Minutes of the Business Committee Meeting held on Thursday 30 April 2026 at 5.15pm, in the Raeburn Room, Old College

Present	Dr William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council	
	Mr Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee	
	Dr Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee	
	Ms Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council	
	Professor Richard Andrews (online)	Mr Lorn Macneal
	Dr Lucy Blackburn	Mr Jock Millican
	Professor Alice Brown	Professor Graeme Reid
	Ms Ann Cormack (online)	Dr Kate Richards
	Ms Candice Donnelly	Mr Alan Ross (online)
	Dr Matthew Epton (online)	Mr Devin Scobie
	Professor John Gillies	Dr Dorothy Welch
	Dr Mary Gunn	Ms Jess Williamson (online)
	Professor Judy Hardy	Rt. Hon Sarah Wolffe (online)

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted apologies received from Max Browning, Manya Buchan, Alastair Dunlop and Thomas Wrench.

2. Observations by General Council Assessors

- JM reported on the open items from the recent Court meeting on 20 April held at the John McIntyre Conference Centre, Pollock Halls;
- The Court agenda had been previously circulated (Paper 1)

Item 3. Principal's Report

- In early March c.130 of the University's senior leaders met for the latest Leaders Forum and considered the progress with the cost saving work. This included a summary of Court's position as indicated at the March meeting of Court and an update on financial progress. At the same meeting there were sessions from Interim Vice-Principal Research & Innovation, Professor Liz Baggs, on changes to UKRI funding policy and a discussion on developments and opportunities for Transnational Education initiatives;
- Continued to keep the broader staff body updated about projects within the University's change workstreams and the additional measures being implemented to help reach cost savings targets;
- February and March saw a focus on engaging with staff locally within Colleges and Professional Services groups. At least ten 'town hall'-style meetings were held across budget areas, with approximately 2,000 staff engaging in these sessions. An additional 200 staff have also taken part in sessions aimed specifically at leaders;
- Project leads have also been engaging with targeted groups of staff about how their projects are developing. For example, five meetings were held for staff to hear more about changes being developed around timetabling and course selection (attended by approx. 220 staff) and presentations have been given to the monthly Marketing and Communications staff forum (approximately 300 members) about the Marketing and Communications project;
- There will be further opportunities for staff to speak to leaders about the University's finances and the changes being made at all-staff information sessions in May;

- The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) issued their indicative funding allocations on 25 March 2026. In line with the approved Scottish Budget for 2026-27, the university sector will receive a £25 million increase in resource budget for Higher Education, and a £26.8 million increase (+8.1%) in capital budgets, incorporating research and innovation funding. The announcement covers the main areas of formulaic grant funding, but institutional allocations have not yet been provided for the Research Excellence Grant, Research Postgraduate Grant, and Knowledge Exchange & Innovation Fund;
- For Teaching, SFC has prioritised additional funding into increasing the 'unit of resource' which is the amount of funding provided per fundable student. For 2026-27 the University of Edinburgh will see a £2.2 million increase in teaching grants (+3.2%). Anticipated an uplift to total research and innovation funding; the University's sector share of these grants is generally larger than that for teaching;
- Dr Frank Armstrong was congratulated on his appointment as Court's newly elected Senior Lay Member from August;
- Vice-Principal Iain Gordon has been appointed Senior Vice-Principal with the University of Glasgow. Recruitment plans are underway and initially seeking an internal appointment for an Interim role;
- Following UCU Edinburgh's (UCUE) ballot via an "e-vote", five consecutive days of strike action commenced on Monday 30 March. This broke the agreement made in December for no industrial action in exchange for a number of specific arrangements, including a commitment to no one at risk of redundancy prior to 28 April;
- On 31 March UCUE confirmed their new ballot passed in favour of Industrial Action. Following the recent change to trade union legislation, this ballot will have a mandate for 12 months, rather than previous 6 months;
- Unison and Unite currently remain engaged and committed to continue discussions with the aim of avoiding job losses and identifying improvements to workload and job security;
- The latest voluntary severance offer (which was opened at the specific request of UCUE) for academic staff only has closed with 69 applications. This represents a maximum saving of £5.3m. Applications will be assessed and outcomes confirmed at the end of April. Most staff will exit by 31 July 2026;
- A number of senior colleagues, led by Associate Principal & Deputy Secretary Students, Lucy Evans, participated in a EUSA Representative Roundtable in March where there was a good discussion focused on the cost-saving activities and their current and potential future impact on students. It was a valuable opportunity to hear directly from student representatives and highlight how and why decisions are being made. The two student fora organised by Ash and colleagues this academic year have been constructive and worthwhile;
- Email communication received from some students, often using UCU template messages, shows support for the current industrial action. These messages are responded to, again signposting to the student-focussed FAQs that cover why action to address the financial situation is necessary and what the impact might be;
- A group of protestors, citing pro-Palestine demands, staged an occupation of the Gordon Aikman Lecture Theatre on Tuesday 24 to Friday 27 March, and on the Friday also occupied Appleton Tower. They were served with a Sheriff's Court Order on Thursday and left both locations on Friday. These occupations did however result in disruption to thousands of students due to have teaching in those buildings. The same group blocked access to Old College on the morning of 1 April. Staff relocated to other buildings during that short disruption;
- PM participated in a debate at the Edinburgh Union on the motion "This house believes that universities have forgotten their purpose." PM spoke against, alongside Lord Smith,

Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. There was a good and lively discussion from both sides on the issues and the debate afforded a welcome opportunity to hear from students and discuss these important issues. The event was well organised by students, who also made good contributions to the debate. It was also particularly heartening and fitting to be in the newly refurbished Teviot Debating Hall following the reopening of the refurbished Teviot Row House;

- Edinburgh was announced in February as one of four New National Compute Resources funded by UKRI via an investment of £76 million. The first to launch is Edinburgh, where a £19.5 million investment will be used to enhance and expand the capabilities of our Cirrus supercomputer. This development is designed to complement the forthcoming national supercomputer, which will also be located at the University.

Item 5. Students' Association and Sports Union Reports

Students' Association Report

- Ash Scholz gave her final report. Bradley Stevens will take over from Ash in June after being elected along with others recently;
- Teviot re-opening - The initial feedback from students, and in fact everyone who has visited since, has been incredibly positive with footfall and trading being ahead of that anticipated;
- The recent occupation by EUJPS of Gordon Aikman Lecture Theatre and Appleton Tower has undoubtedly caused significant disruption, affecting lectures, study spaces, and the day-to-day experience of many students. But, while this impact cannot be ignored, it also reflects a deeper frustration among parts of the student body about the pace of the University response, a year after passing the Responsible Investment Policy.

Sports Union Report

- Edinburgh will retain its fifth-place position in the BUCS table;
- Men's Hockey becoming the first University side to ever win the Scottish Premiership;
- The incoming Sports Union President is Connie Chen. She currently serves as Media Officer on the Sports Union Executive Committee and has been the Athletics Club Women's Captain.

Item 6. Student Experience Update

- Progress continues to be made in a number of areas of work on the student experience. Notable points include the following:
  - Learning & Teaching Strategy: initiated systematic implementation and monitoring.
  - Assessment and feedback: currently tracking at 82.5% of assessments returned to students within three weeks, which is significant year-on-year progress towards the target of 90%.
  - Academic Size and Shape: initial implementation work underway in each College, based on high- level Principles. Design of Framework has commenced.
  - Improvements to collection of tuition fees: in progress and yielding financial benefits.
  - Other important work in advanced planning or preparatory stages, including enhancements to timetabling, course selection, boards of examiners, market insight, administrative processes and relevant digital efficiencies.

Discussion

- JM responded to an enquiry from AC about the voluntary severance scheme and confirmed that applications were under review and not all 69 applicants would be accepted;
- LM addressed concerns over whether students would receive refunds due to the strike-induced disruption drawing parallels with responses to past events like the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions;

- JM clarified that, unlike during the pandemic, there has been no formal discussion or request for compensation related to the recent strikes and noted that, typically, refunds are not provided;
- DW asked about the University's progress toward achieving the £140 million savings;
- JM reported that progress has been slower than initially anticipated, however, there is still a belief that the target will be met, although it is expected to be reached in the next financial year rather than the current one;
- AB echoed concerns about the impact of potential strike actions, particularly regarding assessments and exams, and their consequences similar to issues experienced two years ago;
- She mentioned the detrimental effects past strike actions had on students' degree classifications and their further academic or career opportunities;
- In light of the renewed marking and assessment boycott, JM said there is a strong desire from the University leadership to avoid or mitigate such disruptions;
- JG asked whether the University had a strategy to deal with recurring industrial actions by UCU (Universities and Colleges Union) and the following discussion noted the localised nature of the current dispute with UCU, which is different from past national disputes and provides the University with greater responsibility and capability to address the issues directly, possibly through mechanisms like external arbitration to help resolve this highly polarised situation;
- JM reiterated the University's strategy to achieve £140 million in savings and noted a clear directive from the leadership team to prevent further delays and provide clarity to staff.

The Convener thanked JM for his report.

3. Minutes of the Meeting of 5 March 2025

The minute was approved.

4. Matters Arising from the Minutes of the Meeting of 5 March 2026

<u>Item 2: Presentation by CFO, James Gray.</u>

- Noted that James Gray would be invited to address the BC at its March 2027 meeting;
- WD invited the committee to feedback on any questions/topics they would like covered during the presentation.

<u>Item 7: Election of Senior Lay Member of Court</u>

- Frank Armstrong was elected by a clear margin as the next chair of Court;
- Had a positive meeting with the Secretary to the General Council on 24 April and agreed to attend a meeting of the BC on 15 October;
- SW discussed the availability of certain Court papers, stating that some papers remain closed until approved by Court, after which they become open and acknowledged the high number of closed papers appearing in the Court agenda;
- SW also recognised concerns about excessive confidentiality and proposed engaging with SLT, the BC and Court Assessors to address these issues effectively;
- Furthermore, she mentioned her willingness, along with the other Court Assessors, to assist in discussions with Frank Armstrong at the BC meeting in October, and to prepare by revisiting notes that include unresolved queries due to the documents' closed status.

Action:-

In preparation for the BC meeting in October, members were asked to reflect on key issues they would like to see addressed by Frank Armstrong, and these will be discussed at the next BC in June.

5. **Reports from the Standing Committees**

a. **Academic Standing Committee**

- GR reported on the meeting with Lucy Evans (LE), Associate Principal and Deputy Secretary Students on March 31st (Paper 3), covering a wide range of topics, and highlighted Lucy's expanded responsibilities following VP Students, Professor Colin Harmon's (CH) departure from the University;
- LE will continue her previous role while also managing the areas previously overseen by CH and concerns were raised about her capacity to manage such extensive duties;
- Significant focus was given to the "academic size and shape project," which looks into the optimal number of staff and students at the University, as well as a portfolio review of the courses offered;
- This initiative is addressing the resource allocation across the University's programmes, especially targeting niche programmes with limited economic return but interconnected courses;
- Lastly, GR mentioned, with regret, the departure of Iain Gordon, Head of CSE, which casts uncertainty on future leadership in his areas of oversight.

Discussion

- SW highlighted LE's detailed Court presentation on enhancing the student experience, and praised her for providing a comprehensive and meaningful report, filled with detailed information, ambitions, and targets. She believed that this presentation marked LE as extremely capable in her new role, despite the perceived challenges;
- JG spoke to an interest in balancing the range of University programmes, from large, broad-based ones in the School of Medicine to smaller, specialised programs such as the Department of Celtic Studies;
- He emphasised both economic benefits and the historical and cultural significance of programmes, particularly the long-standing cultural impact of Celtic studies in Scotland, and argued for a cautious approach in evaluating programmes;
- He highlighted the importance of understanding the deeper implications and contexts behind purely numerical evaluations, acknowledging ongoing debates at higher levels of decision-making regarding the value and future of such programmes.

b. **Finance and Services Standing Committee**

- In the absence of MB, WD gave a summary of the meeting on 19 February with CIO, Gavin McLachlan (Paper 4) which focused on developments and challenges in the University's IT infrastructure;
- Some key points included concerns about the shift from human interaction to machine-based services, which are available 24/7, aimed at cost-saving;
- Despite the economic rationale, there are significant worries about the security and vulnerability of digital systems, and the need to balance financial costs of upgrades against potential reputational and financial risks from major IT system failures was emphasised;
- Additionally, the necessity to replace outdated systems, which are no longer supported, with new ones poses challenges regarding the smooth integration of these systems without causing operational disruptions.

Discussion

- The discussion centred on concerns and strategic considerations regarding the implementation of new IT projects at the University, specifically recalling past experiences with systems like "People and Money";
- AC raised questions about whether lessons from past implementations have been adequately learned as the University anticipates upcoming major projects and queried if the targeted £140m savings is sufficient and whether these costs are accounted for in the University's forecasted budget;
- Other key points included the potential replacement of human roles with AI systems, emphasising AI's ability to operate continuously and ostensibly save money. However, this introduces concerns about systemic integration, the future relevance of human roles, particularly in teaching, and the ethical ramifications of increasingly relying on AI;
- AR commented on the choice of the new Euclid system for the University, noting that while most UK universities use this single supplier for this system, the UoE has assessed it and decided not to adopt it;
- This decision suggests that the University does not believe the system aligns well with its specific needs, differentiating it from the model used by many other UK universities;
- This choice raises early concerns regarding the alignment of IT systems with the University's operational needs and priorities;
- AC referenced a talk by Professor Shannon Vallor (SV) who critiques AI's reliance on historical data, which may not accurately represent all demographics due to unequal access to technology;
- SV argues that relying on AI for future decision-making might perpetuate past mistakes instead of fostering new opportunities, underscoring the irreplaceable value of human direction and teaching.

c. Public Affairs Standing Committee

- AB spoke to the meeting on 12 March (Paper 5), which was an internal planning meeting, and provided updates on the following events:

Showcasing events

<u>College of Science and Engineering (CSE)</u>

- Professor Iain Gordon was approached and expressed enthusiasm about hosting the event at his college, particularly in the new engineering building, with activities centred in the Nucleus building;
- The event is now scheduled to take place on Wednesday 24 June at 6pm;
- Currently identifying speakers who can present complex scientific and engineering topics in a manner accessible to the general audience, continuing the successful format of the previous showcase.

<u>College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (CAHSS)</u>

Early discussions with Professor Sarah Prescott, the Head of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and subsequent involvement from Chloe Kippen (Development and Alumni) is leading to plans for a language-focused event, which had been postponed due to budget constraint with the College. A meeting in May will explore this opportunity.

Parliamentary Events

- PASC had discussed potential involvement in parliamentary events in Westminster in June organised by Lynn McMath from Communications and Marketing (CAM);

- During the planning stages, issues arose concerning the complexities of venue logistics and very limited scope for attendance by general council members;
- Consequently, the decision was made by PASC not to participate in this specific event organised by CAM but to keep options open for future events at Westminster;
- Additionally, Sarah Prescott (CAHSS) expressed interest in organising an event at Westminster next year, enhancing the prospect of hosting diverse events there and engaging with a broader UK audience; The committee plans to maintain strong relations with CAM and explore various event possibilities in the future, potentially focusing on town-and-gown initiatives.

'In Conversation' Event

- The first of those was held in October 2025 with Joanna Cherry and Jim Wallace, chaired by the Rector;
- This successful event enjoyed a good turnout and people were very positive about holding another one;
- The next event will be held on 22 October at Teviot Row House and the speakers will be Ian Rankin and Alan Little;
- This will be announced at the HYM on 13 June but members are encouraged to mark the date in diaries in the meantime.

Scholarship Video

- Discussed the production of a third video for the General Council scholarship programme, which is intended to promote this initiative and include interviews with scholarship recipients;
- There were suggestions of potentially involving the Chancellor, Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, in an introductory role. However, this would require a delicate approach, and the Protocol department will handle this request;
- The draft script has been viewed and requires further refinement but aiming to progress with the project promptly.

Billet

The electronic version was circulated to the majority of GC members on 29 April.

Town and Gown

- Follow up with Stuart Tooley (CAM) who will attend the PASC meeting on the 14th of May, with the topic expected to be revisited in the next academic session as a focus for the standing committee.

Community Plan activities

- Engagement with community planning activities, highlighted by a presentation from Gemma Gourlay (Sustainability) last year, may also be revisited.

Future Events

- June 2026 HYM
  Academics Professor Ailsa Henderson, a former student of AB, and Alison Payne will speak at the summer HYM in Teviot Row House, offering insights and political analysis related to the recent elections;

Christmas Reception

- Planning is underway for this event which will take place on Tuesday 8 December;
  HYM February 2027

- Sally Magnusson was suggested as a possible speaker.

Discussion

- Regarding venues for future events, there was consideration of hosting an event at Holyrood given the logistical and cost benefits compared to Westminster;
- LHB suggested contacting individual MSPs to invite them to the "In Conversation" event in October as a way of establishing a closer relationship;
- Devin Scobie will take over from AB in August as the new Convener of PASC;
- AB was warmly thanked for her contributions.
- PASC will have 2 new members in August: Emily Honeysett and Dr Ian Conn, a former Director of CAM.

6. Report from the Secretary of the General Council

Paper 6, previously circulated, contained the following information:

Dates for the diary

<u>Business Committee meetings in 2025/26</u>

Final meeting of the current session will be held in the Raeburn Room 25 June. Newly elected members are invited to attend as observers. Meeting will be followed by an informal drinks' reception.

<u>Standing Committee meetings for 2025/26</u>

All meetings (except ISC) begin at 4.30pm and are online via Teams.

- **International Standing Committee** – **1 May at 1pm.** All members of the Business Committee are invited to engage in a discussion with the Provost, Professor Kim Graham.
- **Finance and Services Standing Committee** – 5 May. This is a closed meeting for members of FSSC to hear from Director of HR, James Saville.
- **Public Affairs Standing Committee** – **14 May.** All members of the Business Committee are invited to engage in a discussion with Stuart Tooley, Communications and Marketing.
- **International Standing Committee** – 28 May at 12.30pm. This is a closed meeting for members of ISC with Andrea Taylor, CEO, Edinburgh Innovations.
- **Academic Standing Committee** – **4 June**. All members of the Business Committee are invited to hear the presentation from EUSA VP Education, Katya Amott.

<u>Business Committee meetings in 2026/27</u>

- Thursday 15 October 2026
- Thursday 10 December 2026
- Thursday 11 March 2027
- Thursday 6 May 2027
- Thursday 24 June 2027

<u>Half Yearly Meetings</u>

- 13 June 2026 – Teviot Row House
- 20 February 2027 - Edinburgh Futures Institute

<u>Christmas Reception</u>

Tuesday 8 December 2026, provisionally in the Informatics Building.

7. **Draft Resolutions of the University Court**

- Draft Resolution No. 3/2026: Foundation of a Personal Chair of Clinical Trials and Complex Intervention Evaluation
- Draft Resolution No. 4/2026: Foundation of a Personal Chair of High-Performance Computing Applications
- Draft Resolution No. 5/2026: Undergraduate Degree Programme Regulations
- Draft Resolution No. 6/2026: Postgraduate Degree Programme Regulations

The above Resolutions were approved by the Business Committee.

8. **Arrangements for June 2026 HYM**

- WD referred to Paper 7, which included the agenda and timetable for the summer HYM;
- He asked the committee to reflect on the key issues which should be contained within the Convener's report from the Business Committee;
- Responses included the concern over the University's cost saving strategy and communications around this issue.

Action:-
GC asked the committee to feedback on any other headline topics to the Secretary so he can begin drafting his Convener's report.

- WD spoke about the Motion re the dates of future HYMs which will be raised at the summer HYM;
- Flexibility around holding meetings on a date other than a Saturday may present an opportunity for a different format of HYMs to include, for example, input from EUSA re the student voice, and entertainment such as music in lieu of invited guest speakers.

9. **Any other competent business**

- GC reminded members to sign up for the summer graduations;
- Business Committee members are welcome and encouraged to attend graduations as part of the academic procession and will receive details shortly via email from Alison;
- Those who wish to attend should complete and return the proforma to the Academic Registrar (who is responsible for organising graduations) giving their availability, and letting Alison know in a separate email so she can monitor attendance.

10. **Date of next meeting**

- The next meeting will take place at 5.15pm on Thursday 25 June 2026 in the Raeburn Room;
- The newly elected members of the Business Committee have been invited to attend as observers;
- A modest drinks reception will follow the meeting, to thank the Business Committee members demitting and to welcome new members.