initiatives, including student recruitment, and supporting entrepreneurial activities among graduates;
- CB touched on the University's phenomenal success in fostering student start-ups and although the University did not own the intellectual property in these would like to be able to encourage global expansion of these innovations, and highlighted the importance of maintaining dialogue with students, particularly when they move abroad after graduation;
- CB suggested a follow-up conversation with AC and the International Standing Committee on alumni engagement strategies also involving Chris Cox, VP Philanthropy, given Development and Alumni's role in this activity;
- AD-B asked about the distribution of innovation-active academic staff across the University, particularly looking for potential hotspots of research and development activities; CB replied certain areas like the Institute for Genetics and Cancer, Institute for Regeneration and Repair, Informatics, and Engineering were particularly innovation active, whereas they were less so in climate and environmental research fields;
- JG asked about the difficulty in assessing the long-term impact of research and cited the work of alumnus Geoffrey Hinton, who had just been awarded the Nobel Prize, as an example of long delayed recognition of impactful research; the discussion briefly touched upon the pressures on academics to produce immediate outputs versus the need to carry out long-term curiosity-driven research;
- AB raised concerns about inclusivity in the University's strategic planning, particularly in terms of how it aligns – or fails to align – with the research focus of staff from various disciplines; CB responded by saying that Discovery Research is the bedrock of University activity and further discussions are encouraged to continue fostering an inclusive environment that supports both applied and foundational research pursuits.

The Convener warmly thanked CB for an enthusiastic and informative presentation and she left the meeting.

3. Minutes of the Meeting of 27 June 2024

The committee approved the minutes

4. Matters arising from the Minutes of 27 June 2024

The Secretary reminded members that the Business Committee Christmas Reception would take place on Tuesday 10 December at 5.30pm in the Talbot Rice Gallery and invitations will be issued shortly from the General Council office.

5. Observations by General Council Assessors

- Sarah Wolffe said that an extra Court meeting had been held on 3 October to discuss responsible investment strategies and the following statement had just been released: [University Court Statement on Responsible Investment | The University of Edinburgh](#)
- An oral report of the open items from the Court meeting of 7 October 2024 (Paper 2) covered the following items:

- Strategic Priorities and Student Support Model: Senior leadership team presented their strategic priorities for the coming year, highlighting the continuing development and implementation of the student support model which aims to enhance student experience and address issues raised by the National Student Survey;
- International Issues: Despite Brexit, the University remains connected with European universities and continues to build research alliances in Europe and other global regions including Africa;
- Risk Assessment: Current risks including financial pressures and systemic underfunding of university places were discussed. Continue to engage in further discussions with the Government regarding funding;
- EUSA Report: An impressive and positive presentation was given by the EUSA President; the EUSA framework identifies important issues for students, for example, relating to housing and affordability issues. The discussion highlighted the importance of improving conditions to better meet student needs. Notable was the absence of past controversial topics e.g.; trans issues and occupation of the Old College Quad, with a focus instead on constructive approach and advocacy;
- Sport Union Report: highlighted accomplishments and challenges, particularly in terms of space constraints for indoor activities. The report conveyed a sense of pride in the University community's achievements at the Olympic and Paralympic levels;
- Committee Business: The Nominations Committee had agreed to proceed to fill the vacancy caused by Douglas Alexander's election as an MP and outlined the appointment schedule

6. Business Committee Work Plan for 2024-25

The Convener referred to paper 3, previously circulated, and noted the following:

- Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member of the University Court, will address the Business Committee meeting on 27 February 2025;
- There will not be invited speakers at other scheduled BC meetings to allow adequate time for members to discuss issues arising from Standing Committee meetings;
- Simon Fanshawe, University Rector, is the invited guest speaker at the lunch after the February 2025 HYM;
- The statutory HYM on Saturday 14 June 2025 will be held in the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute, and a separate "showcasing" event for General Council members is being arranged, in conjunction with the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, at the Usher Institute on a weekday during May/June;
- Members are encouraged to attend General Council meetings and events in-person where possible.

7. Standing Committees' Work Plans for 2024-25

Paper 4, previously circulated, gave information about SC membership and dates of meetings.

- Conveners who were present at the meeting discussed respective areas of responsibility for the coming session;
- Alice Brown, Convener of PASC, highlighted primary focus areas i.e.:
 - Developing a robust communications strategy - considerations around the publication of Billet and future GC events;
 - Planned meeting with Chris Cox, Director of Development and Alumni, to discuss enhancing collaboration and alignment with University-wide activities to avoid duplication of efforts;
 - Engagement with General Council members and the wider community – proposed a survey of alumni resident in Edinburgh to see if more can be done in the local area;

- Revisiting “Town and Gown” relationship with local Council leaders;
- Finance and Services Standing Committee, chaired by Almira Delibegovic-Broome, discussed the committee’s schedule, with ongoing dialogue with the Directors of HR and Finance and a final meeting which will cover either Estates or Cybersecurity;
- Ann Cormack, Convener of the International Standing Committee, outlined potential aims for the year which centred on:
 - Bolstering the role of international alumni in supporting university initiatives, and pointed out the positive influence of the BC as ambassadors for the University;
 - Enhancing the University’s global reputation through strategic alumni engagement while also addressing staff and student satisfaction;
- Candice Donnelly, Convener of the Constitutional Standing Committee, explained that the focus of the committee is to review the internal workings of the General Council and address, for example, the implications of changing international representation and operational challenges such as the quorum for meetings. Recognition of the need for better attendance and explore proxy options for committee members unable to attend;
- Emphasized the necessity for cross-committee collaboration to maximise resource and avoid burdening staff;
- Addressed the importance of adapting to flexible meeting formats to accommodate members’ varying schedules including online participation;
- Gordon Cairns invited each committee convener to refine their focus areas at planning meetings with their committees and prepare for detailed discussions in subsequent formal committee meetings.

8. Draft Resolutions of the University Court

None received.

9. Report from the Secretary of the General Council

Paper 5 had been circulated previously for information. The Secretary highlighted the following:

- The advert for the vacant General Council Court Assessor position will appear in late October with a closing date of 2 December and interviews by the joint Court/ Business Committee Selection Panel will be on 13 January, with its recommendation subject to approval by the Nominations Committee of Court;
- The Secretary will let all General Council members know about the advert shortly after it appears and to further encourage a strong field of candidates asked committee members to alert those who might be suitable know about the vacancy;
- The Secretary expressed gratitude to the Nominations Committee for accelerating the timetable for this appointment, and added that Sarah Wolffe, General Council Court Assessor and member of the Nominations Committee, will represent the General Council on the selection panel along with the Convener and Secretary as neither will be applicants for the role;
- The Secretary took the opportunity to record thanks to the members of the Working Group set up to draft a response to the consultation on the University’s responsible investment policy and which had been approved by the Business Committee prior to submission on 30 September
- The Secretary asked members of the Business Committee able to represent the General Council at the winter graduation ceremonies in November to indicate their availability by completing the form - <https://forms.office.com/e/ERY1BEjpMu>

10. Report on the Meeting of the General Councils of the “Ancient” universities

- Paper 6, circulated previously for information, noted the main difference between the University of Edinburgh General Council and the other “Ancient” General Councils was the level of support provided by the University,
- The next meeting will be held at Glasgow University in 2025.

11. Any other competent business

None.

12. Date of next meeting – 5 December 2024

The next meeting will take place on Thursday 5 December 2024 at 5.15pm in the Raeburn Room.