Minutes of the Academic Standing Committee
on Thursday 4 June 2026 at 4.30pm
Online via Teams

Present: Graeme Reid, Convener of ASC
Matthew Epton
John Gillies
Judy Hardy
Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee
William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council
Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council

In attendance: Katya Amott, EUSA VP Education
Manya Buchan (FSSC)
Lorn Macneal (FSSC)
Devin Scobie (PASC)

1. Welcome and apologies

The Convener of ASC (GR) welcomed everyone to the meeting to hear from Katya Amott (KA) on the current challenges in education at the University and how these are impacting students.

Apologies were received from Gordon Cairns and Dorothy Welch.

2. Presentation by Katya Amott, EUSA VP Education

- KA is the outgoing EUSA sabbatical officer for Education in 2025-26 and will finish her term of office on 5 June;
- Slides were used during her presentation and these will be circulated to the committee.

Current student priorities

Top three priorities of students according to EUSA's annual (October) member survey:

- Cost of living (82%) An overwhelming majority answered that the cost of living was either their top or high priority
- Mental Health and Well-Being (74%)
- Teaching and Learning (74%)

Overview of 2 key issues: AI and Finances

These topics are what most students are acutely worried about. These have informed the work of the Students' Association in 2025-26 and will remain a priority going forward:

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- AI in education is a contentious issue, with concerns that students might eschew traditional learning methods by generating essays with fictional sources, thereby missing out on genuine academic experiences. This has spurred a push for more traditional in-person exams;
- At the University, the number of exams has surged by 47% over six years, significantly impacting the student body, especially those with external responsibilities or learning

adjustments. This increase is considered without solid evidence of widespread AI-facilitated academic misconduct, suggesting re-evaluation might be necessary;

- AI's influence spans various levels and areas within education and is leading to anxiety among schools over potential cheating. However, the spectrum of AI use is broad, with some students refusing to utilise AI at all; concerns range from environmental issues to potential inaccuracies in AI-generated content;
- Concerns also exist about AI's role in deteriorating student-staff relationships, with AI sometimes acting as a stand-in where students feel unsupported;
- The use of AI by academic staff for grading and feedback was criticised for prioritising style over substance and potentially reducing engagement with academic content;
- There are also fears that student work could be used to train AI models without consent, raising ethical questions;
- The entry-level job market is contracting due to companies utilising AI for cost-saving measures, affecting sectors like science, business, and media. This has worrying implications for the nearly one million UK graduates entering the job market annually.

<u>Finances</u>

- From a student's perspective, financial operations at the University appear opaque with many uncertainties, such as the prospects of graduating in their chosen programmes or potential staff redundancies;
- Public financial statements are showing a surplus so students question the necessity of budget cuts, particularly fee-paying, international students who wonder about the justification for their fees;
- The need for cost-saving measures is evident in logistical changes, like the discontinuation of renting the Edinburgh International Conference Centre for exams, leading to more exams being scheduled on Saturdays and in two sessions a day, which poses its own set of challenges;
- Higher education funding emerged as a significant issue in the recent Scottish elections. Over the past decade, funding per student in Scottish universities has dropped by 22%, even as costs have escalated due to factors like rising energy prices, wages, and fuel costs—expenses that are not necessarily visible to students;
- Students primarily learn about the state of the University’s finances through their lecturers or EUSA, neither of whom are typically privy to detailed financial information due to their exclusion from major decision-making processes;
- Secondary sources include local and national news, which further contributes to the sense of uncertainty among students about the University's financial health;
- The lack of transparency and budget cuts negatively impact students, reducing resources like funding for cohort activities and opportunities for PhD students;
- Anxiety is prevalent among students about the potential closure of programmes/courses and job security for their lecturers.
- There is significant distrust among students towards the University's senior leadership, exacerbated by perceptions of mismanagement and high salaries of senior members amidst financial cuts;
- Student support for staff, particularly in matters like strike actions over assessment marking, remains high. This support reflects complex feelings among students who need to balance their educational aspirations with their support for fair staff treatment;

- The current student dissatisfaction coupled with a lack of clarity and communication, have fostered an environment of anxiety and mistrust among students, with potential long-term consequences for the University's reputation and appeal.

A look ahead

- KA spoke to potential improvements in the University's engagement with students for the upcoming academic year;
- Key is increasing transparency and honesty in communications about the University's finances. Regular updates can prevent misinformation and reduce distrust, even if the updates contain no significant changes;
- There is also a call for more compassionate communication that recognises and addresses the anxiety prevalent among students;
- There is a strong emphasis on inclusivity in decision-making processes. By involving students directly and listening to their diverse viewpoints, the University can foster healthier dialogues and create a more informed student body;
- Finally, enhancing the visibility of decision-makers is crucial. Students should be aware of who is responsible for making decisions that affect their academic and campus life. Achieving this through initiatives like roundtable discussions between students and University leadership can significantly improve trust and transparency within the University community.

Discussion

Communication

- In response to points raised by GR, KA emphasised the need for enhanced communication within the University, noting that, while some colleges have proactive communication measures such as organising town halls, others have not communicated significant decisions like budget cuts, leaving students uninformed and dependent on sporadic information;
- Drew attention to email communication in the latter part of 2025 which had outlined the University's financial situation but noted the absence of follow-up University-wide communications;
- A lack of consistent information leads to students speculating or relying on hearsay;
- Regarding inclusion, KA said she appreciates the University's effort to integrate sabbatical officers but suggested that greater engagement with student representatives at the school level could improve oversight;
- KA praised the senior leadership for their engagement in roundtable discussions, which have been well-received by students. However, she notes these roundtables are limited to once per semester and argues this frequency is insufficient given the large student population and the existing anxieties amongst them;
- She suggested increasing the frequency of these roundtables to enhance direct interactions between students and senior leadership, beyond seeing them as distant figures in the media or in parliamentary sessions, in order to address student concerns more effectively.

University Court

- WD asked whether the frustration felt by Business Committee members at the lack of information from University Court meetings was also experienced by EUSA;
- Katya acknowledged a shared frustration and described her experience on Court as challenging, especially when observing decisions that she believed were not in the best

interest of the students and staff, and supported the push for greater transparency, as evidenced by ongoing requests from Senate for open access to court documents;

- KA proposed that Court and Senate should hold joint sessions at least annually to foster open communication and transparency. She believes that such meetings, although possibly contentious initially, could help demystify the decision-making processes of the Court and enhance understanding and accountability among the University community;
- WD said that he has already brought up these concerns with the incoming chair of Court, Frank Armstrong, around the need for improved transparency and communication within the University's governance structures to alleviate frustrations and increase trust among those represented;
- DS acknowledged the long-standing issue of court secrecy, which he has consistently challenged, advocating that information should only be withheld as an exception rather than a rule;
- BN posed a question about the balance of attention the Court gives to academic and student issues versus financial matters, questioning whether Court is maintaining an appropriate focus;
- KA responded by stating that it is difficult to separate academic and financial concerns because they are inherently intertwined and criticised the Court's tendency to dismiss the impact of financial decisions on students, staff, and the educational mission as merely operational concerns;
- She asserted that these should be central considerations because of the University's role as a charitable educational institution and concluded that the current balance is not right, suggesting a need for a shift in how these issues are prioritised and addressed within the Court's discussions.

Disadvantaged student groups

- DS noted that Scottish students are significantly impacted by the high cost of living in the city despite not having to pay tuition fees and questioned whether there has been any improvement for this group;
- KA described some progress in addressing the degree awarding gap, which affects Scottish students, as well as other demographics like widening participation students, minority ethnic groups, and disabled students;
- She shared details of initiatives such as the formation of a group under the Senate Quality Assurance Committee to find effective interventions for these issues, and highlighted the approval of funding for a mentorship scheme trial set for the next academic year. This scheme aims to support students both financially and academically by involving them in paid mentoring roles within the University;
- KA expressed hope that this initiative will positively impact the homegrown students and improve their university experience.

Graduate employment

- JG acknowledged the challenging circumstances faced by university students regarding job opportunities for new graduates;
- He referred to a paper by Lambert & Schindler showing that working from home, rather than AI, is the primary cause of reduction in graduate entry level jobs:
  What if remote working, not AI, is to blame for weak junior hiring?

https://giftarticle.ft.com/giftarticle/actions/redeem/9739717b-329d-497f-826a-65f17c5004a7

- KA voiced concerns about the current job market for graduates, emphasising that the problem isn't about new graduates being selective; rather, it's about the sheer difficulty of landing a job, with some graduates applying to hundreds of positions before securing employment;
- She is concerned that workplaces have not sufficiently adapted to train new staff in a hybrid or remote setting effectively, emphasising the need for more adaptive employment strategies to accommodate the evolving work environment;
- In response to a question from LM, KA indicated that while she has seen data on graduate outcomes from the last graduation cohort, which assesses if students are employed and whether their jobs align with their field of study, she does not have immediate access to comparative national data showing how Edinburgh ranks against other universities in terms of graduate employment;
- She mentioned that outcomes vary significantly across different schools within the University, and while top institutions like Oxford, Cambridge, and St. Andrews are known to lead, she would need to conduct further research to determine Edinburgh's precise standing;
- LM also asked if the University has a dedicated team or department to support student employment and KA confirmed the existence of a career service that provides assistance to students up to two years post-graduation;
- She noted the efforts of the career service to enhance their visibility and rebranding, though she acknowledged the limitations they face in a tight job market distinguished by a scarcity of graduate-level positions;
- She points out that while some graduates may find employment in sectors like hospitality, these jobs might not necessarily reflect their qualification levels, hinting at underemployment issues among new graduates.
- WD raised concerns about the impact of graduate employability on university rankings, emphasising its increasing relevance given changes in the job market. He questioned how feedback mechanisms between the Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) and the career support service could be enhanced to improve graduate recruitment rates;
- In response, KA acknowledged the challenges faced by the career service in preparing graduates for a less-than-ideal job market. She mentioned that despite the efforts to support students and enhance their employability, external factors, such as nepotism, where some individuals secure jobs through parental connections, play a significant role. This situation creates an uneven playing field for those who do not have similar connections and rely solely on their merits and the support from the career service. She stressed the reality that there is only so much that can be done to level the playing field in the current societal context;
- She mentioned that often there are approximately four to five students vying for each job, highlighting the challenging environment for new graduates seeking employment.

Use of AI in academia

- ME queried the use of AI by university staff for marking students' work and student pushback to AI usage in grading;
- KA confirmed that trust is a major issue and cited a study from the University of Cambridge, which tested AI effectiveness in grading. The study found that while AI could generally award grades around the 2:1 level accurately, it undervalued work more deserving of higher grades, often rewarding verbose but insubstantial essays;

- This has led to concerns that the prioritisation of AI in academia might be more about cost-saving than maintaining educational quality;
- She also addressed specific student concerns about using AI tools like ChatGPT for feedback, noting instances where such use without student consent led to fears about intellectual property since input data becomes part of the model's training data;
- Concerns were also raised about AI's potential to "hallucinate" sources and marks, indicating issues with reliability;
- KA highlighted new rules around transparency which require students and staff to declare their use of AI, aiming to ensure fairness and maintain trust in academic evaluation processes.

Continuity within the work of the student sabbatical officers

- GR enquired about the interaction with newly elected sabbatical officers and the continuity of their work with the previous team;
- KA confirmed that there has been a two-week handover period where they engaged with the new team to discuss ongoing and upcoming issues, ensuring they are aware of the University's current projects and the relevant contacts;
- These discussions included major topics like AI use in assessments and decolonisation efforts at the University;
- KA expressed confidence in a smooth transition due to this preparation and the permanent staff who work at EUSA who aid in maintaining continuity.

The Convener thanked KA for her impressive presentation and a valuable discussion and she left the meeting.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 31 March 2026

The minutes were approved.

4. Matters arising from the meeting held on 31 March 2026

- There was some discussion around the extended remit of Lucy Evans, Associate Principal and Deputy Secretary, given the additional tasks she has recently had to take on;
- With no criticism implied about her performance, the committee felt the sustainability of this heavy workload should be monitored especially if the imminent departure of Vice Principal Professor Iain Gordon further increased her responsibilities in relation to the size and shape project which he is co-leading with Lucy;
- Also there was concern about her having to deal with a marking and assessment boycott and its implications not only for students but the forthcoming graduations;
- More generally concern was expressed about increasing frequency of staff overload at all levels arising from unfilled vacancies and departures of experienced staff by voluntary severance restructuring;
- Concerns about the transparency and efficacy of the University's communication, especially in the context of a marking and assessment boycott and its implications, were also highlighted;
- The discussion also commented on the negative implications of making interim internal appointments to senior posts as these would lack the status and credibility of a permanent appointment;
- It was suggested that the Convener's report to June Half Yearly Meeting should refer to these issues so that the senior leadership team receives constructive yet firm feedback about the prevailing challenges.

5. Draft Resolutions

None received.

6. Workplan for 2026/27

The committee agreed on the following topics for consideration:

- **Research** e.g., Professor Liz Baggs, VP Research and Innovation, particularly on the implications of major changes in UKRI funding streams
- **Impact of AI** on teaching and learning
- **Size/shape of the University** - discussion with one of the College Heads (e.g. Professor David Argyle, CMVM) about the impact of the University's academic restructuring project

7. Any other Business

DW had suggested that further information should be sought to follow up on recent press reports about University course closures (teaching out and withdrawal) and a structural reorganisation arising from the Academic Size and Shape project.

Action:-

- ***This will be an agenda item for the Business Committee meeting on 25 June;***
- ***WD will contact Leigh Chalmers, VP and University Secretary, seeking an update on the Size and Shape project that can be presented to the Business Committee.***