

**Minutes of the Academic Standing Committee
on Tuesday 31 March 2026 at 4.30pm
Online via Teams**

Present: Graeme Reid, Convener of ASC
John Gillies
Judy Hardy
Dorothy Welch
Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee
Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council

In attendance: Lucy Evans, Associate Principal and Deputy Secretary, Students

1. Welcome and apologies

The Convener of ASC (GR) welcomed everyone to the meeting to hear from Lucy Evans in her new role as Associate Principal and Deputy Secretary, Students.

Apologies were received from William Duncan, Matthew Epton and Bruce Nelson.

2. Presentation by Lucy Evans, Associate Principal and Deputy Secretary, Students

LE had been provided with an advance list of topics of interest to the Committee (Appendix 1), which were addressed in the following discussion. Slides were used throughout the presentation.

Role

LE updated the committee on her new role and noted her previous collaboration with Colm Harmon (CH), former VP Students. Her responsibilities are strategic oversight of learning and teaching aligned with the University's academic mission, enhancing student services throughout their educational and student life journey, improving internal operations and responding to financial challenges.

STRATEGY AND VISION

- LE discussed the newly approved Learning and Teaching Strategy 2030 which was developed alongside CH;
- This strategy aims to equip students as lifelong learners ready to thrive in an ever-changing world, and aligns with the broader University Strategy 2030;
- The strategy has three inter-related core purposes: (i) developing a curriculum which is future ready; (ii) engaging and empowering learners; and (iii) supporting inspiring teaching;
- The emphasis is on student success, support, expectations, and fostering a community of care, which are foundational for delivering excellent education and student experiences;
- She highlighted the importance of integrated support services to enhance the student experience from pre-arrival to post-graduation and developing the necessary infrastructure for broader academic and administrative coordination across the University.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

- LE acknowledged the challenges faced by universities at a national and global level and emphasised the need for strategic positioning in competitive spaces, focusing on student satisfaction, well-being, collaborations, and financial sustainability;

- She reflected on a recent University debate that questioned the core purpose of universities, illustrating the ongoing discussion about the role of higher education institutions in society, their operational models, and government funding;
- Highlighted the critical need for universities to adapt to current realities while ensuring they continue to play a significant role on a global scale, impacting society at large.

UNIVERSITY CHANGE PROGRAMME

- LE noted that the University is examining its academic size and shape, operational methods and financial strategies in response to broader economic challenges within the sector while still aiming to meet the objectives outlined in Strategy 2030;
- In addressing these challenges, the University is strategically managing costs and income, focusing on avoiding hasty decisions and maintaining a commitment to its staff and students but in a changed operating environment;
- LE is leading a 'learning and teaching' work stream - part of five strategic activity streams which also focus on research and innovation; staff; the physical and digital estate and other operating expenditure - which prioritises enhancing educational quality and student experiences;
- This involves shaping a curriculum that is prepared for future demands, improving student services, and ensuring efficient support and administration. The efforts are set within the wider context of maintaining financial viability without compromising the University's core educational objectives.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE PRIORITIES

- LE elaborated on pivotal elements concerning the University's learning and teaching strategies, including portfolio review, academic size and shape, and adapting to generative AI in a positive manner, all aimed at enhancing the educational journey and quality of programmes;
- Additional focus areas are robust student support models, optimised teaching timetables, and effective student representation;
- Key digital tools like virtual learning environments are emphasised alongside fostering a community characterised by belonging, pride, and respectful communication;
- The **Academic Size and Shape Project** led by LE and Professor Iain Gordon, VP and Head of the College of Science and Engineering, seeks to review staffing models and capacity in line with strategic objectives covering teaching, research, and innovation to ensure sustainability and competitiveness;
- This initiative involves setting principles regarding class sizes, student-staff ratios, and research funding models, while each school applies these principles to shape their specific academic and financial strategies;
- Through this process, the University aims to balance financial sustainability with its societal contributions, ensuring the programmes offered allow staff to innovate in teaching and provide students with genuine choices in their studies, despite existing challenges like over-assessment and complex programme structures;
- The current scale of programmes at the University is not manageable – it is overloaded/overstretched, unnecessarily complex and resource intensive;
- The **Portfolio Review** is not just about cutting costs but is deeply tied to reinforcing the University's academic mission, ensuring a broad yet sustainable educational offer.

Assessment and Feedback

- LE discussed the challenges related to student assessment and feedback as highlighted in student surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS);
- Specifically, at the University of Edinburgh, there has been noticeable student dissatisfaction regarding the timeliness and quality of feedback;
- Data analysis revealed that the University was not meeting its commitment to providing students with prompt feedback;
- Efforts to address this included monitoring and managing feedback timeliness more effectively, which led to notable improvements;
- The University is aiming for a much higher rate of timely feedback, acknowledging that achieving 100% may not always be realistic due to various practical constraints like unplanned changes in staff availability;
- Improvements in feedback timeliness have positively impacted student satisfaction. However, LE emphasised that enhancing assessment feedback is not just about speed, it's also crucial to ensure clarity in marking criteria and the quality of feedback, enabling students to understand how they can improve based on the feedback they receive.

Student Voice Actions

LE addressed challenges regarding student voice at the University and said that schools and colleges are working directly with EUSA and the Student Representative system in an effort to improve.

Student Journey

- LE emphasised the importance of supporting students throughout their educational journey at the University, particularly focusing on their well-being and integration into the community;
- She acknowledged the challenges students face transitioning from diverse backgrounds and educational systems, and stressed the need for tailored support to equip them for success, both academically and in future employment;
- The University has invested significantly in student well-being, including early interventions and support for special needs;
- Highlighted also the importance of fostering a community where students can share positive experiences and feel valued members of the University.

Working with students

- LE discussed efforts to enhance student engagement and representation at the University, through the EUSA Student Experience Framework and Student Partnership Agreement, and shared events such as the Winter run and the Teaching and Student Awards;
- Along with the Principal, she has attended sessions with EUSA and student representatives to ensure senior management remains in touch with student perspectives, recognising that although many colleagues frequently interact with students, direct engagement at the senior level is crucial;
- Despite efforts, feedback from the National Student Survey (NSS) indicates that students feel disengaged from EUSA;
- LE sees potential for mutual benefits through strengthened collaboration e.g., Student Lifecycle Management Group;

- She also emphasised the importance of fostering a community that supports dignity, respect, and the expression of diverse beliefs and cultures, particularly focusing on working with under-represented groups.

Discussion

- **Role**
 - GR asked about managing the expanded scope of her duties and LE explained that instead of handling the work of two people or dropping tasks, she has strategically reallocated responsibilities, specifically, working more closely with the Deans of Education and empowering the directors of her services to take a more operational role;
 - This approach allows more focus on strategic educational responsibilities while still supporting her team's efforts toward enhancing the student experience;
 - She acknowledged the support from the Provost and emphasised the importance of the senior leadership team in addressing educational issues;
 - She highlighted the realistic limitation of not being able to do everything and focusing instead on prioritising key areas;
 - JH expressed approval of increased collaboration with the Deans of Education, enhancing their roles which had previously been underutilised;
- **Current Priorities**
 - JH asked about Lucy's current priorities given the broad scope she presented;
 - LE said that her top priority is ensuring the academic size and shape align with the University's financial challenges and strategic mission;
 - LE also highlighted the importance of not losing sight of past successes in curriculum transformation while exploring new, sustainable, and cost-effective academic frameworks;
 - The overarching goal is to address these complexities quickly yet holistically across the University;
- **Student Recruitment**
 - In response to an enquiry from GR about the current year's recruitment data, LE reported that undergraduate recruitment is generally strong, including from Scottish and international students;
 - Highlighted challenges in the postgraduate taught sector, especially with a notable decrease in Chinese student applications;
 - Efforts are being made to expedite offer turnarounds to improve conversion rates;
- **Student Support Model**
 - DW asked about the impact of financial pressures on the student support model, particularly in light of staff changes due to the voluntary severance scheme;
 - LE assured that the student support model, which she is proud of, remains robust and effective;
 - She highlighted the ongoing contributions of student advisers and the student well-being team, noting that these roles continue to be replaced as needed despite recruitment restraints;
 - Acknowledged challenges in engaging certain student groups and the additional pressures on remaining staff due to departures. However, she emphasised that there is no current plan to reduce or eliminate the student support model;
- **Curriculum Transformation**

- JG enquired about the continuation and development of CH’s curriculum transformation efforts;
- LE confirmed that the work to build on past developments are ongoing with a focus on integrating successful elements into the curriculum and expanding popular initiatives such as challenge courses and experiential learning;
- JG expressed concern about maintaining diverse academic offerings like Celtic Studies amidst resource constraints;
- LE acknowledged this challenge and discussed the need for more interdisciplinary and streamlined approaches to preserve broad academic offerings in a financially sustainable way and is reviewing existing incentivising structures with the Chief Financial Officer, James Gray;
- **Health Concerns - Meningitis B**
 - JG asked about the University’s response to the recent outbreak at Kent University;
 - LE detailed the proactive measures taken, including distributing Public Health Scotland guidance to student-facing staff, directing students to health and safety resources, and monitoring the situation closely;
- **Institute for Academic Development (IAD)**
 - Concerns were raised about the operational changes within IAD;
 - LE said that the decision for dissolving IAD was part of an internal review and reassured that despite cost-cutting measures, the essential work of IAD, such as academic development and support for postgraduate researchers, will continue;
 - She expressed a strong commitment to these core functions and announced ongoing plans to focus more in staff academic development;
- **General Council Event**
 - DW suggested a possible event aimed at updating General Council members on the current academic offerings of the University and which could also help illustrate how fields such as Chemistry have evolved over the years;
 - LE was enthusiastic about the idea and said that she was keen to hear what might interest GC members in order to choose specific areas to focus on;
 - Further discussion with PASC should be arranged to plan this event, possibly to align with Half-Yearly Meetings.

Action:-

- ***DW to discuss her idea in more detail with the Secretary and Convener of PASC;***
- ***LE will then liaise with colleagues for their suggestions.***
- **Use of AI**
 - LE also addressed concerns about AI, especially regarding plagiarism and the potential non-engagement of students with direct learning processes;
 - She indicated that there was some nervousness among staff about AI as it is a fast-moving area and a better understanding as to how it will impact teaching and learning is needed across the institution;
 - She noted developments which continue to explore the positive applications of AI in teaching (e.g., marking) and increased efficiency in administrative processes, while managing risks associated with its misuse;
 - A seminar had recently been held at the University Court to discuss future strategies and trainings related to AI.
- **Academic Size and Shape**

- JH enquired about the timescales associated with the restructuring of academic size and shape;
- LE provided an overview of current plans, noting ongoing collaboration with all three colleges on reviewing academic portfolios, which could lead to changes such as not recruiting for certain programmes by 2027-2028, and adjustments to optional courses as early as the next academic year;
- She emphasised that this is a multi-year project, with more concrete plans expected within the next year that will subsequently inform the planning for 2027-2028.
- LE acknowledged the slow nature of changes in academic settings due to the need to honour commitments to current students and staff;
- She highlighted the financial imperatives driving these changes and stressed the importance of carefully managing transitions;
- JH remarked on the challenges of aligning staff with new initiatives, as academic colleagues can be deeply invested in their existing programmes and courses.

The Convener thanked LE for a useful discussion and she left the meeting.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2025

The minutes were approved.

4. Matters arising from the meeting held on 11 November 2025

None.

5. Draft Resolutions

No Draft Resolutions were received.

6. Any other Business

None.

7. Preparations and date of the next meeting

- EUSA VP Education, Katya Amott will attend the final meeting of ASC in the current session on Thursday 4 June 2026, 4.30pm, online via Teams;
- As she prepares to demit role, she will give her impression of the student perspective of the effects of the current challenges for the University and the impacts on their education.

Academic Standing Committee meeting with Lucy Evans on 31 March 2026 Topics of interest and likely questions

1. Lucy's enhanced role.

- What are the main changes to your role following Colm Harmon's departure and the Vice Principal (Students) post not being filled?
- How is the voice of students heard at Senior Leadership Team meetings?

2. Impact of cost savings on students and staff.

- What is the scale of cutbacks due to cost savings?
- What have been or will be the main impacts on the student experience, how is this being measured, and what is the University doing to mitigate these?
- Have cutbacks resulted in course closures or planned closures
- What will be the impact of increased class sizes on the student experience?
- What impact are cost savings having on staff morale and how is this affecting students?

3. Institute for Academic Development

- What was the rationale for dissolving this?
- How are its main functions (for staff and student development and for facilitating exchange of best practice in learning and teaching across all the Schools and Colleges) now being carried out?

4. NSS.

- What are the main conclusions to draw from the results for Edinburgh University?
- What further measures are proposed to try to bring Edinburgh up the rankings?

5. Adequacy of Lecture theatre accommodation.

- How often are students not able to get into lecture theatres or be unable to get a seat due to lack of capacity in the lecture theatres? [This problem was mentioned by EUSA sabbaticals in their presentation to Business Committee, and they expressed concern on how this can impact on student satisfaction, especially for high fee-paying students, but does the university collect data on this issue and if so, what does this show?]
- If this is more than an occasional issue, what are the plans to address this?

6. Meningitis B.

- What precautions or advice for students is the University currently undertaking, appreciating there is a balance to be struck between sensible advice and avoiding panic?
- What are the plans should an outbreak occur at the University, given that the current Kent outbreak is, for reasons yet to be established, much more severe than has been the norm?