

Minutes of the Academic Standing Committee Meeting
4.30pm on Thursday 5 June 2025
Online via Teams

Present: Graeme Reid, Convener of ASC
John Gillies
Judy Hardy
Dorothy Welch
Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee
Bruce Nelson, Vice Convener of the Business Committee
Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council

In attendance: Colm Harmon, Vice-Principal Students
Richard Andrews (ISC)
Manya Buchan (FSSC)
Kirsty MacGregor (FSSC)

1. Welcome and apologies

Professor Graeme Reid (GR), Convener of ASC welcomed everyone to the meeting to take part in a discussion with Professor Colm Harmon (CH), Vice-Principal Students who had been invited to update the committee on the Curriculum Transformation Programme (CTP).

Apologies received from Brian Smith.

2. Presentation by Professor Colm Harmon, Vice-Principal Students

CH gave an oral presentation which provided a comprehensive overview of the ongoing transformations and initiatives at the University concerning curriculum restructuring, assessment practices, support systems and the student experience. The main points are highlighted below:

- Emphasis is placed on improving the relational, transitional and transactional elements of a student's journey;
- Reported a re-orientation in the management and governance of curriculum changes and said that new structures are being proposed to handle transitional issues within the University;
- Schools have requested faster transitions from concept to delivery, which has influenced shifts in the direction and speed of curriculum innovation;
- Described the implementation of cross-institutional "challenge courses" aligned with the University's research strategy in areas such as sustainability, data and AI, and global health, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and application;
- Schools are developing innovative content drawing students from across the University, and issues like gender and equality, decolonisation, and religion and conflict are being addressed in new courses, attracting significant student enrolment and engagement;
- Redesign of postgraduate offerings to consolidate similar courses, allowing for specialisation within a unified framework, aimed at utilising resources in a more efficient way and supporting financial sustainability;
- Involving students in the redesign of courses in terms of what they feel a degree from Edinburgh should offer and addressing skills for future success and employability, continuously adjusting the curriculum based on feedback;

- Significant reforms in assessment practises and feedback mechanisms are underway to address over-assessment and improve timeliness of feedback;
- Enhanced use of data and analytics to monitor and improve feedback delivery and reported improved rates of students receiving their feedback within a 3-week turnaround period (80-90% up from 50-60%);
- AI and other tools are being used to enhance student interaction with platforms such as MyEd, and improve timetabling management processes alongside better clarity in the presentation and availability of course options and support services;
- Working with EUSA to integrate student voices more effectively into University processes and to better engage with student representatives;
- Initiatives to enhance a sense of community and belonging - led by Professor Tina Harrison, Deputy Vice-Principal Students – aim to improve overall student well-being and a sense of inclusion;
- Initiatives like the revised student support model focus on delivering more personalised and effective support, addressing both general and mental-health specific student needs;
- The transition from traditional personal tutors to a system of professional student advisers and cohort leads is intended to provide more consistent and targeted support;
- The introduction of Student Advisers and Well-Being Advisers within schools aim to decentralise support and provide immediate assistance;
- Acknowledged that the effectiveness of cohort lead positions varies within schools, indicating ongoing challenges in defining roles and expectations;
- CH concluded by acknowledging ongoing and future challenges, with a commitment to iterative improvement based on community feedback and practical experiences within the educational environment;
- Highlighted the importance of effectively communicating with the student body about these changes to ensure awareness and appreciation of improvements and new opportunities.

Discussion

- GR queried how the University's current challenging financial context has likely affected staff morale and the impact this might have on the student experience and ongoing curriculum transformation planning;
- CH responded regarding curriculum transformation by saying that, despite financial constraints, schools are increasingly taking initiative in shaping educational innovations. Originally, there was concern about reduced funding impacting new pedagogic developments, however, schools are adapting by integrating changes that not only enhance the student experience but also increase operational efficiency. For example, the challenge courses are helping to declutter the curriculum while ensuring students can more reliably access courses, they are interested in. Thus, the adjustments are proving beneficial both for enhancing student experiences and streamlining operations;
- Reported concerns around increased class sizes and the loss of some courses, which could cause initial dissatisfaction among students and exacerbate issues with assessment and feedback;
- CH anticipated that class sizes might increase slightly and this marginal increase should be manageable without diminishing the quality of student experience significantly;
- He said that continued attention to how courses are delivered and managed will be crucial to maintaining the focus on student satisfaction;

- JH said that the potential for increased class sizes could also exacerbate the lack of personal academic interactions where each student becomes a smaller part of the whole, potentially diminishing their experience;
- CH clarified there are no plans to increase the total number of students to address financial challenges. Instead, the focus is on internal distribution but acknowledged the point about maintaining quality interaction in larger classes and said that this needs thoughtful handling;
- Regarding operational aspects, curriculum transformation will be integrated under the new teaching and learning strategy, which has recently received approval, and integration involves managing the transformation through the implementation plan of the teaching and learning strategy;
- Essentially, it is about mainstreaming the transformative efforts into regular operations, providing a structured, practical framework for schools to adopt more efficiently, which will then facilitate a quicker adoption across the board;
- DW echoed the concerns raised by JH re the potential for increased class sizes and raised a question regarding assessment and feedback principles and the possibility of schools over assessing;
- CH reported that different schools have varied assessment regimes, even for courses with the same credit value and that this leads to inconsistency in student workload and stress due to simultaneous deadlines across different courses;
- He explained that the initiative led by Professor Tina Harrison had begun establishing foundational principles for course assessment, aiming to standardise practices such as the weighting of assessments throughout a semester and exploring diverse assessment methods beyond traditional end-of-semester exams. These initiatives are in the early policy adoption phase, intended to transition into more firm policies;
- He referred to the recent marking boycott that highlighted the University's heavy reliance on end-of-semester exams, which strained the University's internal quality assurance systems due to their non-uniform implementation across schools;
- Ongoing efforts focus on standardising these processes, improving the transparency and effectiveness of assessment, and addressing exceptional circumstances for students;
- This work is foundational to the University's compliance with quality assurance and regulatory frameworks and is also vital for preserving academic integrity while avoiding disproportionate measures that overshadow the good conduct of the majority of students;
- RA asked how the challenge courses are taught and CH said that a mixed approach is used where some components are taught in small groups, others use hybrid models such as flipped classrooms, and some sessions still employ traditional lecture methods in large venues like the Gordon Aikman lecture theatre.;
- He added that, although these courses are mostly taught conventionally, more innovative teaching methods are being explored;
- RA asked a further question about the PGT stacking model and the administrative challenge of tracking a student's progress;
- CH said that system improvements have been implemented to tag and monitor students' academic paths more efficiently, reducing the administrative burden and potential for errors;
- The system investment has been aimed at lowering the transactional costs for staff while ensuring accurate tracking and reporting student progress within the flexible course structure;
- In response to questions from JG, CH answered first by making the distinction between student advisers and well-being advisers;

- Well-being advisers are clinically trained, often coming from NHS backgrounds, focusing on student mental and social health, whereas student advisers handle more transactional and administrative student needs. Student advisers were recruited en masse to ensure a standardised skill set and approach across various schools, differing from the well-being advisers' clinical focus;
- He went on to clarify that challenge courses are integrated within degrees and are intracurricular, not extracurricular;
- In response to JG's broader question about the nature of changes to the curriculum, he said that the term 'transformation' accurately reflects the implementation of departures from traditional paths, which are not mere evolutionary changes but significant shifts designed to redefine educational paradigms at the University;
- The focus has been on implementing core experiences and knowledge that it is believed every student should have before graduating, which requires more radical rethinking than just mere gradual improvement;
- In response to a remark by BN, CH said that addressing the over assessment issue has been challenging, given its pervasiveness and decentralised nature across different academic areas;
- BN asked about the strategies the University is planning to enhance communication with students to ensure they understand the advancements and current quality of their educational environment;
- CH replied that this is a critical area which can be significantly improved as communication strategies have historically been inconsistent between central and school level messaging and this discrepancy sometimes results in mixed messages or lack of communication on important issues, affecting student perceptions and University ratings in surveys like the NSS;
- This is an ongoing challenge and attempts are being made to balance this with responsive and engaging communication, moving beyond formal emails to more direct and empathetic interactions that resonate with the student body;
- Responding to an enquiry from MB, CH said that, in designing the challenge courses, care was taken not to encroach on the core content of degree programmes and that these courses are integrated within the existing available elective space, to enrich but not replace essential curriculum components;
- WD suggested organising a future event for General Council members to facilitate a deeper understanding of transitional changes the University is undergoing;
- CH agreed with this proposed initiative and suggested input from Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary, Students.

GR thanked CH for a useful and productive meeting and looked forward to opportunities for further collaboration.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 15 April 2025

The minutes were approved.

4. Matters arising from the meeting held on 15 April 2025

None.

5. Draft Resolutions

Draft Resolutions No. 3-5/2025: Creation of Personal Chairs (various)

Draft Resolution No. 6/2025: Undergraduate Degree Programme Regulations

Draft Resolution No. 7/2025: Postgraduate Degree Programme Regulations

Draft Resolutions No. 8-87/2025: Creation of Personal Chairs (various)

- The above Draft Resolutions had been previously circulated to the Business Committee;
- Members were content to approve these, noting nothing controversial in amendments to the Degree Regulations, but had remarked on the affordability of appointments for Personal Chairs;
- In response to an email from WD, Court Services had subsequently clarified that issues of affordability, risk assessment and EDI are covered in reports to Court;
- The committee approved the Resolutions.

6. Any other Business

None.