Minutes of the Finance and Services Standing Committee
4.30pm on Tuesday 5 May 2026
Online via Teams

Present: Lucy Hunter Blackburn
Alan Ross
Jess Williamson
William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council
Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee
Bruce Nelson, Vice Convener of the Business Committee
Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council

In attendance: James Saville, Director of HR

1. Welcome and apologies

- Lucy Hunter Blackburn (LHB) led the introductions and chaired the meeting in the absence of the Convener, Manya Buchan, who had sent her apologies, and welcomed everyone to hear an update from the Director of HR;
- This was a closed meeting and only FSSC members, Business Committee Office Bearers and secretariat were present.

2. Presentation by James Saville Director of HR

- JS reflected on the increasingly challenging international and internal University environment since his last presentation to FSSC in November 2024;
- External challenges include geopolitical tensions, social media and the impact of right-wing politics on university debates and policies, and difficulties in international recruitment and visa challenges;
- The growth in staff size in recent years had not been supported by a comparable increase in income, leading to the need to reduce staff numbers to avoid financial deficits arising in future;
- Financial constraints and short-term measures like recruitment restraints and operating expenditure reductions had been introduced to manage the University's budget and avoid deficits;
- These factors were affecting industrial relations, staff morale and, in turn, the University's operations;
- JS emphasised the need to transition from short-term unsustainable actions, including limiting travel where possible and three recent Voluntary Severance schemes, to long-term strategic changes to stabilise the University's situation and curb rising costs;
- He referred to the ongoing reviews across the University's three colleges and in professional services, focusing on marketing, communications, and IT;
- Although these reviews are taking longer than originally expected, it is essential that they are done thoroughly and have credible implementation plans;
- But the continuing uncertainty over where job losses will arise is creating anxiety and unrest among staff, complicating negotiations and leading to industrial actions, such as strikes during critical academic periods and a Marking and Assessment Boycott;
- Challenges with UCU relations centre on their demand for no compulsory

redundancies which the University cannot guarantee, although its clearly stated aim is to avoid compulsory redundancies wherever possible;
- JS spoke about efforts to improve communications and in particular to engage with staff university-wide in the light of ongoing structural changes and this includes conducting town halls and workshops;
- While uncertainty over job losses remains a key issue and is impacting staff morale, JS said that the overwhelming majority of posts are expected to remain.

Discussion

1. **Measures needed to complete the staff cutback phase and stabilise the University.**

JW asked about this and what could be done to improve the sense of job security and restore morale among staff, especially those not directly affected by the job losses.

- JS explained that the focus is on continuously promoting the University's strengths, ensuring it remains an attractive and fair workplace, and leveraging these aspects to uphold a positive reputation and maintain morale among current and prospective staff;
- The overarching strategy for the coming financial year involves clear planning, communication, and visible action;
- Continuously addressing and improving pay equity issues, such as gender and ethnicity pay gaps also helps. Past initiatives in restructuring pay scales contributed to stabilizing the workforce and preventing high turnover;
- Successfully navigating through the ongoing changes at the University will require time, which is challenging for individuals eager for immediate answers, but producing effective detailed plans will need time to work through to ensure fairness and good implementation;
- Voluntary Severance schemes were offered to avoid enforced layoffs, with varying degrees of uptake across different rounds and groups within the University;
- Despite some progress in reducing staff numbers over the past year, the current number is still much higher than in 2020 and given the financial uncertainties, it is likely that hiring restraint, travel restrictions, and promotion pauses will continue into next year;
- The change programme is expected to span several years, during which ongoing evaluations of staffing strategies concerning diversity, participation, and reward systems will also be considered to ensure we continue to be an attractive place to work;
- The goal is to align these strategies with desired organisational behaviours while maintaining academic freedom amid external pressures**;**
- There is also the challenge of adapting to rapid changes in today's world, particularly with the advancements in AI and global shifts, suggesting that effort should be focused on helping people recognise and adapt to new realities and the requirements for success in a dynamically evolving environment,;
- Expectations that after a period of reduction it will be possible to revert to how things were previously are unrealistic;

2. **Communicating positive news.** JW asked about maintaining and promoting the University's positive image, particularly amidst challenges;

- JS explained key measures to do this include:

- Highlighting the university's ongoing achievements and strengths in media channels such as notable research breakthroughs, the visibility of high-profile academics, and advocacy for government support and mobility changes.
- Ensuring the university's accomplishments and positive attributes are recognised both internally and publicly. Despite challenges, there remains strong approval ratings from the University community, as reflected in metrics like a Glassdoor score of four out of five, with high marks in diversity, inclusion, and work-life balance.
- Reinforcing the University's appeal to prospective employees and ensuring it remains a desirable workplace. This is evidenced by positive feedback on interview experiences and aspects like flexible working conditions and competitive salaries.

- BN said it seemed the trade unions have been more effective in their communications to date and he supported the promotion of positive University stories, particularly those that demonstrate the institution's broader impact on the community and beyond—a task the Business Committee is eager to assist with;
- WD highlighted the General Council's efforts to showcase the achievements of the University, with upcoming events at the College of Science and Engineering, and College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences;
- JS noted a challenge in shifting the narrative from focussing on individual achievements to collective University contributions, which could include improving communications about the economic and civic impact of the university and the broader sector, noting that the University's contributions to Scotland's economy aren't widely recognised;
- JS welcomed suggestions to further communicate the University's extensive role in the community and would discuss these points further with colleagues, emphasising a strategic approach to public engagement and media relations;

3. **How long is 'interim'?**

WD raised concerns about the prolonged use of interim appointments for significant senior positions and asked how long roles with long term purposes, such as Director of Communications or Vice Principal for Research and Innovation, should remain filled on an interim basis and what will serve as a trigger for making these permanent appointments, noting that extended interim status can project negative external perceptions.

- JS recognised concerns regarding the prolonged use of interim appointments, explaining that each role is considered individually based on specific circumstances. For example, the interim appointment for the Vice Principal of Research was strategic due to the REF exercise that requires consistent leadership. In the case of the Communications Director, the interim status fitted into a broader review for reshaping that function because making a permanent appointment too early could delay needed changes;
- He also commented that making internal appointments gave organisational continuity and created a positive narrative of career development within the University.

4. **How has the HR function changed**?

LBH asked about the transformation of the University's HR department over the past eight years that JS has been HR Director.

- JS reported that the HR department had changed from a primarily tactical reactive role to a strategic one with significant influence within the university. It now has an integral place in executive and strategic meetings with HR heads actively involved in College operations and essential change management plans.

LHB thanked JS for a candid and thought-provoking session and he left the meeting.

3. Minutes from the meeting held on 19 February 2026

Members approved the minute from the meeting.

4. Matters arising from the minutes of 19 February 2026

AR suggested it would be helpful to seek further information about the decision-making around new IT systems at the University He specifically mentioned that UoE differs from most other UK universities in not choosing the dominant IT system provider, Tribal. Understanding why it isn't the UoE preferred system would be relevant given need avoid repeat of past difficulties in change management of major IT systems. The limited timeframe to research and deploy an alternative system due to the few the remaining years with the current setup was noted;

Action: -

AR to draft text to be agreed with WD about this issue and follow up with CIO, Gavin McLachlan .

5. Finance Director's presentation to the Business Committee.

The CFO James Gray's (JG) highly informative presentation at the BC meeting in March was very well received and members had indicated they were positive about inviting him to return to a future meeting to address all BC members;

If JG agrees to this it would be instead of the regular slot with the Director of Finance and FSSC.

Action: -WD will invite JG to invite to the March 2027 meeting of the BC and will also ask him to provide an update on the University's current financial situation in advance of the HYM in June 202

6. Workplan for 2026-27

There will be 3 meetings of FSSC in 2026-27. Suggested speakers/topics (tbc):

- CIO, Gavin McLachlan (digital estate)
- Director of Estates, Damien Toner (physical estate)
- Director of HR, James Saville (staff)
- VP Corporate Services, Catherine Martin
- University's investment strategy, particularly in response to continuing disinvestment campaigns
- There was also discussion about whether FSSC meeting should be closed, given the Finance Director's willingness to address the full Business Committee

Action: -

WD will follow up with MB whether to open up online meetings of FSSC to all members of the BC.

7. General Council Budget

- WD referred to papers 2 and 3 (see Appendix 1) and discussed the financial strategy for the GC office operational budget for 2026/27 , which has been confirmed as £57,752 - an increase of 2%
- As shown in Paper 2, the projected underspend for 2025-26 is c. £15k, assuming £20k is spent on two showcasing events with the CSE and CAHSS this year;
- Although the underspend in 2024/5 was significant, this did not affect the allocation for 2026/7, but WD emphasised the necessity of spending the allocated budget for 26/27 to avoid reductions in future years allocations;
- He underlined the need for early event planning, allocating about £4Ok to PASC for its 2026-27 programme.

8. Any other business

- LHB thanked AR for his contributions during his time on FSSC as he prepares to end his term on the BC.

Appendix 1

Finance and Services Standing Committee – 5 May 2026

Budget Allocations to General Council for 26-27 to 30-31

Unlike in previous years when we have only known the budget allocations to General Council on a year-by-year basis and not until the start of the academic year, we now have been given indicative budget allocations as follows:

	Forecast 26-27	Forecast 27-28	Forecast 28-29	Forecast 29-30	Forecast 30-31
Staff costs	£52,601	£53,668	£54,756	£55,866	£56,998
Dept & Admin Expenses	£58,752	£59,927	£61,126	£62,348	£63,595
	111,353	113,595	115,882	118,214	120,594

Having the above allocations for future years is most helpful as it allows planning future years' activities to begin much earlier.
For some events that PASC wants to hold, long lead times are involved.
A major reason for the significant underspend in 2025/26 was planning for several events could only begin in late 2025 or early 2026 and it has not been possible to hold these events before the end of the budget year (31 July 2026)
University finance rules do not allow underspends to be carried forward to the next academic year. We are in a normal public sector situation of ' spend it or loose it'!
The indicative allocations to General Council could, of course, alter if there is a material mismatch between the overall University Budget assumptions/ expectations and the actual situation and there is need to reduce overall operating costs.
The notification of the above allocations was also accompanied with the following:

1. If you anticipate an **underspend of more than £2k** from your allocated budget for this financial year, you should inform us as soon as possible so that any unspent funds can be reallocated and utilised before the end of this financial year.

2. We will also need the predicted forecast for the **Expenditure** for the **next five financial years**. The figures above are based on a 2% annual increase. Please let us know if that's what you are expecting and if there are any known increases or decreases. Unless we hear back, we will assume these figures.

WD 1 May 2026