

## **Minutes of the Business Committee Meeting held on Thursday 16 October 2025 5.15pm in the Raeburn Room, Old College**

<b>Present</b>	Mr Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee
	Dr Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee (online)
	Dr William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council
	Ms Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council
	Dr Lucy Hunter Blackburn
	Mr Lorn Macneal
	Professor Alice Brown
	Mr Jock Millican
	Mr Max Browning (online)
	Dr Bruce Nelson (online)
	Ms Ann Cormack (online)
	Professor Graeme Reid
	Ms Candice Donnelly
	Dr Kate Richards (online)
	Dr Matthew Epton
	Mr Devin Scobie
	Professor John Gillies
	Dr Dorothy Welch
	Dr Mary Gunn (online)
	Ms Jessica Williamson
	Professor Judy Hardy
	Mr Thomas Wrench
<b>In attendance</b>	EUSA President, Ash Scholz
	EUSA VP Community, Arkit Ghimire
	EUSA VP Education, Katya Amott

### **1. Welcome and Apologies**

The Convener of the Business Committee, Mr Gordon Cairns, welcomed all attendees to the first meeting of the session, particularly new members: Matthew Epton (ASC), Lorn Macneal and Jessica Williamson (FSSC); Kate Richards and Thomas Wrench (PASC). Devin Scobie, Dorothy Welch and Judy Hardy return to the committee for a further term, and a special mention was given to Manya Buchan, the new Convener of FSSC.

Apologies had been received from Richard Andrews, Alastair Dunlop and Sarah Wolffe.

The Convener introduced Ash Scholz (AS), President of the Students' Association, and invited them to address the committee on the EUSA sabbatical officers' individual and joint priorities and objectives for the academic year 2025-26.

### **2. Presentation from Ash Scholz, President of EUSA**

- AS began by explaining the role of the Students' Association, which is separate from the University, but both work together to enhance student experience at UoE;
- Other sabbatical officers present at the meeting were Katya Amott, VP Education and Akrit Ghimire, VP Community;
- During the presentation, AS detailed various significant issues currently affecting students, including the cost of living, concerns about the future of higher education, political activism on campus, the impact and ethics of artificial intelligence, job market uncertainties, student loneliness and the need for the University to handle basic administrative and support structures more effectively;
- The objectives for the year were focused around three main goals: 1) Centering student voices throughout a period of challenging financial and structural change, with particular support for students from marginalised backgrounds; 2) Making students' lives easier through affordable

housing, transport, and better academic processes; and 3) Pushing for institutional change around issues that matter to students e.g., racial justice;

- Each sabbatical officer has specific projects and focus areas;
- The President focuses on strategic University changes and ensuring student voices are heard in decision-making processes; organises round table discussions with SLT and other student representatives from across the University, not just the sabbatical team; finding more accessible spaces where students can socialise more;
- John Rappa, VP Activities and Services, is implementing material support initiatives like a participation grant to allow students access to e.g., sports clubs, and a breakfast club in Potterrow where students can access a free meal from 8.30-11am, to help alleviate financial burdens and foster a sense of community;
- Arkit Ghimrie, VP Community is working towards improving options for affordable and nutritious food as well as advocating for better housing and transport policies;
- Katya Amott, VP Education is focused on transparency within academic processes and giving students a voice in proposed changes to the curriculum portfolio to include more interdisciplinary studies and transferable skills, as well as addressing colonisation in the curriculum;
- Syjil Ramjathan, VP Welfare is dedicated to enhancing student safety and belonging and working on initiatives to streamline support services, and address reform processes around e.g., the recommendations of the Race Review and the Code of Student Conduct;
- AS concluded the presentation by speaking about current projects such as the launch of an activism toolkit, and the continuous nature of the work of the EUSA officers, acknowledging that it often involves initiating long-term changes that may only come to fruition after their tenure has ended;
- This ongoing process allows each of the sabbatical team to build upon their predecessor's efforts, emphasising the gradual but steady improvement towards making the University a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

## Discussion

- **Relationship with the University's Senior Leadership Team (SLT).** In response to a question from DS, AS reported that SLT are largely supportive towards EUSA but, while interactions on issues where both sides agree are positive, there can be difficulty when disagreements arise, as SLT can become defensive around uncomfortable yet necessary topics which can frustrate productive dialogue. EUSA's view is that open and candid discussions work best;
- **Teviot Row Union.** TW asked if its closure had affected student collegiality. AS said that, initially, the closure of Teviot was a disappointment for many students due to the emotional and social bonds they had formed within that space, adding that, because the refurbishment has been ongoing for two years now, many current students largely haven't experienced Teviot, so that other venues such as Potterrow, have risen in popularity;
- Significant efforts were made to enhance Potterrow during Teviot's closure, making it a pleasant alternative space. It has been equipped with large screens for sports viewing and other events, encouraging communal activities and student interaction similar to those previously experienced in Teviot;
- There remains the hope that, once Teviot reopens it will recapture its role as a key venue for student bonding and social activities. The reintegration of familiar elements such as the moose decoration is anticipated to revive the traditional atmosphere and draw students back to Teviot;
- Regarding the re-opening timeline, AS confirmed that Teviot is projected to reopen in Spring 2026, ideally by March, pending completion of construction work and interior set up. WD said

that this aligns favorably with the General Council's wish to hold its June 2026 HYM there. Continuous updates and engagement with contractors indicate that Teviot will be ready for use by then;

- **Financial challenges faced by students.** LB asked about the rising cost of living in Edinburgh. AS identified Scottish students as being particularly vulnerable to financial pressures, despite the absence of tuition fees for them, due to high living costs when they arrive in Edinburgh. Another group facing difficulties are international students who are limited by visa restrictions to working only 20 hours per week, which is often insufficient to meet their financial needs. The issue of escalating rent and the necessity for many students to have to work part-time to afford living expenses were highlighted as widespread concerns across the student body;
- **Student housing.** LM asked about the impact of City Council policies on Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and the shift towards purpose-built student accommodation blocks. AS noted the convenience of purpose built student flats, especially for international students, as they often do not require guarantors and include all bills in a single payment. However, there is a recognised preference among students to live within the community in areas like Marchmont and Bruntsfield for a more integrated experience, rather than being set apart in student-only residences;
- AS talked about instances where students have had to resort to temporary or emergency housing solutions, such as sleeping in hostels or couch-surfing. AS described initial provision by the University for temporary housing in shared spaces but acknowledged ongoing difficulties in securing permanent accommodation. The discussion reflected the broader issue of insufficient student maintenance loans not aligning with increasing rental costs, forcing students into precarious living situations for extended periods;
- **Top objective for EUSA President.** In response to a query by DW about what AS would most like to achieve as President, AS said that prime objectives include: the establishment of the Green Hub, which would be an important addition to the campus, the creation of a prayer space that accommodates the main six world faiths, and the provision of regular free meals to students, potentially across various schools within the University. Beyond these tangible projects, the broader aim is to ensure the University navigates its financial challenges with a focused commitment to student priorities;
- **Participation rates in EUSA elections.** MB asked how many of the approx. 50,000 students voted in the election of EUSA office bearers. AS responded by stating that approximately 12,000 votes are cast each year, equating to about 20-25% of the student body, which is similar to other universities. MB asked whether this figure was the number of individual voters or the total number of votes cast, given that students are able to cast multiple votes across different categories. AS reported that, while 12,000 votes were cast overall, the actual number of individual voters was between 7000-8000, noting a recent upturn in voter turnout post-pandemic, reaching higher levels than before, indicating a positive trend in student engagement;
- **Student feedback.** MB also asked whether SLT genuinely incorporates student feedback into their strategic planning or if they merely acknowledge it without substantive action. AS said the SLT response varies by issue. On matters closely related to student experience, student views are often considered integral. However, on broader University issues, student input tends to receive less attention, reflecting a degree of scepticism about student contributions to more general University matters. Despite this, AS underlined that there are areas where conversations have led to positive action, particularly in improving feedback mechanisms within the University;
- **Student satisfaction.** AB asked about student satisfaction at the University, acknowledging its comparatively low ranking in this area compared to other universities in Scotland and the UK. AS highlighted tangible benefits that have enhanced the student experience such as

improvements in specific areas like timely feedback, which has positively influenced student satisfaction scores, and the reform of the Board of Examiners, allowing students to receive their degrees earlier and thereby enter the job market or apply for postgraduate study sooner;

- AS also referred to ongoing challenges in how SLT communicates with and makes itself present to the student body. The perceived distance between students and senior leaders, who often seem only visible during events like graduation, contributes to a feeling of dissatisfaction, and emphasised the need for a more human approach from University leaders to improve student satisfaction;
- **Lecture accommodation space.** KR asked if there was sufficient space to accommodate high student numbers in lecture settings. KA confirmed this was an issue at the University. Students are told to arrive early to secure seating, and overflow areas are provided where lectures are livestreamed, which was felt to be particularly unsatisfactory for international students paying high fees. Recording lectures was a potential solution, although some lecturers have resisted this idea, fearing it might discourage in-person attendance;
- **Support for students out with the central campus area.** BN asked about this. AS said that the Vet School has its own student society which is very active and talked about the development of community and sports activities at the King's Buildings campus such as badminton courts and the King's Fest festival. Also mentioned were ongoing efforts to improve transport between campuses, and the importance of maintaining the shuttle bus service as it greatly benefits students who would otherwise rely on overcrowded public buses, and advocating for subsidised travel to the Easterbush campus;
- **Data on major issues affecting students.** ME asked if EUSA routinely collects such data. AS said a student society -Slurp - conducts annual surveys on student homelessness, gathering both qualitative and quantitative data across various campuses. This information is shared with the University and strengthens EUSA's case when discussing these issues with senior leadership. Additionally, data is collected on participation in breakfast clubs, with a significant increase in attendance noted this academic year compared to last, further supporting advocacy for this type of initiative;
- **Sense of belonging** JW asked about the sense of belonging to the University among students, particularly those groups who might feel this challenge most acutely. AS noted that international students, especially from China, often struggle with feelings of disconnect, due to cultural and environmental adjustments. Additionally, some Scottish students can also experience a sense of alienation, feeling marginalised by perceived classism within the University despite being local.

The Convener warmly thanked AS and colleagues for an interesting and informative presentation. The sabbatical officers then left the meeting.

### **3. Minutes of the Meeting of 26 June 2025**

The committee approved the minutes

### **4. Matters arising from the Minutes of 26 June 2025**

#### **Item 5: Co-option to Business Committee**

Two vacancies arose since the elections held in February. Using the delegated powers given by the Constitutional Arrangements, the Business Committee agreed, unanimously by correspondence, to **co-opt Tom Wrench** to replace Tamara Raidt **and to co-opt Lorn Macneal** to replace Kirsty MacGregor. These co-options are for the remainder of the terms of those being replaced, being until July 2028 for Tom and July 2029 for Lorn.

## **Item 8: Secretary's Report**

### Race Review

This major two-part Review was released in late July and received widespread mixed media coverage and reaction. An Implementation Group has been established to advise on the many recommendations made in the Review Reports.

### Community Plan

- This was launched on 8 October 2025 at EFI. WD had attended.
- JH expressed disappointment at the lack of external input to the launch
- WD commented that all the speeches were from those within the University, who spoke well, but there seemed to be a significant number of external no-shows. He will give feedback on the arrangements when he next meets the new Head of Communications, Niall Bradley;
- AB noted the necessity of improving town and gown initiatives.

## **5. Observations by General Council Assessors**

The University's governing body, the University Court, met on 6 October 2025.

Below is a summary of the key topics discussed:

### **Update from the Principal**

Peter Mathieson, Principal & Vice-Chancellor, updated Court on policy developments in the Scottish and UK higher education sectors.

### **Finance and planning**

Court received an overview of the University's financial position and on-going work to ensure financial sustainability.

### **Student Surveys 2025: Results and Responses**

Court received a report on the results of the 2025 National Student Survey, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. It was noted that the University had seen notable improvements in its results in all three surveys, especially in those areas that had been of particular focus of recent work to improve the student experience. In national rankings, these gains had been masked by improvements also achieved at other institutions. Court welcomed the progress made and the recognition that further efforts would be required to consolidate and build on this progress.

### **Sector-level Governance Report**

Court received detailed reassurances that the University's existing systems and practices were in line with those promoted in the 'lessons for the sector' identified in the recent report into previous financial oversight and decision making at the University of Dundee. Court also discussed opportunities for further enhancing governance practices.

### **Other items**

Regular reports were received from the Students' Association, the Sports Union, the Development and Alumni Office and Court's committees. Court approved revisions to the Remuneration Committee Framework for Decision Making, the Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblowing) Policy & Procedure and the Anti-Fraud Policy. Court approved the bestowal of benefactor status to two major donors, the appointment of trustees to a philanthropic trust and a change in the ownership of some museum artefacts to reflect longstanding

practical arrangements. Court noted the establishment of the Responsible Investment Advisory Group. Court also approved required funding to complete essential Estates and IS contracts.

More detailed information on the University Court, including the membership, agenda, open papers and approved minutes can be found on the University Court webpages:

<https://governance-strategic-planning.ed.ac.uk/governance/university-court>

### **Discussion**

DS expressed concern that almost all the items on the Court agenda were closed, greatly inhibiting what the Assessors are allowed to report to BC.

### **6. Business Committee Work Plan for 2025-26**

- The Convener referred to paper 3, previously circulated, and which contained the following information about Business Committee meetings for the remainder of the session;
- Business Committee Meetings begin at 5.15pm, preceded by tea/coffee in the Carstares Room from 5pm;
- All meetings will take place in the Raeburn Room, Old College, unless otherwise advised;
- The meetings on **4 December, 30 April and 25 June** will include reports from the Conveners of each of the Standing Committees of meetings in Semesters One and Two;
- The meeting on **5 March** will include a presentation from the University's Chief Financial Officer (tbc).

**Action:- WD to contact James Gray to invite him to address the BC on 5 March 2026.**

### **7. Standing Committees' Work Plans for 2025-26**

Paper 4, previously circulated, gave information about SC membership and dates of meetings.

- Conveners of the Standing Committees discussed their plans for meetings in the coming session;
- Graeme Reid, Convener of the **Academic Standing Committee** mentioned two scheduled meetings: one on 11 November with Professor Colm Harmon, VP Students who is invited to address the Committee before he leaves the University to take up an appointment in Australia. Lucy Evans, who is taking over much of Colm Harmon's role, will attend a joint meeting with ISC on 31 March, focusing on ongoing strategies and improvements in student and academic affairs, with a particular focus on international students;
- The new Convener of the **Finance and Services Standing Committee**, Manya Buchan, talked about a programme of meetings to include the Director of Estates (23 October) and Vice Principal Information Services (19 February); the Director of HR will be invited to the final meeting in May;
- Questions about student accommodation were raised, emphasising concerns over access to necessary facilities such as lecture theatres and the impact on student satisfaction;
- KR mentioned regulatory standards from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, particularly about facilities, hinting at broader compliance and quality issues that might be present in other areas as well;
- Noted that, unlike previous years, the Director of Finance will be invited to address the entire Business Committee at its meeting in March 2026. Specific issues relating to the University's financial challenges will be discussed, with particular focus on the overall strategy to address these issues;

- Ann Cormack, Convener of the **International Standing Committee**, said that the main challenge for arranging meetings of ISC revolves around finding times to suit its international members who are based in multiple time zones, from India to the UK and USA. To address this, meetings are being scheduled for midday in the UK;
- The content for upcoming meetings of ISC includes engaging with Chris Yeomans, Director of Global Engagement (4 November), focusing on alumni relationships and local engagement worldwide which link to crucial issues such as student satisfaction, international student recruitment, the University's global ranking, financial income and overall reputation;
- Noted the absence of a VP International since the departure of Professor James Smith, with responsibilities now shared across the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Discussions are planned to evaluate how effectively this redistribution is working and explore the implementation of the global strategy amid resource constraints;
- Emphasised the potential role of the University's alumni network which has grown significantly, suggesting it could be better utilised to support the University's goals;
- Alice Brown, Convener of **Public Affairs Standing Committee** (PASC) reported on the Committee's initial meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> October with Niall Bradley (NB) the Interim Director of Communications and Marketing (CAM). The agenda had covered a range of topics, notably the organisational restructuring of CAM as part of an ongoing review;
- The Committee also discussed communication strategies on sensitive issues that impact the University's reputation, such as finances and budget restrictions, ethical investments and topics such as the Race Review and Sex and Gender issues;
- Discussion also explored town-gown relations, parliamentary relations, and the importance of publicising positive stories about the University to counterbalance negative press;
- The open and frank discussion also addressed criticisms of the University's responsive rather than proactive communication methods and members provided suggestions about how to improve some of the issues highlighted. NB had agreed to provide future updates;
- Highlights from PASC's main business agenda, included: positive feedback from the recent "In Conversation" event held on 7 October, with Lord Wallace and Joanna Cherry, chaired by the Rector, Simon Fanshawe, and discussions about future plans included the latest video project about General Council Prince Philip Scholarships, an event to showcase the work of one of the Colleges and the production of Winter Billet;
- Preparations for future events included the Christmas reception on 9 December and the HYMs in February and June 2026. Professor Marion Thain, Director of EFI, will be the after-lunch speaker at the February lunch in the Playfair Library;
- Suggested inviting Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact, to a future meeting to update on the Community Plan but, given the extensive programme of PASC's activities, it is possible that the next meeting on 12 March will be an internal meeting to cover key issues and smaller committee groups will be established to take the workplan forward between meetings.

## **8. Draft Resolutions of the University Court**

None received.

## **9. Appointment/re-appointment of General Council Secretary**

- This Item was taken last on the agenda after WD had left the meeting;
- The Convener led a discussion on the approaching end of Dr William Duncan's (WD) four-year term as Secretary in July 2026 and the process of appointing his successor;
- GC reported that WD is content to continue in the role for a further four-year term, subject to good health, but is happy to step back from seeking re-appointment if others are interested;

- The decision with regards to re-appointment of the Secretary, typically informal under the current constitution, allows the Business Committee considerable autonomy;
- Members expressed an openness to William continuing in the role, while also recognising that future procedures should potentially be more formal and structured to ensure additional legitimacy to the appointment process;
- There is perhaps a need to also reconsider the duration of the terms of office of both Convener and Secretary, possibly staggering terms to prevent simultaneous turnover of key positions to ensure continuity and stability;
- Candice Donnelly, Convener of the Constitutional Standing Committee, has agreed to undertake a review of the Constitution but emphasised that, as the new appointment will be presented as a Motion to the June 2026 HYM, there is insufficient time to implement substantial changes before William's term expires and, given these time constraints, would also need to know promptly if the appointment is to be opened up to other interested parties;
- Members were in favour of a gradual shift towards formalising future processes over immediate changes, considering both the time limitations and the importance of maintaining effective governance during this transition period;
- Highlighted that the post is pro-bono and unremunerated, which elicited a surprised reaction from several of the committee members as the role of Secretary is an important one and involves a significant time commitment;
- Members agreed that WD has done "a wonderful job", that he is highly regarded within the University and that support for his re-appointment would be the best outcome for the Business Committee.

***Action:- Members are invited to contact GC, confidentially, in the next two weeks, if they would like to express an interest in the role of Secretary or to further discuss any of the points mentioned above.***

## **10. Report from the Secretary of the General Council**

The Convener referred to Paper 5, which had been circulated previously and contained the following information for noting:

### **a. Meeting of the Secretaries, Clerks and Conveners of the General Councils of the 'Ancient' Universities in Scotland**

This was held on 4 August and hosted by the University of Glasgow. It had been intended to hold it as an in-person meeting but due to adverse weather affecting travel to Glasgow, it had to be held online. Dr Bruce Nelson and Dr William Duncan attended. There was an extensive agenda of matters of shared interest. The minute of the meeting, being produced by Glasgow, will be circulated when available. The University of St Andrews will host the 2026 meeting.

### **b. Summer Graduations**

Many of these were disrupted by demonstrations by the graduands about the University's investment portfolio and the implied support this gave to Israel in the war in Gaza. These protests made it uncomfortable for Business Committee members to be on stage as part of the academic procession.

### **c. Ordinance 217**

The widening of General Council membership allowed by this Ordinance was implemented smoothly on 1 October 2025. This resulted in about 25,000 new members being added to the General Council Register, but the University only has email addresses for 60% of these, and so only they will receive General Council communications.



**d. Videos about General Council**

These are available to view on the General Council website and have been well received.

**e. 'In conversation' event on 7 October at St Cecilia's Hall**

This conversation between Joanna Cherry and Lord Jim Wallace, chaired by Simon Fanshawe was very well received by the 100 members who attended the event, with very positive feedback. The Public Affairs Standing Committee will consider options for further 'Town and Gown' events.

**f. February 2026 Half Yearly Meeting**

This will be held on 14 February at EFI and followed by lunch in the Playfair Library, when the guest speaker will be Professor Marion Thain, Director of EFI.

**11. General Council Archive**

The Convener referred to Paper 6, circulated previously, for information.

**12. Any other competent business**

None.

**13. Date of next meeting – 4 December 2025**

The next meeting will take place on Thursday 4 December 2025 at 5.15pm in the Raeburn Room.