

## Minutes of the Business Committee Meeting held on Thursday 4 December 2025 at 5.15pm in the Raeburn Room, Old College

<b>Present</b>	Dr William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council	
	Ms Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council	
	Mr Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee	
	Dr Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee	
	Professor Richard Andrews	Mr Jock Millican
	Dr Lucy Blackburn	Mr David Ovens (online)
	Professor Alice Brown	Professor Graeme Reid
	Ms Many Buchan (online)	Dr Kate Richards
	Ms Ann Cormack (online)	Mr Devin Scobie
	Dr Matthew Epton (online)	Dr Dorothy Welch (online)
	Professor John Gillies	Ms Jessica Williamson (online)
	Dr Mary Gunn (online)	Sarah Wolffe, KC
	Professor Judy Hardy	Mr Tom Wrench (online)
	Mr Lorn Macneal	

### 1. Welcome and Apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone and noted apologies from Candice Donnelly and Alastair Dunlop.

### 2. a. Minutes of the Meeting of 16 October 2025

The minutes were approved.

### b. Matters arising from the Minutes of 16 October 2025

None.

### 3. Observations by General Council Assessors

- The agenda for the Court meeting having been previously circulated (Paper 2), the Convener invited Sarah Wolffe (SW) to report on the open items from the Court meeting on 1 December 2025;
- SW reported the meeting had been relocated from Saint Cecilia's Hall due to student protests but she felt that the Raeburn room was more conducive to effective and positive discussion, which largely centred on the University's financial circumstances, with more diverse participation from a wider range of contributions from those present;
- Prior to the meeting, significant concerns had been raised in her various discussions with staff, reflecting a heightened sensitivity to the current challenging issues;
- Item 3 - The Principal's Report
  - A detailed report from the Principal, Sir Peter Mathieson, prompted key questions about the expected future state of the University after the current financial challenges had been addressed. This included discussions on the sustainability of diverse courses and the broader impact on the University's mission and offerings;
  - A two-year financial plan initiated in June 2025 was still in its early stages, with awareness among the University executive of the potential adverse impacts of possible budget cuts or resizing;

- The Senior Leadership Team emphasised its commitment to approach any necessary cuts or adjustments in a manner that maintains fairness and preserves the integrity of the University's offerings. The goal is to avoid purely financially driven cuts;
- The discussion recognised the necessity of maintaining a balanced approach, ensuring that less financially self-sufficient departments, which are cross subsidised from profitable areas, are not the only focus of financial adjustments;
- Item 4 – Committee Business
- The minute of Senate meeting demonstrated a desire to better understand its responsibilities, noting that previous minutes had indicated some confusion over its role;
- Item 8 – Finance and Planning
- Closed item. SW explained the absence of reporting on financial discussions was due to their confidentiality;
- Concerns were raised regarding the potential cancellation of future courses where students had already enrolled with specific expectations of studying these, highlighting the need for careful strategic planning to prevent damage to the University's long-term prospects;
- Noted strong financial expertise among Court members who had expressed confidence in the ability of the new Financial Director, James Gray;
- Item 9 – Students' Association and Sports Union Reports
- Reports from the Student Association and Sports Union were highlighted as insightful, with particularly strong student representation this year, although it was noted that the Court's busy agenda may marginalise these contributions, which are otherwise appreciated for their positive reflection on the student body's engagement and initiatives;
- Item 11 – Annual Court Internal Effectiveness Review
- The effectiveness of the Court's operations was reviewed and found to be satisfactory.
- Item 13 – Annual People Report
- Focused on the financial aspects.

## Discussion

### Closed and open Court papers

- DS raised concern about the transparency and inaccessibility of many Court documents, noting that 75% of the papers were classified as closed items and could not be seen by or reported on to the Business Committee, with the Assessors only allowed to speak about 25% of the reports;
- In response, SW explained the Assessors were not involved in deciding which papers were closed but suspected that this was based on conventions supported by rational considerations, for example, some might contain information that could affect the University's competitive position or involve commercially sensitive matters;
- AB supported the concern expressed by DS regarding the extent of closed documents presented to Court meetings;
- Surprise was expressed particularly about reports like those on student numbers and student experiences being classified as closed as this would be useful for the Academic Standing Committee and such information did not fit the typical criteria for confidentiality. Even if considered sensitive, this could be treated with confidentiality if made available to the Committee;
- JG began by commending the robust challenge posed to the Senior Leadership Team at the recent Court meeting, viewing it as indicative of a healthy governance environment. He highlighted that such constructive criticism is crucial for the improvement and accountability of the University Executive;

- He then emphasised the role of the General Council was as a governance body to serve and support the University's best interests and expressed concern regarding a perceived lack of trust being shown towards the Business Committee, particularly in terms of sharing information like student numbers and student experiences, given the eventual public nature of most of this data, and suggested that earlier access for governance purposes could be feasible and beneficial;
- LM expressed frustration regarding a perceived hindrance to the role of the Finance and Services Standing Committee (FSSC) due to restricted access to financial information;
- While understanding the sensitivity about the University seeking to reduce operating costs by £140 million, there was a strong sentiment in FSSC, which held closed meetings, that more information on the finances could be made available on a privileged basis to enable it to assist effectively in the governance process;
- JM said that members of the University Court only received broad statements about objectives and strategy and added that, although the University administration would be disclosing to Court more specific information regarding which areas would be affected by budget cuts, these details are not yet ready to be shared;
- DW expressed concerns about the binary nature of how documents are handled — they are either completely open to the public or entirely closed, with no nuanced consideration for different potential audiences, such as access for specific groups like the Business Committee;
- BN commented there appeared to be confusion about the application of Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, which applies to specific pieces of information contained in a report, not the entire paper. He highlighted that many organisations manage to make documents available in a way that respects the legislation but still restrict access to certain sensitive information;
- WD highlighted that, given the current challenging and unusual circumstances facing the University, issues of trust and confidence among staff and other stakeholders stem partly from a perceived reluctance by the University management to share key information presented to Court;
- He felt a distinction should be made between documents which should remain confidential until the Court has deliberated on them but then could be communicated promptly to the broader University community (redacted where necessary) and those reports which contained sensitive information that meant they should remain restricted to Court;
- It was noted that the current method of disseminating information about Court business relied predominately on the University's website pages, but updates have been very slow, often months after the meeting, and sometimes did not then provide the open papers;
- The discussion considered how the Business Committee (BC) could discharge its governance role within the constraints of such limited access to information;
- SW suggested that the BC could identify key issues and craft specific questions to be raised by the Assessors at Court, as this could facilitate a better two-way dialogue.

### **Senior Lay Member of Court**

- WD asked about the current status of the recruitment process for a new Chair of the Court to replace Janet Legrand whose term of office would finish on 31 July 2026;
- SW replied the process is being handled internally by the University and would not this time involve an external search agency, partly due to significant costs involved and doubts about the added value of such an approach in enhancing the candidate pool;

- Assurance was given that the process is on track to appoint a new Chair well before Janet Legrand's departure.

### **University Sports facilities**

- JM drew attention to the encouraging comments reported to Court about the University's Health and Safety record and that the University's gym had been voted the UK University Facility of the Year.

The Convener thanked SW and JM for their contributions.

### **3. Topics for consideration arising from the Standing Committee meetings**

SC Conveners gave a short summary of the key issues from each of their meetings in Semester One (Papers 3-6):

**a. International Standing Committee (ISC).** AC reported on the initial meeting of on 4 November with Chris Yeomans, Director of Global Engagement. CY had addressed the meeting in place of Alan Mackay, Director, Edinburgh Global, who was abroad;

#### **Key points**

- A strategic body (Global Partnerships Group) chaired by the Provost has been established to co-ordinate all international activities more effectively without duplication of effort;
- Over 300 current partnerships are being reviewed with a strategic approach to potentially phase out less valuable collaborations;
- Two University-wide international Deans had been appointed to support the University's international priorities, with regional directors focusing on operational matters within Edinburgh Global;
- There was decline in the overall number of applications from Chinese students, attributed to the rising quality of universities in China and economic considerations affecting student mobility, but currently the number coming to the University was holding up without reduction in standards;
- There was a positive geographical shift in the intake of international students;
- TW remarked on the implications of UK foreign policy on the University's finances and reputation, suggesting that the Public Affairs and the International Committees should consider this;
- AC concluded with plans to follow up on international initiatives and encouraged members to attend additional standing committee meetings for broader engagement and insights.
- **The next meeting of ISC is on Tuesday 14 April 2026, online via Teams.**

#### **Action:-**

***To identify speaker and confirm time for next ISC meeting.***

**b. Public Affairs Standing Committee (PASC).** AB gave an update since the initial meeting held on 9 October which had included developing a work plan for the coming academic session.

#### **Key points:**

- **The Prince Philip Scholarships** Plans are now underway to produce a third video focusing on these and will include interviews with two students benefiting from the scheme who have agreed to take part;
- **Christmas reception on 9 December 2025 in the Informatics Forum,**

- **Half-Yearly Meeting on Saturday 14 February 2026** to be held at the **Edinburgh Futures Institute** instead of in the McEwan Hall as previously. Marion Thain, Director of EFI, will give the after-lunch speech in the Playfair Library;
  - **Formation of committee subgroups** to plan activities into 2026 and the following academic year. Plans include another “in conversation” event, a showcasing event, and potential activities surrounding the Scottish elections;
  - **The next meeting of PASC is on Thursday 12 March at 4.30pm in the Braid Room, Charles Stewart House** and will be a working meeting to focus on discussing and planning future activities (closed meeting).
- c. **Finance and Services Standing Committee (FSSC).** MB commented on the meeting on 23 October with Director of Estates, Damien Toner:
- Key points:**
- **University's Capital and Estate Strategy:** Reviewed the impact of financial constraints causing a pause on several Court-approved projects and a strategic shift from expansion to optimization. The focus is now on effectively managing physical space and sustainability and increased utilisation;
  - **Net Zero Energy Goals:** Decommissioning Gas-Powered CHP Engines: These currently fulfill 30% of the university’s electricity needs, with a move towards cleaner energy sources under consideration despite significant financial challenges. An **Energy Master Plan** is to be presented detailing strategies and financial implications necessary for energy transition;
  - **Student Accommodation:** A report indicates need for 3800 additional beds by 2030 to meet national student-to-bed ratios, with no population growth considerations. The University manages nearly half of the city's purpose-built student accommodation beds and aims to maintain its housing guarantee;
- Other matters**
- **General Council Budget:** Significant underspend last year mainly resulting from reduced costs in producing the Billet publication. Plans to discuss effective use of funds with PASC to avoid future budget reductions;
  - **Scholarship Appointments:** Despite ongoing challenges in securing accurate financial information from People and Money, the appointment of a Prince Philip replacement scholar will continue annually;
  - **Meeting with Finance Director:** This meeting is a regular part of FSSC’s workplan but WD highlighted that James Gray, the new Chief Financial Officer will instead meet with the full Business Committee at its next meeting in March 2026. Preparation includes a preliminary meeting to discuss University finances and upcoming challenges.
  - **The next meeting of FSSC is on Thursday 19 February 2026, 4.30pm online via Teams** with Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal and Chief Information Officer to provide an update on the Digital Estate (closed meeting).

### Discussion

- JW emphasised the need for better communication with estate management regarding room allocation and student seating issues, suggesting increased collaboration with EUSA to ensure data on these issues is accurately conveyed to the Director of Estates;
- LM remarked on building use and occupancy data which highlighted the low occupancy rates in classroom and administrative buildings;

- Challenges in scheduling large lectures due to the variety of course sizes and their specific requirements were discussed, complicating full utilisation of lecture theatres throughout the academic day;
- GR suggested that the method of data collection regarding building utilisation might also be problematic. It counts the teaching day as running until 6pm, whereas most classes end by 5pm skewing utilisation statistics;
- JH commented on whether recent curriculum transformations, which aim to streamline courses, might help alleviate some of the timetable issues, although it remains a question if significant impacts have been observed;
- The financial burden of maintaining under utilised buildings is significant, costing around £46,000,000 annually. Due to this inefficiency, it was felt there was potential consideration for selling off some of the University's real estate;

**d. Academic Standing Committee (ASC).** GR reported on the recent meeting of the on 11 November with outgoing VP Students, Professor Colm Harmon (CH)

**Key points and discussion:**

- Over the years, CH had provided insightful annual updates about educational and student-related affairs, and the committee had an open discussion with him before demits as VP Students to take up post in Australia;  
**Reduction of Senior Roles:** the VP Students role would not be filled following CH departure. Instead, Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary (Students), will take over many of CH's responsibilities and be given the rank of Associate Principal. While fully appreciating her capability, concerns were expressed that she already has a significant workload and will not be part of the Senior Leadership Team. The need for a strong academic presence in the University's senior management to ensure that educational and research quality is not compromised was regarded as important;
- It was also noted the VP International role was unfilled and other senior roles, such as the Director of CAM and VP Research and Innovation, had been filled on an interim basis;
- JG suggested that a question about the appointment of replacement Vice Principals should be asked at the Half Yearly Meeting in February.
- **Curriculum Transformation:** Concerns were raised that this project is no longer centralised but will be up to the individual Colleges and Schools to take this important work forward;
- **Closure of the Institute for Academic Development (IAD):** After 15 years, the sudden closure of IAD was concerning as it had played a valuable role in supporting both students and academic staff. The future handling of IAD's functions remains uncertain and CH was unable to report further due to his lack of involvement in relevant discussions;
- **Course Closures:** Some MSc courses face closure reflecting potential strategic changes which could affect the quality and diversity in academic offerings;
- **Winter Graduations:** WD said that there were minor disruptions during winter graduations. Modifications have been made to traditional graduation proceedings to minimise disruptions, such as altering the format of the Vice Chancellor's speech;
- **The next meeting of ASC is on Tuesday 31 March 2026 at 4.30pm, online via Teams** with Lucy Evans, Associate Principal and Deputy Secretary Students.

**Action:**

- *Invite members of the wider BC to attend meeting of ASC on 31 March.*
- *AB remarked that the role of Provost has increased significantly and suggested inviting Kim Graham to a future meeting to discuss the recent structural changes within the University's*

*management and operations and how this aligns with the University's core academic mission and values.*

- **JG to submit question about Senior Leadership Team vacancies for the next Half Yearly Meeting**
- **Obtain an up-to-date senior management organisation chart and circulate it to Business Committee**

#### **4. Report by Lucy Blackburn Hunter (LBH) on sex and gender identity**

- The Convener invited LHB to speak to her report, Paper 7, circulated previously. Her report was a follow up to the request made at the General Council Half-Yearly Meeting in June 2025 by the former Rector, Ann Henderson, for this topic to be considered by the Business Committee (BC);
- **Purpose of the Report and role of the Business Committee:**  
LBH explained her paper was intended to provide an introductory background for those less familiar with the complex details of this topic. It recognised differing perspectives and proposed approaches but was not advocating specific solutions. Rather it sought to frame the key issues within the remit of the BC for the well-being of the University in its role as a critical friend, by starting to identify relevant questions to pose to university management.
- **University's Current Position:**
  - LBH commented that this topic is recognised across higher education institutions as challenging, with Edinburgh University being notably affected;
  - It is proving challenging for universities, given the variety of other concerns in higher education and because advocates for differing views on this sensitive matter are treating it as a "normal challenge" within the University's operations, pushing for routine handling to better address this issue within existing frameworks;
  - WD reported he had forwarded a copy of the report to Leigh Chalmers, University Secretary, but she was not asked to comment on any specific aspect. She had asked that it should be noted the University has multiple functions and in seeking to comply with a wide range of legislation, including the Equalities Act, it has to achieve a fair balance between many different interests.
- **Legal and Policy Framework:**  
As discussed in the paper, there is a need in mitigating reputational and financial risks for the University to be fully compliant with the **Equality Act 2010**, taking account of the Supreme Court's ruling in April on the terms sex and gender in that Act, and how that reflects on daily university operations, such as service provision;
- **Maintaining academic freedom and free speech.** These are also significant factors for universities to take into account when dealing with this issue and the report provides a summary of the challenges affecting Scottish higher education institutions in that regard, as distinct to those in other parts of UK;
- **The Sullivan Review.** LBH had been involved in this Review, which made recommendations for universities, favouring simplicity and cost-effectiveness rather than creating new structures or imposing additional costs;
- **Summary**  
Members remarked that it was an excellent paper and thanked LHB for producing it.
- **Future Steps:**  
Leigh Chalmers to be asked for an update on how the University was discharging its responsibilities for having legally compliant policies and guidance on this topic.

**Action:**

- *The report will be re-circulated in word format to allow access to hyperlinks contained within the document.*
- *The committee was invited to let the Secretary have any specific questions arising from the report before contacting Leigh Chalmers for update on relevant policies and guidance.*

**5. Report from the Secretary of the General Council**

Paper 8, previously circulated, covered the following items:

**A. Matters arising from meeting on 16 October 2025**

1. **Responsible Investment Advisory Group** – the membership has now been made known and includes two external members, Louisiana Salge and Amanda Young. The Group met on 8 October and agreed its workplan for 2025- 27, which has 6 priority tasks;
2. **The new Chief Financial Officer, James Gray** readily agreed to come to the next meeting of the BC on 5 March. Manya Buchan (Convener of FSSC) and the Secretary will meet him separately on 27 January.
3. **Meeting of the Secretaries, Clerks and Conveners of the General Councils of the ‘Ancient’ Universities in Scotland.** The next meeting of this group will be at St Andrews University on 26 June 2026.

**B. Other Matters – for information**

**Business Committee elections.** By the closing date of 19 November, there were 5 valid nominations for the 4 vacancies to fill next academic year. Details about the candidates, including a 2-page CV, are now on the General Council website. The outcome will be decided by an election held January/February with the result announced at the 14 February HYM.

**Resolutions from Court.**

The following Resolutions received for comment from the University Court were circulated to the Business Committee and approved by correspondence:

No.88/2025: Foundation of a Personal Chair of Thoracic Oncology and Imaging

No.89/2025: Foundation of a Personal Chair of Philosophy of Education

It was noted that these Resolutions and backdated to 1 August 2025 due to the decision of the Central Academic Promotions Committee to uphold two Academic Promotion Appeals.

**Christmas Reception on 9 December 2025.** This will be held at the Informatics Forum. Following a welcome and introduction by the Convener, the Principal will address those present. Thereafter, Christmas carols will be sung by the University Chamber Choir.

**6. Any other competent business**

None.

**7. Date of the next meeting**

The next meeting would take place at 5.15pm on Thursday, 5 March in the Raeburn Room.