

**Minutes of the joint Academic Standing Committee and International Standing Committee Meeting
on Tuesday 11 November 2025 at 4.30pm
Online via Teams**

Present: Graeme Reid, Convener of ASC
Ann Cormack, Convener of ISC
Matthew Epton
Judy Hardy
Dorothy Welch
Richard Andrews
William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council
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, VP (Students)

1. Welcome and apologies

The Convener of ASC (GR) welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the session, which was a joint meeting with members of ISC, to hear from Professor Colm Harmon, VP Students (CH), who is leaving the University in early December to take up the role of Provost at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Australia.

Apologies received from John Gillies.

2. Presentation by Professor Colm Harmon, VP Students

CH began by saying how much he had valued his engagement with the Committee over the years. He has much enjoyed the discussions and thought them to be mutually beneficial. He highlighted his willingness to continue contributing insights from overseas and had provided the Secretary (WD) with his contact details in Australia.

CH had been provided with an advance list of topics of interest to the Committee and these were addressed in the following discussion:

Update on Curriculum Transformation

- CH addressed the practical and financial challenges facing the University in implementing Curriculum Transformation (CT), acknowledging a shift in focus due to the need to reduce operating costs;
- CH explained that, while the CT programme has officially ended, its ethos and objectives are being integrated into the broader Learning and Teaching Strategy and this has been approved by Senate. This integration aims to shift activities from design to delivery, ensuring that the transformational elements of the CT continue under the new governance structures within the operational framework of Schools and Colleges;
- CH is optimistic about the continued influence of CT principles in academic offerings, citing examples of successful implementation like the challenge courses. These popular courses not only enrich the curriculum but also streamline academic offerings by potentially reducing the number of smaller, less integrated courses;

- He noted that the University Initiatives Programme Board (UIPB) is now prioritising projects with direct financial implications, whereas those like CT are seen as long-term investments;
- RA expressed appreciation of the sustained commitment and impact of the CT work led by CH. He expressed some regret that financial realities are impacting the full potential of these educational innovations;
- WD suggested the General Council could play a constructive role within its remit of supporting the 'well-being and prosperity' of the University by keeping a focus on maintaining its well-being in the medium term, not just immediate financial concerns.

Course closures

- GR enquired about the recent closures of courses and programmes at the University, questioning if these closures are as negative as portrayed or if they represent a necessary "tidying up";
- CH responded by explaining that the closures are not as inherently negative as reported. Some are overdue necessary steps towards streamlining and managing the University's extensive catalogue of courses and programmes, which is disproportionately large compared to other institutions with similar student numbers;
- He explained that the volume of offerings at the University had not been critically assessed for some time, and upon review, it was clear that maintaining some programmes was not viable, adding that, while he supports maintaining small, valuable courses, there must be a compensating balance with larger, revenue-generating courses to sustain them financially;
- CH thought there was a need for a more systematic approach to evaluating and managing the array of courses and programmes offered, ensuring they are justified and sustainable;
- Despite necessary thinning out, he acknowledged that the implementation of these changes has been somewhat challenging and has faced considerable resistance from within the academic community.

Impact of budget reductions on the Student Experience

- BN asked about the impact of financial cuts on the student experience at the University;
- CH acknowledged the potential risks associated with financial cuts to the student experience.
- He emphasised the success of the recently introduced student support model and stressed the importance of prioritising the student experience and ensuring that essential services, like student support, are not compromised due to cost reductions.

Institute for Academic Development (IAD)

- GR enquired about the future of the functions performed by the IAD, which is reported to be closing. He highlighted its importance in supporting students and staff and facilitating the sharing of best practices across the University;
- CH explained that he was limited in what he could report due to not being part of the consultation process over IAD's future, noting that Lucy Evans was leading on this.

Contributions from alumni

- AC asked on how the University alumni, especially those overseas, regard its reputation given actions being taken to reduce its cost base:

- CH recalled his motivation for joining the University, driven by the desire to highlight its strengths in education and student affairs, which he felt were underappreciated by comparison with University's research reputation;
- He described the challenges today's students face and the need to adapt the University's educational offerings to meet contemporary needs;
- CH mentioned international interest in the University's innovative approaches to student support, which are becoming topics of global discussion. He supported AC's view about improving communicating these educational strategies to alumni, with alumni communications possibly including more about students' achievements and career progressions, rather than focusing largely on research achievements;
- CH expressed a shared optimism with AC about the future impact of the University's ongoing reforms and welcomed his openness to continuing to the dialogue around the University's evolution and reputation internationally.

National Student Survey (NSS)

- GR asked about the current status of student satisfaction at the University, particularly referencing the latest results from the NSS;
- CH explained that the recent NSS showed there had been significant improvements in certain aspects, particularly the feedback times on assessments, which has been an issue of longstanding concern in some Schools. This demonstrated the necessity of maintaining focus on areas of student feedback and starting to address other areas like assessment rubrics;
- CH commented internal metrics now provide better insights compared to the past, allowing the University to validate its progress independently of the NSS metrics;
- Despite local improvements, other institutions had also improved, making it difficult for the University to advance in the rankings;
- CH discussed the limitations of the NSS, suggesting it reflects a broader cumulative student experience rather than immediate changes, which may not be as perceptible in the survey's results. He pointed out that postgraduate students, who typically have shorter durations at the University, show more immediate recognition of improvements compared to undergraduates, whose survey responses reflect their cumulative experience;
- Despite its flaws, he expected the NSS will continue to be influential, especially as government policies might increasingly align resources and regulatory measures to survey outcomes;

Winter graduations and potential disruption

- WD asked what measures are being taken to avoid a repetition at the Winter graduations of the disruptive and unsettling protests that marred the Summer graduation ceremonies.
- CH acknowledged the adverse impact that these demonstrations had on those at the summer graduations and that foot-stomping and clapping during ceremonies created safety and respect concerns.
- CH said that discussions had taken place about how to avoid a repetition and these had focussed on the Schools where disruption had been most notable but acknowledged the difficulties in managing politically charged environments at graduation events;
- Specific measures included reminding both staff and students about the decorum expected at such events, emphasising respect and considering the broader implications of protests during such ceremonies;

- CH commented that the protests are part of a national campaign, making local mitigation challenging. The University had attempted to provide alternative platforms for expressing dissent, including proposing an arrangement to archive the protests in a scholarly manner within the University's records but, disappointingly, these suggestions had been rejected when informed that opposing viewpoints would be included in the archive.

Future of the role of VP Students

- JH expressed disappointment that a replacement of the VP (Students) is not being recruited;
- CH appreciated these remarks but explained that Lucy Evans will take over many of his duties and is exceptionally capable, although unlike CH, she will not be part of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT);
- JH suggested that this is an important issue for the Business Committee to consider, given the impact of CH's work and the institutional decisions taken at SLT level.

The discussion concluded with a warm acknowledgment of CH's contributions and expressions of good wishes for the future. CH expressed his gratitude to the Committee and emphasised his willingness to remain engaged following his move to Australia.

CH then left the meeting.