

## General Council video FAQ's

### 1. What is the statutory basis of the General Council?

a. **Universities (Scotland) Act 1858.** The General Councils in the four Ancient Scottish Universities (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and St Andrews) were established by this Act, as part of the governance structure. The aim in setting up the General Councils was to ensure that the graduates of each University had a continuing voice in the way its affairs are run. Further information on the statutory origins and subsequent legislation concerning the General Council is given in the General Council Constitutional Arrangements. Part 1 of this sets out the Legislative context.

b. **Ordinances.** Each individual University is governed by its own rules or Ordinances, which specify how that University conducts its affairs in compliance with the relevant legislation. The Ordinances of the University of Edinburgh of relevance to the General Council are listed in Appendix II of the General Council Constitutional Arrangements.

### 2. Who can be members of the General Council?

**The membership of the General Council of the University of Edinburgh as at October 2025 is over 300,000.** It overwhelmingly consists of graduates of the University but also includes senior staff and members of the University Court. The membership is defined by an Ordinance of the University Court, now Ordinance 217.

Further information about the membership Ordinance is given in Part II of the Constitutional Arrangements document. Proposals to extend those eligible for General Council membership were approved by the Privy Council in February 2025 with an implementation date of 1 October decided by the University Court.

**Register of Members.** The Higher Education Scotland Act 1966 (Section 10) requires the University to maintain a register of members of the General Council. This is the responsibility of the Registrar, not the General Council. Ordinance No. 213 reflects the University's secure management of personal data in the digital age. The conditions under which personal data about General Council members are held are in strict compliance with contemporary data protection regulations [Regulation (EU) 2016/679 General Data Protection Regulation].

### 3. What is the Role of the General Council?

**The General Council is part of the formal governance structure of the University,** and its views must be formally sought before the University Court can change any Ordinance or University Regulation.

The General Council also:

- **Elects the Chancellor of the University.** (This election only occurs infrequently. The process involved is set out in Part 3 of the Constitutional Arrangements.)
- **Has three Assessors on the University Court,** on which three places are reserved for General Council members. These posts are filled by an open appointment process jointly managed by the Court and the Business Committee.
- **Elects its own Business Committee,** the working executive of the General Council. (Further details of the process involved are given in Part V of the Constitutional Arrangements.)
- **Ensures the Registrar (the University Secretary) maintains a Register of General Council members** (as part of much wider contacts database managed by appropriately qualified professional staff within Development & Alumni).
- **Has the statutory right to comment on Draft Resolutions and Ordinances** referred to it by the University Council.

Since the establishment of the General Council in 1858, its role has gradually changed as universities have professionalised over the years. The principal responsibilities can be summarised as follows:

- Formal (Statutory) Responsibilities;
- Influencing & Advising;
- Ambassadors for the University.

**The present role of the General Council, and particularly its Business Committee, is akin to that of being ‘wise advisers’ or ‘critical friends’ to the University.**

#### 4. How is the General Council organised?

**The General Council is part of the University Secretary’s Group (USG)** and for budget and operational aspects, it is located within Development and Alumni (D&A).

The **Secretary of the General Council** is appointed to serve as the pivot point between the University and the General Council. This ‘pro bono’ appointment is supported by an **Assistant Secretary**, a full- time position on the University staff, working from the General Council Office in Charles Stewart House.

**The current Secretary is Dr William Duncan. The Assistant Secretary is Alison McNulty.**

#### 5. What are Half Yearly Meetings?

The Business Committee organises Half Yearly Meetings open to all General Council members, held on Saturdays in February and June. These are important events.

- In February, the Principal presents his Annual Report about the University and there is the possibility to question him on any matter relating to the University.
- The June meeting allows the Business Committee to report to and engage directly with the wider membership.

The Half Yearly Meetings are livestreamed to enable those General Council members who cannot attend in person to participate in these events in real time as well as to view them on video via the General Council website thereafter.

## 6. What is the Business Committee and what does it do?

**Role.** Between the statutory Half Yearly Meetings open to all General Council members, the responsibilities of the General Council are delegated to its Business Committee, whose primary role is managing the 'business' of the General Council. It is not responsible for dealing with the 'business' of running the University, as that responsibility lies with Court, Senate, and the senior executive staff, led by the Principal, but it can have influence through, for example, its statutory right to comment on 'matters which affect the well-being and prosperity of the University.'

### Membership:

- Twenty members of the Council, elected by the Council or co-opted;
- Secretary of the General Council
- Convener and Vice-Convener, appointed by the Business Committee;
- Three General Council Assessors appointed to the University Court;
- Chancellor's Assessor

Most members are eligible to serve for 4 years, with the possibility of serving a further 4 years, subject to re-election or re-appointment.

**Election to Business Committee.** There is an annual online election to replace those standing down from the Business Committee. The procedures for this election are set out in a Protocol for election to the Business Committee.

**Meetings.** The Business Committee meets 5 times a year, normally soon after the University Court meetings, and receives an oral report from one of the Assessors to Court on the open agenda items discussed by the Court.

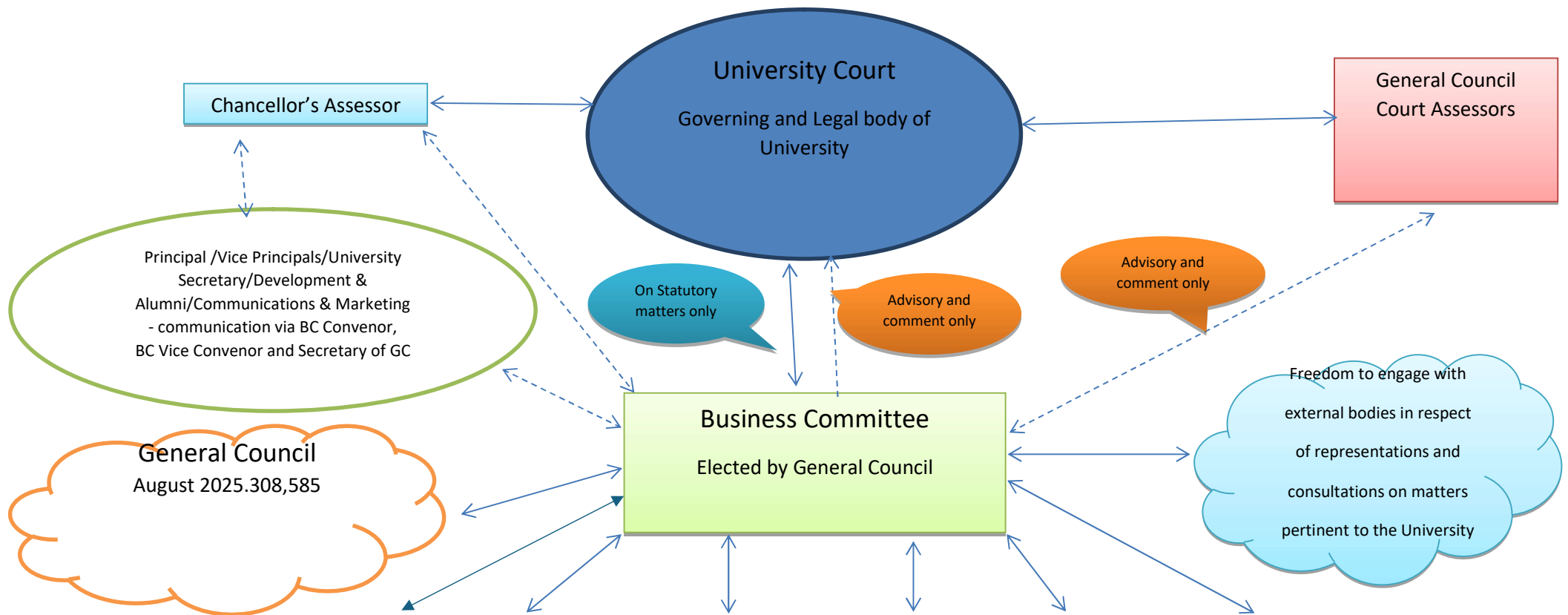
## 7. What are the Standing Committees?

Every elected or co-opted member of the Business Committee is allocated each year to one of the Standing Committees. The Business Committee has five Standing Committees, which are its working Committees:

- **ACADEMIC (ASC):** receives updates from student representatives and senior staff, principally academic, but also others involved in learning and student support services.




- **CONSTITUTIONAL (CSC):** is responsible for all matters relating to the General Council’s constitutional arrangements and formal documents.
- **FINANCE AND SERVICES (FSSC):** receives updates on financial matters affecting the University and other key professional services such as Buildings & Estates, HR, and Digital & Information systems. It oversees the General Council Office budget.
- **INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (ISC):** considers the key contemporary issues in the University’s international engagement globally and on campus.
- **PUBLIC AFFAIRS (PASC):** is responsible for matters that affect the public face of the University and the General Council, including media and communications. It has a particular interest in the links with D&A. It assists the Secretariat in the planning of General Council events.

**8. What are the Key Relationships for the Business Committee?**





Legend:

-  two way blue arrow is for existing two way communication between bodies
-  one way blue arrow is for existing one way communication between bodies
-  dashed blue arrow is for existing communication on certain matters, one and two way