

Minutes of the Business Committee Meeting held on Thursday 1 May 2025 at 5.15pm, in the Raeburn Room, Old College

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| 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 | Ms Kirsty MacGregor |
| | Professor Alice Brown | Mr Jock Millican |
| | Ms Manya Buchan | Mr David Ovens |
| | Ms Ann Cormack (online) | Mr Alan Ross (online) |
| | Ms Almira Delibegovic-Broome | Mr Devin Scobie |
| | Ms Candice Donnelly | The Rt. Rev. Brian Smith |
| | Professor John Gillies | Dr Dorothy Welch |
| | Professor Judy Hardy | |

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted apologies had been received from Arron Ashton, Alastair Dunlop, Graeme Reid and Sarah Wolffe.

2. Observations by General Council Assessors

- JM gave the report from the recent Court meeting on 28 April held at the Peffermill Sports Centre;
- The Court agenda had been previously circulated (Paper 1)
- The meeting was dominated by discussions on finance and progress on cost reductions;
- Students with masks disrupted the Court Meeting to protest about University investments in businesses linked to the ongoing conflict in Gaza;
- **Principal's Report**
 - Sir Peter continued to stress in all of his interactions, both internal and external, that the University must take its agreed course of action in order to avoid reaching a deficit position and to secure a sustainable financial future;
 - He had been interviewed and commented on the financial difficulties facing the HE sector;
 - University's indicative SFC funding for 2025-26 was confirmed. In aggregate, the uplifts and reductions result in a net positive 2.8% year-on-year increase in total SFC funding for 2025-26 of £4.8m comparing favourably to an average sector uplift of 2.3%. As noted by Universities Scotland, the sector's outcome is a real-terms cut of 0.95%;
 - In a very competitive student recruitment context, pleasing that the University continues to be in high demand overall, having now received almost 70,000 Undergraduate and over 85,000 Postgraduate applications to study at UoE in 2025-26, with the PG figure expected to increase further. Admissions colleagues are responding positively, with offer making rates ahead of previous cycles;
 - Chief Financial Officer (CFO). After deliberation and discussion, the panel decided not to appoint a CFO from the interviewed applicants. Management is actively addressing with the required degree of urgency, the consequences of this decision including meeting with the search firm to seek further candidates;
 - Vice-Principal Research & Enterprise. Moving forward with advertising the role given Professor Boswell's decision to stand down in the autumn. Notwithstanding the current circumstances that the University is facing and the need for restraint, this is a critically

important post for the University particularly with strong work immediately required to lead the submission to the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework exercise in 2029 and the importance of exemplary leadership in the research portfolio to drive substantial income as well as excellence and reputation.

- Vice-Principal International. It has been decided not to recruit to this role at this time with members of the senior team working effectively to lead the international agenda along with Deputy Vice-Principal International, Alan Mackay;
- The Staff Survey 2025 closed on the 3 March 2025. There was a 42% response rate, (+6% compared to 2023) with 7,432 staff responding. Results indicate that a majority of staff enjoy their roles, are satisfied with their work environment, and are treated with fairness and respect. There are worrying scores around senior leadership and change management, and particularly concerning is that only 24% of staff believe that any action will be taken based on this survey;
- The outcome of the Voluntary Severance scheme is now known. Approximately 350 staff will leave, producing savings of £18m;
- Management had received formal notification of a ballot for strike and action short of strike (ASOS) from UCU and Unison. UCU's ASOS could include a range of actions from a marking and assessment boycott to refusal to do any processes associated with the cost saving programme. The ballot closes on 20th May;
- Sir Peter drew attention to the recent round of EUSA facilitated initiatives aimed at building student engagement with the University leadership. This is a new approach, led by the EUSA President;

- **Finance**

- There was a robust debate on the cost reduction programme including input from Senate through its representatives;
- Motions B1-B4 made specific requests of Court and read as follows:
 - B1. Senate considers the scale and timetable of the Executive's currently proposed changes to be incompatible with maintaining the University's academic mission, reputation and the quality of education it provides.
 - B2. Senate requests Court to require that the Executive provides a clear and credible account of how and why the University reached the point where large-scale, urgent and damaging cuts were unexpectedly announced, following large commitments to estates, facilities, and staff payroll expenditure that were premised on the University's sound financial position.
 - B3. Senate requests Court to require the Executive to present a thorough analysis of the costs and benefits of its current and proposed actions, including course and programme closures, cuts to operating budgets where these impact student experience and staff capacity to undertake research and teaching, and potential staff redundancies.
 - B4. Senate requests Court to require the Executive to develop a plan that will enable proper academic scrutiny, via Senate, College and School bodies, of any changes which are necessary to secure budget sustainability.

Court through the Principal will respond to Senate.

- Court was informed that
 - The current scale of programmes at the University is not manageable – it is overloaded/overstretched, unnecessarily complex and resource intensive. This impacts on staff workload most critically and further on other aspects of staff and student experience;
 - A series of reviews has resulted in actions to close c. 350 programmes of the c.750 that comprise the University's PGT portfolio with others being categorised as Grow, Maintain or Keep Under Review;
- **Timetabling and Course Selection Project**

- The aim is to improve student satisfaction through ensuring courses are well organised. Need to reconsider how to design and deliver the University's academic administration and support functions to be more consistent;
- Achieve improved proactive and effective working practices for staff in teaching administration, including consolidated and simpler processes, improved planning and reduction in urgent/complex resolutions to queries;
- The project requires significant change across: culture, policy, planning, process, organisational design and use of and appropriateness of space;
- There will be more details on cost reductions with the budget presented to the next Court meeting in June;
- **Student Experience Update**
 - Assessment and Feedback
 - Semester 1 in 2024/25 showed improvement to 72%, up from 55% of 26 Schools/Deaneries, 21 have improved from Semester 2 in 23/24 to Semester 1 in 24/25. Those where have yet to see improvement, or improvement has been minimal, are the focus of close attention;
 - University Portfolio Framework
 - There have been College-focused meetings on portfolio review activities, overseen by the Student Experience Delivery and Monitoring Oversight Board, which continue to assess the work underway;
 - A series of reviews has resulted in actions to close c. 350 programmes of the c.750 that comprise the University's PGT portfolio;
 - Curriculum Transformation
 - Some aspects are paused while cost reduction exercise is on-going;
 - Teaching timetable and course selection
 - There is a need to improve student satisfaction through ensuring that their course is well organised. Will need to reconsider how to design and deliver academic administration and support functions to be more consistent. The project requires significant change across culture, policy, planning, process, organisational design and use of and appropriateness of space;
- **Students' Association and Sports Union Reports**
 - Last meeting for current EUSA sabbaticals, Dora Herndon and Ruth Elliott. New sabbaticals attended as observers, Ash Scholz and Katya Amott. Improved turnout of voters in elections.
 - EUSA Budget approved;
 - Teaching and Student Awards announced, details on EUSA website;
 - Liv Stevens, elected president of EUSU for next year;
 - BUCS – Edinburgh likely to finish 5th overall. Special mention for Men's hockey who won BUCS final and have also finished top of the Scottish senior league, first time ever.

Discussion

- GC asked about the possibility of strike action involving a boycott of marking student papers. JM said that this was dependent on ballot results expected later in the month;
- AD-B highlighted the need for effective communication, especially regarding discussions that are already underway at a higher level. It was suggested that the senior leadership should not repeat past communication errors to avoid mistrust and regular updates on ongoing issues were recommended to keep all parties informed;
- The importance of the senior leadership's role in clarifying the University's financial position and the necessary actions to mitigate this was discussed. More effort in transparent communication was deemed crucial to garner trust and cooperation from all University stakeholders;

- DS raised concerns about the high number of Court agenda items labelled as “closed”, hindering open discussion and full participation at the Business Committee. He is concerned the effectiveness of the General Council as a “governance body” was impeded by highly restricted access to information dealt with at Court and requested it review the necessity of keeping so many items closed, even after they have been discussed by Court;
- AB said that she was delighted that a new Vice-Principal Research and Innovation was going to be appointed. Disappointment was expressed over the decision not to recruit a Vice-Principal International, especially when strategic international leadership is crucial, and concerns were raised about the University potentially lacking direction in its global engagements. JM responded to say that the position of VP International is not being abolished, it is not being recruited currently;
- The uptake of 350 voluntary redundancies was mentioned, which had met expectations but there had been hope for a higher number so as to avoid enforced redundancies. Despite some reluctance, further staff cuts through other means seemed likely;
- The need to reduce and streamline the number of postgraduate courses (from 700) was noted, with many courses having low enrollment, suggesting inefficiencies in programme offerings;
- There was a discussion about the lack of satisfactory applicants for the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) role and the consequent decision not to appoint anyone from the initial candidate pool. JM said that the effectiveness of the interim CFO had raised expectations of the standard required by potential candidates.

3. Minutes of the Meeting of 27 February 2025

- The minutes (Paper 2, previously circulated) were approved, subject to a small amendment noted by AC on page 2, fourth bullet point, which should read:

*“• 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 **£1400m** and involves reimagining University operations and potentially reducing staff levels”*

4. Matters Arising from the Minutes of the Meeting of 27 February 2025

These are all covered under other agenda items.

5. Reports from the Standing Committees

a. Academic Standing Committee

- BN had chaired the recent meeting on 15 April in the absence of GR, when the committee had heard from Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary, Students who provided a candid update on the current challenges faced by the University relating to Student Experience (Paper 3, previously circulated);
- The presentation was well-received, particularly highlighting how effective collaboration with the Students’ Association can lead to significant improvements.

b. Finance and Services Standing Committee

- AD-B spoke about the previous meeting with the Interim Finance Director, Nirmal Borkhataria. Key points were captured in the minutes (Paper 4, previously circulated), and these covered topics on interim financial planning, operational strategies and economic pressures facing the University;
- There was recognition of the delicate balance needed between making necessary financial cuts and retaining the essential character and stability of the University;

- Concern was expressed about the potential risk of losing the essence of what the University represents if conventional cost-cutting measures were applied without a permanent figure in place to consider the long-term impacts and maintain the University's unique values.

Discussion

- Addressed the recruitment process for finding suitable candidates for the high profile and key role of Finance Director, questioning whether current headhunting strategies and advertising in financial publications were sufficient and highlighting the importance of attracting top-quality candidates who are not necessarily actively job searching;
- WD mentioned that of the proposed reduction of £140m in operating costs, £90m was expected to come from staff reductions. There were concerns about the scale of staff reductions required to produce this level of saving when voluntary severance departures would produce £18m, leaving a gap of £72m.
- The uncertainty around budget cuts and redundancies was creating much anxiety, with concern expressed about the broader impact on the University's appeal as a stable workplace and fears that such concerns about job security might deter talented individuals from pursuing careers at the University;
- AC emphasized the importance of correcting narratives that misrepresent the financial situation at the University. She pointed out that Edinburgh does not currently have a budgetary 'black hole', unlike other universities, and proactive saving measures are being employed to prevent such a scenario. She encouraged the committee to actively correct misconceptions in public and governmental discourse to ensure the University's financial strategies and health are accurately understood.

c. International Standing Committee

- AC began by sharing her experience at a Westminster Cathedral service, noting the presence of many Edinburgh graduates and emphasised the University's influence in London;
- AC reported on the recent meeting of ISC on 31 March (Paper 5, previously circulated) and positive developments in alumni relations activities, particularly through efforts by the Development and Alumni (D & A) team to transform ideas into action, and cited the impact of the University's initiatives in artificial intelligence in London, highlighting notable University representation at a panel discussion, including Professor Shannon Vallor, Baillie Gifford Chair in the Ethics of Data and Artificial Intelligence at the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI);
- A key priority for ISC is to continue to enhance alumni relations and networking opportunities internationally and RA commented on a forthcoming international visit to Hong Kong, expressing hope for fruitful engagement with alumni based there. GC reminded committee members that the General Council had visited Hong Kong in 2010 and there had been a lot of support for the University;
- The committee had met with University Provost, Professor Kim Graham to discuss updates to the University's Global Strategy with emphasis on the need for action and implementation over further strategic reviews, with a focus on making existing plans work effectively;
- Potential strategies discussed for enhancing international collaboration, including joint funding and leveraging international networks to attract research opportunities and funding;
- Discussed the absence of a Vice-Principal International due to financial constraints, but noted senior staff such as Alan Mackay, Director of Edinburgh Global and others on the executive team are taking on international responsibilities as an interim measure;
- Concerns were raised about the potential negative impact on the University's strategic positioning due to the absence of a focused leadership role in international relations;
- Noted challenges in attracting international academics, influenced by perceptions of the UK academic sector's stability and funding or visa issues.

d. Public Affairs Standing Committee

- AB spoke to the meeting on 8 April (Paper 6, previously circulated) when PASC had met with Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact, Department of Social Responsibility and Sustainability, who had presented an update on the draft of the new Community Plan (CP) for 2025-30;
- Gemma was keen to receive feedback from the committee to help inform the next iteration of the CP, which aligned with the University's Strategic Plan and included a wider consultation process, development details and next steps;
- Gemma emphasised that the plan was an evolution of existing frameworks and highlighted successes to date;
- Key priorities identified were partnering for positive social impact, promoting equality, and fostering thriving communities;
- The committee appreciated the detailed update and effectiveness of student community initiatives, such as volunteering for free legal advice;
- Questions had been raised regarding financial pressures and the feasibility of implementing the plan without additional financial resources;
- Concerns were expressed about the overlapping roles with existing town and gown relationships and the need for better strategic collaboration;
- The communication strategies for the launch event for the plan were discussed, with suggestions for improvements and utilising pro bono support from General Council members;
- The remainder of the meeting had focused on Summer Billet and the cost reduction in mailing, down from 700 to 77 postal recipients, leading to substantial cost savings;
- Proposals were in hand to use the saved funds for creating three new videos to raise awareness about the General Council, its Business Committee and Standing Committees, and the impact from the General Council Prince Philip Scholarship Fund. Currently evaluating proposals from two firms;
- Plans for future events included the Usher Institute event on 22 May, the GC HYM on 14 June and an "In Conversation" event in October chaired by the Rector;
- An additional meeting is scheduled for 8 May to complete outstanding agenda items;
- A final meeting on 29 May with Chris Cox is planned to discuss and potentially agree on strategies for boosting alumni participation and might also include considerations for a focused survey, though resource constraints due to University budget cuts might affect this;
- AB and WD had a productive meeting with the new leader of Edinburgh City Council, Jane Meagher, to discuss strengthening the town and gown relationship;
- With the current interest in themes relating to artificial intelligence, DW suggested inviting a speaker e.g., Professor Shannon Vallor to a future Half-Yearly Meeting.

Action:-

Members were encouraged to email the GC office with suggestions about future speakers and topics for the GC HYM in February 2026.

6. Report from the Secretary of the General Council

- Paper 7, previously circulated, contained the following information and WD drew members' attention to the following:

1. Ordinance 217

The Summer Edition of Billet included a report about the new membership Ordinance approved by the Privy Council. This comes into effect on a date to be determined by the

University Court and will be decided by Court at its meeting in June, but near the start of next academic year (2025/26) looks feasible.

Prior to the formal implementation date, all newly eligible staff (c 1000) will receive an email explaining about the General Council and encouraging participation. Similarly, there will be separate communication to newly eligible graduates (c 24,000).

2. Usher Institute 'showcasing' event on 22 May 2025

The arrangements for this are proceeding smoothly with registration now nearing the cut-off before setting up a waiting list. A final reminder to General Council will be included in an email being sent in early May.

3. Summer graduations

BC members had been sent information about joining the academic procession for the summer graduations in July and were encouraged to attend. It is much appreciated by the University senior management if there is at least one Business Committee member present at each graduation.

4. Edinburgh University/Foundation for Science and Technology discussion meeting on High Performance Computing on Thursday 29 May (5.30 - 8pm)

The Foundation for Science and Technology, chaired by Lord David Willetts, and Sir Peter will hold a joint high-level discussion event at the University on Thursday 29 May on the next generation of high-performance computing. Attendance at this event will be by invitation issued by the Foundation and Business Committee members will be invited.

The timing of this meeting could be significant as it will be shortly before the expected announcement in June as part of the UK Government Spending Review about whether to fund an Exascale computer in the UK and if so where it will be located.

5. Business Committee meetings in 2025/26

A reminder that the dates of Business Committee meetings next academic year have been set as follows

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

As usual these will be on Thursdays from 5.15 – 7pm in the Raeburn Room unless otherwise advised.

7. Draft Resolutions of the University Court

None received.

8. Arrangements for June 2025 HYM

- WD referred to Paper 8 asking the committee to consider:
 1. What should be the main business
 2. Who should chair the meeting
- The main purpose of the June Half-Yearly Meeting will be to present the work of the Business Committee and Standing Committees, as the showcasing event is being held separately at the Usher Institute on Thursday 22 May;

- The Conveners, except Graeme Reid (ASC) due to personal circumstances, will give short presentations on the work of their respective standing committees. Professor Alice Brown will speak about PASC and Ann Cormack about ISC. Almira Delibegovic-Broome (FSSC) may be unable to attend given her new role as Honorary Consul General in Scotland for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the co-incident visit to Scotland by the Ambassador. If she is unable to attend, Gordon Cairns' report will include a section on the work of FSSC
- It was recommended that the Vice-Convener of the Business Committee, Bruce Nelson, chair the June Half-Yearly Meeting in the absence of all officials named in the relevant University Ordinance as this allows in such circumstances for those present at the HYM to choose the Chair. The University Secretary and Registrar of the General Council, Leigh Chalmers, has been consulted and she and the Principal are content with this arrangement;
- The absence of the Principal at the June meeting was noted, with some concern expressed about the impact on his public reputation. WD clarified that, while Sir Peter's attendance at the February meeting is required, his presence at the business part of the June meeting has never been expected based on past practice. Were the Principal to Chair the meeting, he would not be expected to answer questions but to direct these to the other most relevant member of the of the platform party. Questions about financial or management issues would be referred to the University Secretary who will be present;
- Concerns were raised about the potential for the meeting to be overwhelmed by numerous questions about the University's current situation. A proactive approach was proposed where Leigh Chalmers and the General Council Secretary, Dr William Duncan, would prepare a brief factual update on significant developments since the Principal's Report at the February HYM.
- Concerns were raised about the appeal on a Saturday morning of attending a meeting primarily to listen to business reports;
- It was explained that there will be much more time for Q&A as the meeting is not followed by a showcasing event. The objective is to avoid the meeting being a passive event where attendees only listen without engaging.
- A structured approach to handling the Q & A session was discussed to ensure the meeting remains interactive yet concise.

9. Any other competent business

None.

10. Date of next meeting

- The next meeting would take place at 5.15pm on Thursday 26 June 2025 in the Raeburn Room;
- The newly elected members of the Business Committee have been invited to attend as observers;
- A modest drinks reception will follow the meeting, to thank the Business Committee members demitting and to welcome new members.