

## Minutes of the Business Committee Meeting held on Thursday 5 December 2024 at 5.15pm in the Raeburn Room, Old College

**Present**

Dr William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council	
Ms Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council	
Mr Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee	
Dr Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee	
Professor Richard Andrews (online)	Ms Kirsty MacGregor (online)
Dr Lucy Blackburn	Mr Jock Millican
Professor Alice Brown	Professor Graeme Reid
Ms Ann Cormack	Mr Alan Ross (online)
Mrs Almira Delibegovic-Broome	Rt. Rev. Brian Smith
Alistair Dunlop KC	Dr Dorothy Welch
Professor John Gillies (online)	
Professor Judy Hardy	

### 1. Welcome and Apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone to the final meeting of semester one and noted apologies from Arron Ashton, Manya Buchan, Candice Donnelly, Devin Scobie and Tamara Raidt.

### 2. a. Minutes of the Meeting of 10 October 2024

The minutes were approved.

### b. Matters arising from the Minutes of 10 October 2024

None.

### 3. Observations by General Council Assessors

The agenda for the Court meeting having been previously circulated, the Convener invited Jock Millican to report on the open items from the Court meeting on 2 December 2024:

- Item 3 - The Principal's Report
  - The recent communication from the Principal to University staff regarding cost-cutting measures and voluntary redundancies was discussed. Feedback indicated the communication had not been well received and there was a need for greater clarity and explanation from the senior leadership team at meetings being arranged with staff;
  - Discussions on procurement noted successes in streamlining and cost savings across the University and that this was now possible because of the better information provided on purchases by the People and Money system;
  - The Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI) had been awarded various prizes including a Prix de Versailles award;
- Item 4 – Committee Business
  - Douglas Millican had been reappointed as the Convener of the Audit and Risk Committee;
  - Good progress was being made on the recruitment of a new General Council Court Assessor, with interviews in January so that the person appointed can attend the next Court meeting in February;
  - The role of Senate could be better explained and they are in the process of having an effectiveness review;

- Item 5 - Finance
  - There was significant concern about the financial impact of the increase in employer national insurance contributions resulting in an additional £24m next year and this exceeding the extra tuition fee income paid for rest of UK students at the university;
  - External auditors are finalising their work on University's Annual Report and Accounts to July 2024 and these will be available in January. The interpretation difficulties arising from financial reporting in accordance with accounting standards and the misleading impression given by the overall surplus having to include significant non-cash changes were highlighted, with the pension funds showing an increase of £350m;
- Item 10 - Responsible Investment Policy

Court considered an analysis of the responses to the consultation on investment strategy which included a submission from the Business Committee that was well received, and a comprehensive report is due out early in the new year:
- Item 11 – Student Experience Update
  - The paper by Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary Students, highlighted positive feedback from recent implementation of a range of activities designed to support students but noted ongoing issues with inconsistent assessment and feedback across different Schools. Efforts to improve this were acknowledged as challenging but necessary; also reported issues with timetabling which are being corrected, and Curriculum Transformation has been pushed forward slightly;
- Item 12 – Students' Association and Sports Union Reports
  - Issues were raised regarding challenges faced by sabbatical officers interacting with the Student Council, with instances of proposals being rejected multiple times. This points to underlying tension and potential governance issues within student leadership structures;
  - JM suggested asking the EUSA President for a copy of the section in the EUSA report which describes the student representative structures, which could then be circulated to the BC;
  - The Sports union reported record levels of participation with the need for some sports clubs having to limit membership due to challenges with sports facilities capacities;
- Item 13 – Annual Court Effectiveness Review
  - The annual internal report on the effectiveness of Court was generally positive with suggestions for improvements in the level of preparatory documentation and responsibilities;
- Item 14 – Health and Safety Annual Report
  - The current status of health and safety measures at the University was reviewed, noting a better than average accident rate compared to the sector (i.e., 38/1000 cf. 63/1000).

## **Discussion**

- In response to a question raised by AC, JM said that action points are highlighted in the Court minutes and followed up for the next meeting;
- WD reported that at the closing date 19 applications had been received for the General Council Court Assessor vacancy (6 were from women) and the importance of the person appointed regularly attending Business Committee meetings as well as Court meetings was emphasised;
- Noted historic low participation in student elections;
- Members expressed concern that the letter to staff from the Principal regarding the financial prospects of the University had adversely affected staff morale and had also attracted negative media coverage which was not subsequently dealt with effectively;
- There was recognition of the need for continued improvement in both internal and external communications to better present the University's many positive activities and respond to concerns, with the emphasis on being proactive rather than reactive in communications;

The Convener thanked JM for his report.

#### 4. Topics for consideration arising from the Standing Committee meetings

SC Conveners gave a short summary of the key issues from each of their meetings in Semester One (Papers 3-6):

##### Main points from the discussion

- **AD-B reported on the meeting of the Finance and Services Standing Committee (FSSC) on 4 November with Director of HR, James Saville.** The key points discussed were:
  - a. the potential link between staff and student satisfaction and the difficulties in creating a sense of belonging within the University; noted this topic was also discussed at the meeting of the Academic Standing Committee (ASC) on 19 November as part of the EUSA President's presentation;
  - b. AD reported that the University's ratio of 12 students per staff member compared favorably with many other universities which had 20 or 30 students per staff member and that it did not seem that student-staff ratios were the cause of the student dissatisfaction. GR commented that such comparative statistics can be misleading because there is insufficient clarity over how the number of staff who deal directly with students are calculated or reported within each institution;
  - c. University management's aim of reducing staff costs through a tightening of replacement recruitment. This led to discussions about its potential impacts, particularly in relation to international student recruitment, which is a significant income source for the University; noted this issue links to the work of the International Standing Committee (ISC) and raises whether there is more that members of the General Council could do internationally as 'ambassadors' to promote the University;
  - d. there was a generally positive assessment of the University's financial position, including positive re-evaluations of USS and local SBS pension schemes and a successful narrowing of the gender pay gap as a result of the pay grade scale review;
  - e. given the positive tone of the meeting with the HR Director, there was surprise at the subsequent communication from the Principal to staff indicating the need for voluntary redundancies. This had caused considerable concern among staff and the apparent lack of preparation before issuing this communication was criticised. LB suggested that the Principal should be made aware of the concerns of the Business Committee about how this issue was being handled and to emphasise the need for future communications to avoid causing undue alarm or reputational damage; WD expected that questions regarding the University's current financial challenges will be raised with the Principal during the February HYM;
  
- **GR reported on the recent meeting of Academic Standing Committee on 19 November with Dora Herndon, EUSA President.** The key points discussed were:
  - a. the student experience initiatives led by the sabbatical officers. He expressed concern that the project places too many responsibilities on the University while neglecting to involve students sufficiently in shaping their own experiences, particularly in managing their expectations. Given the project's lack of concrete actions and the short tenure of sabbatical officers, he doubted that significant achievements will be made;
  - b. ongoing University initiatives that aim to enhance student experience. Concern was expressed about how these are managed within existing governance structures;
  - c. the need for more balanced responsibilities and better cooperation between students and the University administration to foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment;

- d. Relations between the Students' Association and the Rector are strained and concerns were voiced about a perceived disengagement process directed at the Rector; WD commented that the Rector will be the guest speaker at the Half-Yearly Lunch in February and suggested the EUSA office bearers who attend Court meetings be invited, highlighting the need for a cautious approach by the Business Committee given the sensitivities on both sides;
  - e. Future online meetings have been arranged to revisit the topic of student experience, with Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary Students, and Professor Colm Harmon, VP Students, who will update on the Curriculum Transformation Project (CTP); all members of the Business Committee will be invited to listen to the presentations and take part in the discussions;
- **AC reported on the initial meeting of International Standing Committee on 15 October** and said that the primary aim for this academic year is to strengthen links with alumni associations worldwide to enhance the University's international presence and influence;
  - Specific goals include using these links to aid in recruiting international students, supporting these students as they transition back to their home countries, and engaging them in fundraising efforts in a way that feels localised and respectful rather than imposing;
  - Acknowledged the challenges in achieving these ambitious goals within a single year, the initial focus will be on building relationships and setting a strategic direction;
  - Recognised that disaffected students who have had below expectation experiences at the University represent a significant concern and this issue cuts across the work of the other standing committees;
  - ISC intends to work collaboratively with Development and Alumni (D & A) to activate alumni networks effectively and a future meeting with Chris Cox, VP Philanthropy and Executive Director of D & A will be arranged. Noted that this would take place in the next academic session as CC is due to present to PASC at its meeting in May 2025, where the concentration on maintaining a unified approach to international relations and alumni support is combined with local community engagement;
  - In the absence of Professor James Smith, former VP international, AC will meet with the Provost Kim Graham, and Professor Christina Boswell, VP Research and Enterprise, who had previously given a valuable presentation to the Business Committee on research positioning and impact, which is aligned with ISC's objectives;
  - AC encouraged broader participation in ISC meetings, highlighting an open invitation to all BC members to engage with upcoming meetings and discussions;
- **AB gave an update since the initial meeting of the Public Affairs Standing Committee (PASC) held on 22 October which had focused on developing a work plan for the coming academic session** and progression of the committee's goals;
  - Improving General Council communications includes a proposed new direction for Billet and noted that the winter 2025 edition has been produced and is due to be circulated shortly;
  - Announced the date for a planned event to showcase the work of the Usher Institute on 22 May 2025;
  - Engaging General Council members and supporting University outreach into the wider community is a priority and will involve strategic discussions with Chris Cox and the alumni relations team to enhance alumni involvement both locally (via PASC) and internationally (via ISC);
  - Proposals for direct engagement with local politicians, includes a notable event with John Swinney, a prominent alumnus and First Minister, to discuss town-gown relations, with participation from the Rector;

- The next meeting of PASC will take place online in April 2025 with Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact, and members of the wider Business Committee are encouraged to attend to provide feedback and input into the next iteration of the University's Community Plan (2025-2030);
- Discussion reflected an overarching consensus on the importance of a cohesive strategy concerning communication, alumni relations, and external engagement, covering areas of key interest to the Business Committee such as issues concerning student satisfaction, student housing and wellbeing, media coverage and the University's reputation;
- The necessity for a supportive and cooperative relationship with Development and Alumni was underlined.

## 5. General Council Billet

- Paper 7, had been circulated previously and discussion included the following:
- WD reported that the head of Communications and Marketing (CAM), Theresa Merrick, had agreed that CAM would design Summer 2025 Billet as this will avoid the onerous procurement process involved in outsourcing the design and allow the savings to be used to improve other communications with General Council members;
- There is a desire to reduce costs associated with the printing and distribution of Billet and the long-term aim is to phase out sending paper copies but, meanwhile, a letter would be inserted into the c. 750 posted copies of Winter Billet to ask those who wish to continue to receive paper copies to confirm this by returning the form provided. It is hoped this will reduce significantly the number who opt into receiving paper copies and the savings from reduced print costs and in-house production could be used for other General Council activities;
- RA suggested reducing the frequency of printed issues to annually but the clear preference is to reduce a reliance on print materials, shifting towards more sustainable and engaging digital formats;
- The current print design was described positively, but around 99% of recipients receive Billet by email; Concerns were raised about low engagement levels with only 2% of members opening the emailed PDF version of Billet;
- Future efforts will focus on designing an engaging digital format which can be easily updated and accessible from the General Council website;
- Discussions were also held about the usability of the General Council website with suggestions to improve sections for marketing to alumni and the wider community in order to maintain a dynamic and engaging digital presence to connect effectively with alumni and other stakeholders.

## 6. Report from the Secretary of the General Council

- Paper 8, previously circulated contained the following information:

### **Election to Business Committee**

There are 13 candidates for the 6 places on the Business Committee next academic year. Details of the candidates are on the General Council website [List of Nominees for 2025 Elections | The General Council](#) Information about the Candidates (but not their statements) will also appear in Winter Billet

The outcome will be decided by election, held in accordance with the Protocol for General Council elections [Microsoft Word - Document1](#). The ballot papers will be issued by Civica on 9 January with a closing date of 11 February so that the results can be announced at the Half Yearly Meeting on 15 February 2025.

## **General Council Assessor to the University Court**

Initially, there had been a moderate response and as a result, the University Secretary decided to extend the closing date for applications to Wednesday 4 December. Those to be called for interview will be decided by the joint Selection Panel on Monday 9 December and interviews will be held on 13 January. Final approval of the appointment will be made by the Nominations Committee of Court, but it is expected that the new Assessor will be in post and able to attend the Court and Business Committee meetings in February.

## **Resolutions from Court**

- No. 99/2024: Foundation of a Personal Chair of AI, Memory and War
- No. 100/2024: Foundation of a Personal Chair of Educational Change and Diversity

The above Draft Resolutions were considered by the Business Committee and approved by correspondence.

## **Christmas reception**

This will be held in the Talbot Rice Gallery on the evening of Tuesday 10 December beginning at 5.30pm. There has been an excellent response to the invitations with over 100 acceptances. The Principal is expected to arrive at 6pm and following a welcome from the Convener, he will address those present. Thereafter Christmas carols will be sung by the University Chamber Choir.

## **7. Any other competent business**

The following open Standing Committee meetings have been arranged for Semester Two. These will take place online via Teams at 4.30pm\*

### Academic Standing Committee

- Thursday 20 March 2025 at 4.30pm with Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary, Students on progress concerning issues around housing, student welfare and financial support;
- Thursday 5 June 2025 at 4.30pm with Professor Colm Harmon, VP Students to update on the Curriculum Transformation Project and student satisfaction scores;

### International Standing Committee

- Monday 31 March 2025 at \*5pm with Professor Kim Graham, Provost, to update on the Global Strategy;

### Public Affairs Standing Committee

- Tuesday 8 April at 4.30pm with Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact, on the University's Community Plan Refresh 2025-2030;
- Monday 26 May at 4.30pm with Chris Cox, VP Philanthropy and Advancement and Executive Director of Development and Alumni, about the development of a strategy to encourage greater engagement between alumni and their university and its General Council.

### **Action:-**

***Outlook diary invitations have been circulated to the Business Committee who are asked to respond.***

## **8. Date of the next meeting**

The next meeting would take place at 5.15pm on Thursday, 27 February 2025 in the Raeburn Room.