



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH  
The General Council

# Billet Summer 2025



# welcome

## Welcome to Billet summer 2025

The General Council provides graduates with a continuing voice in the management of the University's affairs, and every graduate automatically becomes a member. Academic staff and members of the University's governing body, the University Court, are also members of the General Council. It meets twice a year and has the right to comment on matters affecting the University's prosperity and wellbeing. For more information on the work of the General Council, visit [\*\*\*The General Council | The General Council \(ed.ac.uk\)\*\*\*](#)

# Contents

**07** The General Council  
Half Yearly Meeting

**09** Report by the Convener of  
the Business Committee

**13** Membership of  
the General Council

**14** Papers for the General  
Council Half-Yearly Meeting

# General Council Meeting

## The General Council Half Yearly Meeting

Saturday 14 June 2025

The next statutory half-yearly meeting of the General Council will be held in the Conference Room, The Edinburgh Climate Change Institute (ECCI), Infirmary Street, Edinburgh, beginning at 10.30am on Saturday 14 June 2025. Tea and coffee will be available from 10am.

General Council Business Meetings are open to all General Council Members and are free to attend.

There is no need for prior registration but members will be asked to sign the General Council Register on the day.

For those unable to attend in person, please note that the meeting will be livestreamed and recorded for viewing on the General Council website:  
**[www.general-council.ed.ac.uk](http://www.general-council.ed.ac.uk)**



# Convenor Report



## Report by Mr Gordon Cairns

### Convenor of the Business Committee of the General Council.

I hope this report finds fellow members of the General Council as well as is possible in the circumstances in which we currently live and work in this ever-changing world.

Our University is inevitably affected and I am acutely aware that its financial wellbeing is a matter of great concern at the present time particularly for the staff and students as the University Court grapples with the challenge of increasing costs of running the University against a background of proportionately decreasing income.

At the Council's Half Yearly Meeting in February, the Principal delivered his annual report. Sir Peter spoke passionately about the many positive achievements of the previous year, despite the currently unsustainable funding situation that all universities in the UK are having to operate in, while recognising with compassion the concerns and anxiety faced by staff and students alike.

[www.general-council.ed.ac.uk/half-yearly-meetings/past-meeting](http://www.general-council.ed.ac.uk/half-yearly-meetings/past-meeting)

Our University is not immune from these financial challenges. While currently producing an operating surplus unlike several other prominent universities, to avoid the University going into an operating deficit in future years, the Court has since approved plans to reduce operating costs by about 10% (£140m) over the next 18 months.

Whilst not all will necessarily agree with the pre-emptive action proposed to minimise the financial threats ahead, there is open debate and consultation with all key stakeholders including, most importantly the elected representatives of the staff and students.

Also, the Business Committee is continuing to closely monitor the progress and implementation of change and where appropriate act as ambassadors for the University whilst recognising the need to support the staff during this period of inevitable change.

Our first opportunity to do so was when the Business Committee was delighted to welcome the Senior Lay Member of Court, Janet Legrand, to its meeting on 27 February.

Janet's comprehensive presentation and the subsequent discussion covered a range of topics including, the current financial situation and actions being taken to avoid the University going into deficit, the lessons learned particularly in relation to change management following the implementation of the people and money system, and the reaction to recent internal communications from the Principal.

There was more detailed examination of the financial situation when the **Finance and Services Standing Committee (FSSC)**, led by Almira Delibegovic-Broome KC, met with the interim Director of Finance, Nirmal Borkhataria, on 4 March.



The discussion covered a range of issues including, the University's historic financial performance, the difference between EBITDA and operating surplus, the projected EBITDA figures for future years, the planned reduction in operating costs, the importance of maintaining adequate cash balances and the challenges faced generally by the UK universities sector.

At its February meeting, Business Committee was pleased to have an update on the Race Review by Chris Cox, Vice-Principal Philanthropy and Executive Director of Development and Alumni. Our Secretary, William Duncan, and I met him in March to discuss consultation with the General Council on the Race Review report, expected to be published in the coming months, given the impact it may have on the reputation of the University. We also discussed ways of improving General Council communications with alumni which is a key focus of our **Public Affairs Standing Committee (PASC)** led by Alice Brown. This will be followed up when Chris Cox meets PASC on 26 May.

A major task has been the production of this edition of Summer Billet 2025 which, this year, has been produced wholly in house. Over 99% of members receive Billet electronically, but those members who specifically requested to continue to be sent paper copies will still receive them in this format.

To improve our links with the community and our 'Town and Gown' relationship, members of PASC met with the leader of Edinburgh City Council, Cllr Jane Meagher on 3 April.

To raise awareness of the role of the General Council and the Business Committee, short professionally produced videos are being commissioned and will be available on the General Council website in the summer.

Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact, Social Responsibility and Sustainability, gave a presentation to PASC on 8 April about the University's Community Plan Refresh 2025-2030 as she was keen to receive feedback to assist the next iteration of the Plan before it is launched in the autumn.

PASC also has oversight responsibility for the 'showcasing event' at the Usher Institute at Little France Road, Edinburgh on Thursday, 22 May. This is already very well subscribed and any members wishing to attend should register as soon as possible via the General Council website

[www.general-council.ed.ac.uk/news/general-council-usher-institute-showcase-event](http://www.general-council.ed.ac.uk/news/general-council-usher-institute-showcase-event)

The **International Standing Committee (ISC)**, led by Ann Cormack, met the Provost, Professor Kim Graham, on 31 March. She explained that the implementation plan for the global strategy will focus on enabling the development of research and innovation, teaching and learning, and the civic mission of the University. With the need to reduce expenditure, for the time being the responsibilities of the Vice Principal (International) are being embedded across the senior executive team.

The new Global Partnership Group, chaired by the Provost, will ensure new and existing strategic partnerships have clearly identified outcomes and benefits for the University, before releasing investment. From a history of bi-lateral partnerships, the University is looking to establish multi-lateral partnerships, involving several universities working together.

Some positive messages included international student recruitment. Numbers have held up for the University, though are less than originally budgeted for, given increasing competition for a declining number of students

wanting to come to the UK. Against a tumultuous external environment, the five-year financial plan is being revised to ensure Edinburgh retains its market share.

The **Academic Standing Committee (ASC)**, led by Professor Graeme Reid, met on 15 April with Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary Students to explore a range of issues affecting the student experience and the University's approach to dealing with these. Of particular interest was students' concerns over the cost and availability of accommodation in Edinburgh, the impact of the necessary savings in University expenditure, and the associated impact on staff morale in very challenging circumstances.

This report only covers the Standing Committee meetings that have taken place this semester, but more are in prospect and will also be covered in the oral reports to the Half Yearly Meeting in June.

The challenges we face as a General Council are many, but our main focus at the current time is to be ambassadors for the University within our own spheres of influence and emphasising the need for support and morale boosting amongst the staff and stakeholders of the University during this turbulent period.

We must strive to maintain the excellent standing of our Alma Mater as the 5th best university in the UK and 29th in the world. I am confident that this can be achieved with hard work and goodwill on all sides. I look forward to meeting with those of you who can attend our Half Yearly Meeting in June, if not before at the Usher Institute.

# General Council Ordinance



## Membership of the General Council

**Dr William Duncan, Secretary to the General Council.**

In February, the Privy Council approved a new Ordinance (No. 217) that widens the eligibility for membership of the General Council at the University of Edinburgh, on the basis previously agreed by the University Court following the representations made by the General Council.

The main changes, when this Ordinance comes into effect, will be to extend eligibility to:

- All University graduates
- All University staff at Grade 8 and above (not only those with the job titles Lecturer, Reader or Professor.)

Updating the criteria of membership to include these categories has been a priority for some years. The Business Committee is keen to ensure the General Council represents graduates of all modern courses

and that we and the University benefit from the valued contributions these graduates and experienced staff can make. We now have an inclusive membership Ordinance consistent with the University's contemporary values and practices.

There will be no change in the position of current members; the changes will be to extend eligibility, not curtail it.

The new Ordinance will allow an additional 23,900 graduate alumni to become General Council members – an increase of 8% - raising the overall membership to 322,300. Not all alumni will, however, become members of the General Council. There will be almost 53,000 alumni whose qualifications do not involve graduation and, as a result, will not be eligible for General Council membership.

By far the largest new intake to General Council membership will be existing graduates with qualifications such as, PGD, PGDE, PGC, CERT(HE), DIP(HE). They will also be fairly straightforward to incorporate into the General Council Register as their details are already held in the alumni database managed by Development and Alumni.

There will be about an additional 1000 staff eligible on a grade basis for General Council membership, but some will already be members by virtue of a relevant graduate qualification from the University.

The Ordinance allows the University Court to determine the implementation date.

# Papers for the General Council Half-Yearly Meeting

## Saturday 14 June 2025

Conference Room, Edinburgh Climate Change Institute (ECCI), Infirmary Street, Edinburgh

10 – 10.30am

Coffee, tea and biscuits

10.30am

General Council Meeting in the Conference Room, ECCI

The meeting can be viewed live online at:  
**The General Council | The General Council**  
**(ed.ac.uk)**

### Agenda for the General Council statutory business meeting

1. Minutes of the Meeting of the General Council held in the McEwan Hall on 15 February 2025 (Paper A)
2. Matters arising
3. Report of the Business Committee
4. Dates of future meetings of the General Council and Notice of forthcoming Elections
5. Any other competent business
6. Adjournment

### Paper A

Minutes of the Meeting of the General Council held in Edinburgh on 15 February 2025.

#### Present:

Mr Simon Fanshawe	University Rector, in the Chair
Ms Leigh Chalmers	University Secretary
Professor Sir Peter Mathieson	Principal and Vice-Chancellor
Dr William Duncan	Secretary of the General Council
Mr Gordon Cairns	Convener of the Business Committee
Rev Dr Harriet Harris	Chaplain to the University

95 Members present (plus those attending online)

#### 1. Results of the Elections for seven Members of the General Council Business Committee

The Secretary announced that the seven members of the Business Committee elected to serve for a period of four years from 1 August 2025 to 31 July 2029 were: Dr Matthew Epton, Professor Judy Hardy, Miss Kirsteen MacGregor, Dr Katherine Richards, Mr Devin Scobie, Dr Dorothy Welch and Mrs Jessica Williamson.

#### 2. Minutes of the Meeting of the General Council held in the Edinburgh Futures Institute Saturday 15 June, 2024

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 15 June 2024 were approved.

#### 3. Matters arising

The Chair reported that there were no matters arising from the Minutes.

#### 4. Report of the Business Committee

Gordon Cairns introduced his first report as Convener of the Business Committee by welcoming the attendees and expressed gratitude to the Rector, Simon Fanshawe, for chairing the meeting. He went on to mention the talk by the Rector on “Argument, taking offence and academic freedom”, highlighting its relevance in the current academic climate. He explained the Convener’s report was a prelude to a more detailed presentation from the Principal, Sir Peter Mathieson, noting some of the University’s achievements and emphasising the need to maintain optimism despite significant challenges faced by higher education institutions at the current time.

The Convener gave a short summary of the key issues arising from the meetings of the various Standing Committees during Semester One:

The Academic Standing Committee, chaired by Professor Graeme Reid, focused on the student experience initiatives under EUSA President, Dora Herndon, tackling University navigation, expectation accuracy, student welfare and stronger community identity. The framework urges better cooperation between students and the University administration to improve the education environment. He noted the challenges due to the brief tenure of sabbatical officers.



The International Standing Committee, led by Ann Cormack, is working on extending the University’s global influence through alumni engagement and collaboration with Development and Alumni, with upcoming strategies and initiatives in discussion with Chris Cox, Vice-Principal Philanthropy.

Professor Alice Brown leads the Public Affairs Standing Committee, which is tasked with developing communication strategies to engage more effectively with General Council members, with plans to improve digital engagement and enhancing member events, such as that taking place in May to showcase the work of the Usher Institute.

Almira Delibegovic-Broome KC convenes the Finance and Services Standing Committee, which acknowledges efforts to address the University’s financial challenges, including discussions around responsible investment policies and recent concerns about staff redundancies.

Gordon also reported on the recent approval by the Privy Council of a new University Ordinance increasing membership eligibility of the General Council, and the appointment of a new General Council Assessor, David Ovens.

The Convener ended his report by congratulating newly-elected and re-elected members joining the Business Committee in August and reaffirmed the Business Committee’s role as critical supporters and ambassadors of the University. He concluded with appreciation for the ongoing dialogue enabled by participation from senior colleagues in continued engagement and advocacy for the University.

The report of the Business Committee was approved.

Reports from the Standing Committee meetings are available to view on the General Council website:

***Standing Committees | The General Council***

**5. Dates of future meetings of the General Council and Notice of forthcoming elections**

The next Half-Yearly Meeting will take place on Saturday 14 June 2025 in the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute. Any Motions for discussion at this meeting should be received in the General Council Office by Wednesday 26 March 2025.

The following Statutory Half-Yearly Meeting will be held on Saturday 14 February 2026 in the Edinburgh Futures Institute. Any motions for discussion at this meeting should be received in the General Council Office by Wednesday 19 November 2025.

There will be elections for four Members of the Business Committee in February 2026. Nominations on forms available from the General Council Office and on the website should be received in the General Council Office by Wednesday 19 November 2025.

**6. Presentation by Professor Sir Peter Mathieson, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, of the Annual Report to the University**

The Principal’s 8th annual report to the General Council provided a comprehensive review of the University’s current status and challenges, primarily focusing on its current financial situation, strategic goals and areas for improvement.

Sir Peter highlighted the financial instability and sustainability challenges facing the UK higher education sector, emphasising the sector’s historical and structural vulnerabilities made worse by static tuition fee income, ongoing inflation, rising utility costs, and supply chain issues post-COVID. Additionally, policy changes surrounding international student visas and geopolitical factors, such as currency crises in countries like Nigeria, have exacerbated these issues by reducing the attractiveness of the UK as an education destination, leading to a significant drop in international student numbers coming to the UK. This shift is critical as international student fees have become essential in subsidising underfunded domestic education and

research activities. The University of Edinburgh is comparatively better off than many other universities, but is not immune from the pressures facing the HE sector and, as a result, has implemented measures such as, recruitment constraint and critical post evaluations to manage operational costs while preparing for measures to try to avoid potential future operating deficits.

The Principal discussed the current size and dynamics of the University’s student population, highlighting that the institution is approaching 50,000 students, with over half enrolled in arts, humanities and social sciences. The demographic breakdown reveals 27% of students are from Scotland, 24% from the rest of the UK, 8% from the EU (post-Brexit treated as international students), and 41% other international students.

The University faces challenges with funding, as all Scottish students require financial cross-subsidy. The student body predominantly consists of undergraduates, constituting 60% of the total student population. Despite an overall reduction in applicants since 2022, the University remains selective, with strong applicant interest, especially from international students who significantly aid in financial cross-subsidisation.

Efforts in “size and shape” planning post-pandemic aim to realign the University’s strategy for 2030, focusing on diversifying international student sources beyond China, increasing scholarships, and expanding into online education. However, there remain gaps between targeted and actual enrolments and financial projections, signalling ongoing challenges in reaching strategic goals amidst a volatile international student market.

Sir Peter reviewed the progress on “Strategy 2030” detailing their achievements through 16 key performance indicators (KPIs). There was successful progress on 8 of the KPIs, moderate success on 5 others and only one red flag, specifically around the

failure to meet net zero targets due to increased emissions post-pandemic, contrary to expectations that remote work and less travel would continue.

The University has made strides in widening participation, emphasising support for disadvantaged students both domestically and internationally through substantial financial aid packages. Despite some struggles with recruiting disadvantaged international students, efforts such as scholarships continue to be a focal point.

In terms of research, the University boasts significant accomplishments, generating an impressive £11 million per day in research income, and has exceeded its three-year average award total, demonstrating robust health and productivity in its research endeavours.

Furthermore, the presentation touched on the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal, a 15-year initiative leveraging the University’s data science expertise to foster educational and innovative growth across the region. Remarkably the programme has already surpassed its target outcomes by 119% in just seven years, illustrating its success in advancing both education and entrepreneurship.

Various awards were distributed within the University, including EUSA teaching awards, Chancellor’s Awards (awarded at Holyrood Palace) and the Principal’s Medals. There were over 1,800 nominations for the EUSA teaching awards, highlighting the significant participation and recognition of excellence within the academic community. The Principal’s Medals celebrate achievements of students and staff, with winners acknowledged in University graduation ceremonies. Sir Peter expressed congratulations to all nominees and winners and acknowledged the extensive effort involved in the nomination and selection process.

The importance and contribution of alumni to the University was noted, with the Principal acknowledging their vital role not only in the University’s history but also in shaping its future. The University utilises platforms like Multi-Story Edinburgh and Enlightened for outreach to keep alumni informed and engaged. The Principal highlighted the achievements of an exemplary alumna who has made significant strides in community education, empowerment, and entrepreneurship, receiving the Being Edinburgh Award for her accomplishments.

Alumni also contribute through initiatives like the Insights programme, funded by philanthropic donations, which significantly impact students’ lives and perspectives.

The Principal talked about the prospects for an exascale supercomputer in the UK being hosted at the University, stressing its importance for maintaining international research competitiveness requiring massive computing capability. The exascale supercomputer, capable of executing a billion billion computations per second, is the proposed successor to the UK’s current top model, Archer 2, located at the University of Edinburgh. Despite commitments in writing by the previous government to fund this next-generation supercomputer in Edinburgh, the new Government has paused these plans, leading to ongoing discussions. Sir Peter expressed cautious optimism that the University of Edinburgh may still host this advanced technology and highlighted the global supercomputing race, in which the UK is lagging behind countries like the USA, China, Japan, and Germany.

The University is undergoing a comprehensive review of its recent history in matters of race, a project that involved substantial contributions from academic staff. Initiated around three years ago, this review is drawing to a conclusion and its findings have been shared with the University’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee. The final report, which contains both unsettling historical information and constructive recommendations for future improvements, is poised for presentation to the University Executive and will be publicly released in the coming months.

The Provost is currently revitalising the University of Edinburgh’s global strategy, focusing on international collaborations and recruitment efforts. Although the University plans to appoint a new Vice-Principal International, the role is currently vacant. Despite these uncertainties, the University’s commitment to its international objectives remains firm and unchanged.

An extensive question and answer session followed, which covered a range of topics including: University finances; the impact of the Trump presidency; support for Palestinian students and staff; the University’s relationship with Israeli institutions; cultural sensitivity and inclusion; and Sir Peter’s personal pride in University achievements.

The Principal was warmly thanked for his comprehensive report and for his highly informative and candid responses to the questions.

7. Any other competent business

There was no other competent business.

8. Adjournment

The Motion by the Convener of the Business Committee that, for the purpose of considering matters which may be transmitted to the General Council by the University Court or any other business of a competent nature, the Business Committee be empowered to act on behalf of the Council, and that this meeting be adjourned to a date to be fixed by the Business Committee, was approved.

The Rev Dr Harriet Harris closed the meeting with a benediction.

The Principal’s full presentation, and the Business Committee’s report to the meeting on 15 February 2025 is published on the website at:

[general-council.ed.ac.uk/half-yearly-meetings/past-meeting](https://general-council.ed.ac.uk/half-yearly-meetings/past-meeting)

A recording of the full report from the Convener can be viewed on the General Council website:  
[Past meeting | The General Council \(ed.ac.uk\)](#)

Officers

Chairman: HRH The Princess Royal  
Secretary: William Duncan, BSc, PhD, MCIPD  
Registrar: Leigh Chalmers, University Secretary

2026  
ex-officio

General Council Assessors on the University Court:

Jock Millican, BSc, FCILT  
The Hon. Lady Wolffe (Sarah Wolffe KC)  
David Ovens, LLB

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Business Committee:

Convener: Gordon Cairns, LLB  
Vice-Convener: Bruce Nelson, BSc, MBA, PhD, FCMI  
Convener of Academic Standing Committee: Graeme Reid, BSc, PhD, FRSE  
Convener of Constitutional Standing Committee: Candice Donnelly, LLB (Hons), Dip LP, NP, WS  
Convener of Finance and Services Standing Committee: Almira Delibegovic-Broome, KC  
Convener of International Standing Committee: Ann Cormack, MBE, MA (Hons), PGDip  
Convener of Public Affairs Standing Committee: Alice Brown, CBE, FRSE, AcSS, FRCP<sup>EDIN</sup>, CIPFA (HON)

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Members:

Chancellor’s Assessor: Sheriff Principal Alastair Dunlop KC  
Brian Smith, MA, MLitt  
Judy Hardy, BSc, MSc, PhD, MinstP, FHEA  
Dorothy Welch, BSc, PhD  
Kirsty MacGregor, MA, MBA, DipEd  
Arron Ashton, BSc  
Devin Scobie, MA (Hons), MPRCA  
Alan Ross, MA  
Max Browning, MA, MSc  
Manya Buchan, BA (Hons), MBA  
Mary Gunn, PhD, MBA, MA, LLM  
John Gillies, OBE, FRSE, FRCGP, FRCPE  
Lucy Blackburn, MSc, PhD  
Tamara Raidt, MSc  
Nikhil Agarwal, PhD  
Richard Andrews, MA, PhD, PGCE

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Assistant Secretary: Alison McNulty, MA (Hons)

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