

Minutes of the Business Committee Meeting held on Thursday 27 February 2025 at 5.15pm, in the Raeburn Room, Old College

Present	Dr William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council Mr Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee Dr Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee Ms Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council Professor Richard Andrews (online) Dr Lucy Blackburn Professor Alice Brown Ms Manya Buchan (online) Ms Ann Cormack Ms Almira Delibegovic-Broome Ms Candice Donnelly Alistair Dunlop KC Professor John Gillies Dr Mary Gunn (online) Professor Judy Hardy	Ms Kirsty MacGregor (online) Mr Jock Millican Mr David Ovens Ms Tamara Raidt (online) Professor Graeme Reid Mr Devin Scobie The Rt. Rev. Brian Smith
In attendance	Ms Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member, University Court Mr Chris Cox, VP Philanthropy and Executive Director of Development and Alumni	

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone to the first meeting of Semester 2, particularly to the new General Council Court Assessor, Mr David Ovens, and stated that the meeting would include two principal presentations: the first from Janet Legrand (JL) on the relationship between Court and the General Council, followed by an update from Chris Cox (CC) on the University's Policy Group Race Review paper.

Apologies – Arron Ashton, Alan Ross, Dorothy Welch and Sarah Wolffe.

2. Presentation by Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member, University Court

The Convener invited JL to address the committee and respond to questions that had been prepared in advance of the meeting (Appendix 1);

- JL studied Law at Trinity Hall, Cambridge where she is an Honorary Fellow and is currently chair of the RNLI;
- A background of her experience within HE governance includes:
 - On the board of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Marshall Commission with oversight of the UK Government's Marshall Scholarship scheme
 - Deputy Chair of City, University of London and trustee of its Students Union
 - External member of the Audit Committee at the University of Cambridge
- JL is in her fifth year as Senior Lay Member of Court at the University of Edinburgh, where she emphasised the importance of in-person interactions for trust building among board members;
- The University's Court is large with 23 members drawn from a wide range of internal and external constituencies, including three representatives from the General Council and a Chancellor's Assessor; members from the University community: academics, professional

services, trade unions and student representatives as well as external lay members; this breadth and depth of knowledge of the institution helps to inform discussions;

- A major priority on the Court agenda has been the student experience and the comparatively low scores in the National Student Survey (NSS). JL reported that post graduate rankings have begun to improve and is hopeful that the new student support model will also lead to improvements, along with an intensive focus on improving the timeliness and quality of assessment and feedback;
- Highlighted the independent external review commissioned by Court, which had addressed challenges with the implementation of the People and Money system, acknowledging that there were lessons learned, particularly in relation to change management but noted that the University now has better data in relation to both its people and its financial position;
- JL focused on the scale of the financial challenges facing the University, necessitated by a budgetary shortfall that requires significant and sustainable cost reductions estimated at around 10% of annual turnover of £140m and involves reimagining University operations and potentially reducing staff levels;
- Detailed plans are to be executed in strategic work streams targeting operational and financial efficiencies in the areas of teaching and learning, research and innovation, staff, estate and other operating expenditure with the aim of restoring the University to a secure and sustainable surplus position by 2026-27;
- The recent internal communication sent out from the Principal included information on the detail of the various work streams and hyperlinks to resources to assist staff;
- The University's biggest expenditure is on staff costs, which have risen through pay awards and grade reviews in recent years along with steadily rising staff numbers and the staff work stream will focus on identifying the right size and shape of the University's academic and professional staff body informed by a strategic rationalization of the current educational portfolio;
- Better utilisation of the University's estate, improved heating management and acting to dispose of assets that are no longer a strategic priority have the potential to reduce estate management operating costs;
- JL said the General Council has access to very senior figures within the University and is supported through the work of the three General Council Assessors who feed into Court discussions, and highlighted the potential for the Business Committee to act as ambassadors for the University within their own spheres of influence, emphasising the importance of support and morale boosting among staff and stakeholders during a transformative period;
- JL reported that topics on the Court agenda are closed items, either because they are still going through the University's internal approval process or because they are commercially sensitive and it is the responsibility of the authors of the individual papers to make an initial determination of the paper status which is then reviewed by Court Services with the University Secretary making the final decision;
- Media coverage relating to the University is difficult to manage because of the size and scale of the institution and the broad nature of media, and indicated that perhaps insufficient time is allocated to building relationships with the press in order to anticipate and mitigate bad news stories, but added that there are many positive stories around, for example, research;
- Court does not usually get involved in the drafting of internal communications but is briefed where it might affect decision making e.g.; freedom of expression and the screening of the contentious film 'Adult Human Female';
- The University is supportive of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill as necessary legislation to move forward reform proposals that it has supported but care will be needed around some of the details to keep a balance between accountability and institutional autonomy. The Principal is a board member of the Scottish Funding Council;

- Court has received the analysis of responses to the responsible investment consultation. The policy is now undergoing revision and working its way through the governance processes and expected by the end of this academic year;
- In relation to Exascale, JL said that, at the recent Half-Yearly Meeting of the General Council, the Principal had expressed a cautious optimism that the supercomputer would be located at the University as originally agreed, despite a written assurance from the previous UK Government being paused by the new UK Government, and that it was encouraging that the Principal had been invited to Downing Street to a recent reception on AI;
- Edinburgh remains an attractive destination for international students and takes in more US students than most UK universities and is well positioned to take in more, and despite not meeting targets in the last year, more were recruited.

Discussion

- Issues relating to relationships with the media and public perception were further discussed with DS suggesting that the University is overly cautious in its approach, proposing an improved and ongoing relationship with the press who are willing to engage and be notified of “good news” stories;
- He added that this “risk averse” approach is also evident in the number of closed papers as seen in the Court agendas (around 60% are closed items);
- LB raised the issue of professional services being higher than faculty and JL responded by stating that the Russell group average spend on staff is about 53% and the University of Edinburgh is 58%, citing duplication of professional staff across schools in such a devolved institution;
- The staff work stream will focus to identify the correct size and shape of the academic and professional staff body;
- JL went on to reference a portfolio review of courses and said that this showed the University offers too much choice and it is necessary to consolidate and focus where there is significant demand;
- AB commented on the significant increase in recent years in the appointment of Personal Chairs;
- AC spoke about the opportunities for reinvention and the role the University should play in supporting its people with courtesy and respect throughout the current transformative process.

The Convener thanked JL and invited her to attend a future meeting before she left for another engagement.

3. **Presentation on the Policy Group Race Review paper from Chris Cox, VP Philanthropy**

- The Convener invited CC to update the committee on progress with the Edinburgh Race Review policy strategy, now in its very late stages;
- It was noted that detailed reports from both subgroups (Policy Group led by Chris Cox and the Research and Engagement Working Group) have been passed to the University’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee and the Steering Group but will need to undergo further review by the University Executive before being made public;
- CC provided an overview of the Edinburgh Race Review, commissioned by the Principal in 2021 to address historical injustices and current challenges related to race and representation within the university;
- CC emphasised the upcoming decisions on building re-naming and policy updates based on historical connections to slavery and colonialism were largely informed by the findings of the academically led Research and Engagement Working Group;

- Significant changes made since the launch of the Review include the Being Edinburgh Award and the Old College Project;
- The key discussion focused on Policy Group Recommendations relating to revising the naming policy for University buildings. A significant update includes the creation of a Naming Approval Committee to handle cases of specific buildings named after historical figures with controversial legacies in a sensitive and transparent way;
- The importance of community engagement was stressed, with a call for broad participation once the review findings are made public;
- Recommendations from the race review policy group were shared, including:
 - Updating the naming policy to include protocols for renaming
 - Increasing the diversity of campus artwork to reflect more inclusive values
 - Transparent communication regarding name changes, including the use of plaques and QR codes for educational purposes
- There was some discussion on the need for dedicated funding to implement recommendations, emphasising the need for financial planning and external fundraising;
- CC concluded with an affirmation of the University's commitment to learning from its past and improving institutional practices related to race and inclusivity, which recognizes the University's progressive values as stated in the 2030 strategy;
- Members of the Business Committee were encouraged to review the detailed findings once available and to prepare for further discussions and an implementation phase based on decisions by the University Executive;
- The Convener thanked CC who will be invited to a follow-up meeting after the final report is published.

4. Observations by General Council Assessors

JM gave the report from the recent Court meeting on 24 February. The Court agenda had been previously circulated:

- General Council Ordinance 217
 - The Ordinance was approved by the Privy Council resulting in an increase to the General Council's membership;
- Principal's Report
 - Sir Peter focused on the **financial challenges** facing the University, emphasising the seriousness of the situation and the need for decisive action, using slides previously presented to the recent General Council Half-Yearly Meeting; extensive discussions included valuable contributions from staff members;
- **Student Recruitment** is being closely monitored, including comparisons with previous years and peer institutions. There have been improvements in the pace of making offers, although some challenges remain;
- Concerns over the proposed increase in the **Scottish Funding Council's** powers and its implications for the autonomy of universities;
- **Student Experience** – improvements noted in marking and assessment with the College of Science and Engineering meeting targets in all schools;
- **A review of Postgraduate Taught courses** may lead to the discontinuation of some due to scheduling challenges;
- Sir Peter's recent visit to **Gujarat University** in India, aimed at strengthening its international partnership with the University;
- **Exascale** – efforts are continuing for the supercomputer to be based in Edinburgh;
- Committee Business

- The Nominations committee approved the appointment of David Ovens as General Council Court Assessor;
- Senate minutes are available on the University website;
- Students' Association and Sports Union Reports
- Dora Herndon, EUSA President, updated on EUSA's strategic plan with a review of whether there is enough representation for students enrolled in online courses;
- The President of the Sports Union reported on thriving sports programmes with excellent performances noted in BUCS Championships. There are plans to collaborate with the student recruitment team on managing athletic scholarships more effectively;
- Annual People Report
- An annual HR report is set to be published, reflecting on past activities over the past year;
- Self-Evaluation Action Plan
- The Scottish Funding Council has initiated a self-evaluation action plan involving university and student input.

The Convener thanked JM for his presentation.

5. Minutes of the Meeting of 5 December 2024

The minutes were approved.

6. Matters Arising from the Minutes of the Meeting of 5 December 2024

None that had not been covered under other agenda items.

7. Appointment of David Ovens as a General Council Assessor

- The Secretary prepared paper 2, previously circulated, which contained the following information:

Following a highly competitive selection process with 19 applicants, the University Court has confirmed the unanimous recommendation of the joint Selection Panel and David Ovens has been appointed as a General Council Assessor and will take up post immediately. We look forward to welcoming David to the next meeting of the Business Committee.

He replaces Douglas Alexander who resigned following his appointment as a government minister.

David has a strong financial background and has been Joint Managing Director of Archangel Investors Limited since 2014 and is a non-executive director of LINC Scotland/Angel Capital Scotland - the national association for business angels and early-stage risk capital investors in Scotland. His earlier career was in banking and finance. He has been Chair of Scottish Athletics since 2021.

I should also like to take this opportunity to thank Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member of Court, and chair of its Nominations Committee and Court Services staff, for the exemplary way the recruitment was handled as a joint exercise between the Court and the Business Committee.

8. Draft Resolutions of the University Court

Resolutions 1-2/2025 had been approved electronically by the Business Committee and no further Resolutions had been received.

9. Report from the Secretary of the General Council

- Paper 3, previously circulated, contained the following information:

Business Committee election

The names of the successful candidates announced at the HYM on 15 February were:

- Dr Matthew James EPTON
- Professor Judy HARDY
- Kirsteen Joan MACGREGOR
- Dr Katherine Anne RICHARDS
- Devin SCOBIE
- Dorothy Ann WELCH
- Jessica Nicole WILLIAMSON

There were 6 unsuccessful candidates – all men. It was possible to elect 7 (rather than 6) because the Convener of the Finance and Services Committee, Almira Delibegovic Broome will be standing down at the end of July, following her appointment as Hon Consul for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The total number of valid votes cast (overwhelmingly electronically) was 5082, which is 3.3% of those sent voting papers. This is a good turnout for University elections but down from previous year of almost 6000.

As most who vote either know none of the candidates personally or only one or two, there have been several requests for more information about Candidates.

Half Yearly Meeting

This was held on Saturday 15 February at the McEwan Hall and followed by lunch at the Playfair Library when the speaker was Simon Fanshawe who spoke about Freedom of Expression. The Principal's Annual Report was very different from previous years and focussed on the financial challenges facing the HE sector and Edinburgh in particular.

For those unable to attend in person or watch the live stream in person, a recording is available on line on the General Council website.

Ordinance 217

Privy Council recently approved a new Ordinance (no. 217) to reflect the changes in eligibility for membership of the General Council previously agreed by the University Court, following the representations made to it by us.

The next step is to devise and agree a detailed implementation timetable and plan with Development and Alumni as they maintain the General Council Register. When this has been done, an implementation date will be recommended to Court.

I am most grateful to Leigh Chalmers and her colleagues in Court Services, especially Dr Lewis Allan, for their diligent support and guidance at navigating through the rather labyrinthine approval processes involved.

Resolutions from Court

No. 1/2025: Alteration of the title of Personal Chair of Politics

No. 2/2025: Foundation of a Personal Chair of Neuroinflammatory Medicine

The Business Committee approved the above Resolutions confirming Personal Chairs but noted that there was considerable retrospection involved. The new People and Money system showed up some discrepancies which needed to be corrected; there may be more similar situation reflected in other Resolutions going to Court and hence to General Council.

Dates for the diary

a. Business Committee meetings in 2024/25

1 May. A report from the Conveners of the Standing Committees on the first meetings held in Semester 2. Meeting will be held in the Raeburn Room 26 June. A report from the Conveners of the Standing Committees on the final meetings for 2024/25. Newly elected members invited to attend as observers. Meeting will be held in the Raeburn Room.

b. Standing Committee meetings for 2024/25

All meetings begin at 4.30pm

- **Finance and Services Standing Committee** – 4 March in the Braid Room, Charles Stewart House. For members of FSSC only to hear from the interim Director of Finance.
- **Academic Standing Committee** – 20 March on Teams. All members of the Business Committee are invited to hear the presentation from Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary, Students on student satisfaction.
- **International Standing Committee** – 31 March on Teams. All members of the Business Committee are invited to hear an update from Professor Kim Graham, Provost on the University's International strategy.
- **Public Affairs Standing Committee** – 8 April on Teams. All members of the Business Committee are invited to engage in discussion about the next iteration of the University's Community Plan.
- **Finance and Services Standing Committee** – 6 May in the Braid Room, Charles Stewart House. For members of FSSC only to hear a presentation about the University's digital infrastructure.
- **International Standing Committee** – 12 May on Teams. All members of the Business Committee are invited. Speaker tbc
- **Public Affairs Standing Committee** – 26 May on Teams. All members of the Business Committee are invited to hear from Vice-Principal Philanthropy and Director of Development and Alumni.
- **Academic Standing Committee** – 5 June on Teams. All members of the Business Committee are invited to hear the presentation from Professor Colm Harmon about Curriculum Transformation.

c. Business Committee meetings in 2025/26

Please note the dates proposed for meetings next academic year are:

- Thursday 16 October 2025
- Thursday 4 December 2025
- Thursday 5 March 2026
- Thursday 30 April 2026
- Thursday 25 June 2026

d. Half Yearly Meetings

- 14 June 2025 – Edinburgh Climate Change Institute (ECCI)
- 14 February 2026 Edinburgh Futures Institute (provisional)

e. Christmas Reception

Tuesday 9 December 2025 in the Informatics Building.

10. Any other competent business

There was no other competent business.

11. Date of next meeting

The next meeting would take place at 5.15pm on Thursday, 1 May 2025 in the Raeburn Room.

Topics to discuss with Janet Legrand at General Council Business Committee meeting on 27 February 2025

1. Financial difficulties facing the University and how these will be dealt with

- a. The Principal's Annual Report to the General Council HYM was well received by members, despite its gloomy prognosis of the financial situation. He was restricted in what he could say publicly then as the Court had not then considered proposals from management. Now it has, can you provide any update on the direction of travel?
- b. Is the Court satisfied with the "shape" of the University? The headcount in professional services is higher than faculty. Will the coming cost reductions target a reduction in the overhead rather than front line teaching staff?
- c. Is the Court satisfied with the 'efficiency' of the University and how will cost reductions be targeted to deliver improved efficiency?
- d. Given the challenges facing the University, what role do you see for the Business Committee in helping to address some of these challenges?

2. Improving the effectiveness of the Business Committee and its support to the Court and University management

- a. How could the BC members better support the work of Court?
- b. Are you aware of any examples of situations in which the Court/the University changed or modified its intended course of action, following an 'intervention' (using that word in its broadest sense, to cover informal discussions, written submissions, questions at half-yearly meetings etc.) by the BC? [Such concrete examples (if there are any) would be helpful to have, both for our own understanding of our effectiveness and to amplify to our membership the role that the GC/BC plays.]
- c. What kind of input or 'intervention' from the BC do you consider is/would be most effective? What could we do better? What has worked well in the past? Are there any bad examples?

3. Communications

a. From Court

Why are so many of the topics on the Court agenda closed items - often over half the items - and who decides whether an item is open or closed? [Classification of items as closed precludes what the Assessors or others can report after these important items have been considered and agreed by Court, even in confidence to the Business Committee. This inhibits the ambassadorial role of the Business Committee. It is, of course, understood that matters of commercial sensitivity or active negotiation must remain confidential until Court decides they can be made public.]

b. External University communications

Is Court satisfied with the way external University communications are being dealt with, especially those affecting the reputation of the University regarding in particular negative media reports?

c. Internal communications

Is Court consulted in advance of 'bad news' communications from management to staff or students?

4. Topical issues – can you provide any updates on:

- a. Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill
What is Edinburgh University's view on the Bill and how is this being communicated to Scottish Parliament?
- b. Ethical investment review and call for disinvestment; next steps?
- c. Exascale. The Principal's cautious optimism in response to question at HYM was encouraging but given the delicacy of the situation, he was understandably constrained in a semi-public meeting. Can you say more?
- d. International Student flows. Reports suggest the overall effect of Trump's hostile immigration policies could be to increase overseas students coming to UK and Europe. Does this seem realistic and how can Edinburgh make it a more attractive place of choice?

Dr William Duncan
Secretary to General Council

21 February 2025