



UNIVERSITY COURT

4 October 2022, Laurie Liddell Clubhouse, Peffermill

Web Version

Minute

- Members Present:** Debora Kayembe, Rector
Robert Aldridge, City of Edinburgh Council Assessor
Douglas Alexander, General Council Assessor
Frank Armstrong, Co-opted Member
Shereen Benjamin, Senatus Assessor
Richard Blythe, Senatus Assessor
Alastair Dunlop, Chancellor's Assessor
Perdita Fraser, Co-opted Member
Ruth Girardet, Co-opted Member
Tobias Kelly, Academic Staff Member
Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member
Peter Mathieson, Principal & Vice-Chancellor
Sarah McAllister, Professional Services Staff Member
Douglas Millican, Co-opted Member
Hugh Mitchell, Co-opted Member
Kathryn Nash, Trade Union Academic Staff Member
Niamh Roberts, Students' Association President
Alistair Smith, Co-opted Member
Isi Williams, Students' Association Vice-President Community
Sarah Wolffe, General Council Assessor
- Member Apologies:** Joyce Anderson, Trade Union Professional Services Staff Member
Jock Millican, General Council Assessor
- In Attendance:** Leigh Chalmers, Vice-Principal and University Secretary
Kate Huang, Governance Apprentice
Sophia Lycouris, Rector's Assessor
- Presenters & Observers:** Lewis Allan, Head of Court Services
Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary Students
Iain Gordon, Vice-Principal & Head of College
Kim Graham, Provost
Lee Hamill, Director of Finance
Colm Harmon, Vice-Principal Students
Gary Jebb, Director of Place
Catherine Martin, Vice-Principal Corporate Services
Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal, Chief Information Officer & Librarian to the University
Theresa Merrick, Director of Communications & Marketing
Sarah Prescott, Vice-Principal & Head of College
James Saville, Director of Human Resources
Rona Smith, Deputy Secretary Governance & Strategic Planning
Alan Mackay, Deputy Vice-Principal International (for Item 10)

OPENING ITEMS

1 Minute

Paper A1

Debora Kayembe, Rector, noted apologies and welcomed new and continuing members and attendees to the first meeting of the academic year. New members are: Robert Aldridge, City of Edinburgh Council Assessor; Shereen Benjamin, Senate Assessor; Richard Blythe, Senate Assessor; and, Douglas Millican, Co-opted member. New attendees are: Christina Boswell, Vice-Principal Research & Enterprise; Iain Gordon, Vice-Principal and Head of College of Science & Engineering; Kate Huang, Governance Apprenticeship Programme 2022-23; and, Sarah Prescott, Vice-Principal and Head of College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences. In addition, Leigh Chalmers, Vice-Principal & University Secretary and Rona Smith, Deputy Secretary Governance & Strategic Planning, were welcomed to their first meeting in their new roles.

The minute of the previous meeting was approved.

2 Matters Arising & Review of Action Log

Paper A2

There were no matters arising and the action log was noted.

3 Principal's Report

Paper B

A summary of the Principal's main activities since the last Court meeting was noted, with the Principal commenting on the following:

- Death of Her Majesty The Queen and the Accession of King Charles III – the University was deeply involved in the ceremonial events held in the City of Edinburgh to mark the death of the Sovereign and accession of the new King. Letters of condolence had been sent by the Principal to the Royal Family and to the University Chancellor and warm responses received in return;
- The first Welcome Week for new students without public health restrictions since the onset of the pandemic took place with great success, with some alterations in respect of the ceremonial events mentioned above and the period of national mourning;
- While the student accommodation guarantee has been met and exceeded for the provision of University accommodation to first year undergraduates and new overseas postgraduates, a decrease in the supply and increase in the price for private accommodation has caused difficulties for many returning students. The University has worked with the Students' Association to help many of those in greatest difficulty, including providing temporary or permanent accommodation where possible;
- In response to increasing living costs for students, University hardship funds have been increased and stipends for postgraduate research students with University funding have been increased, matching a recent increase in the stipend for those postgraduate research students funded by UK Research & Innovation. All students in University-provided accommodation will continue to benefit from fixed energy charges for the duration of the academic year that will not be subject to the recent rises seen elsewhere; and,

- The sector is seeking to engage with the newly formed UK Government on key issues such as funding and immigration policy, as well as potential legislation relating to freedom of speech in higher education and national security.

Members raised the following points:

- Concerns with the new finance component of the People & Money System, including significant increases in the administrative workload for many staff, such as principal investigators on research projects and many professional services staff, and with making timely payments to students in receipt of funding and to suppliers. The importance of rapidly addressing identified problems and communicating these was raised, along with the wider issues of calculating staff workload implications of major strategic projects and learning lessons for future projects, such as the Curriculum Transformation Programme. In response, it was recognised that the implementation period has been difficult for many staff and a backlog has arisen given the closure of the previous system whilst data was migrated to the new system. This backlog is in the process of being cleared. An escalation mechanism is in place for urgent cases and rapid payments can be made to suppliers if required. Student stipend payments were made in September under the previous system and will be made in October under the new system. A communication is being prepared by the Enactment Group to respond to the concerns that have been raised;
- It was clarified that any potential UK Parliamentary legislation on freedom of speech in higher education would not apply in Scotland but may have indirect implications, while national security legislation would be expected to apply across the UK; and,
- All staff involved in managing arrangements on the University estate to accommodate the queue for members of the public to pay their respects at Her Majesty The Queen's lying in rest at St Giles' Cathedral were thanked for their work to facilitate this.

4 Committee Business

- **Senior Lay Member's Overview**

Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member, thanked the Principal and Senior Leadership Team colleagues for the 'getting to know you' session held as part of the Court Seminar earlier in the day and provided an update on activities since the last meeting. The Senior Lay Member and the Vice-Principal & University Secretary have held individual review meetings with departing and continuing Court members and these will be summarised within a report to the next meeting. The Committee of Scottish Chairs has reviewed the Scottish Code of Good Higher Education Governance and an updated version has been transmitted to the Secretaries' Group for their consideration. An annual Court update stakeholder event will take place by videocall on 1 November and an invitation will issue after this meeting.

- **Exception Committee**

Paper C1

The following matters approved by Exception Committee on behalf of Court were noted:

- The acceptance of a replacement property insurer, a scheduled consortium led by Axa XL, and the annual premium for 2022/23;
- The appointment of Douglas Millican as the Convener of Audit & Risk Committee for an initial three year term of office from 9 September 2022, with David Law demitting office on 8 September 2022;
- The appointment of staff members to the following committees from 1 September 2022:
 - Knowledge Strategy Committee
 - Richard Blythe appointed for a three year term
 - Joyce Anderson appointed for a two year term
 - Shereen Benjamin appointed for a three year term (with Kathryn Nash demitting membership of the Committee)
 - Policy & Resources Committee
 - Kathryn Nash appointed for a two year term
 - Exception Committee
 - Kathryn Nash appointed for a two year term
 - Remuneration Committee
 - Toby Kelly appointed for a three year term
 - Nominations Committee
 - Sarah McAllister appointed for a two year term;
- An extension of the term of office of Frank Armstrong to 31 July 2025 to enable Frank Armstrong to serve as the first Convener of Estates, Digital & Infrastructure Committee for a three year term to provide continuity of leadership; and,
- Consequential amendments to the Delegated Authority Schedule linked to the new approved terms of reference for the Estates, Digital & Infrastructure Committee.

- **Policy & Resources Committee**

Paper C2

The report was noted and the gender pay analysis considered by the Committee discussed, with a query on target setting. It was noted that there are targets to reduce pay gaps within the Equality Outcomes 2021-25, with imbalances within Grade 3 (with a greater number of posts with the potential for overtime and other supplementary payments held by men) and within Grade 10 (with a greater number of men at higher points on the Grade 10 pay scale, with Remuneration Committee considering this aspect in all relevant Grade 10 remuneration decisions) but with other grades not containing gender pay imbalances. There is an overall pay imbalance with a greater number of men in Grade 10 and a greater number of women in lower grades but the recent trends in the compositions of Grades 8 and 9 are positive.

- **Nominations Committee**

Paper C3

The report was noted.

- **Audit & Risk Committee**

Paper C4

The report was noted and an update to the Risk Management Policy and Risk Appetite Statement to reflect the use of EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation, and Amortisation) as a key financial metric was approved.

- **Senate**

Paper C5

The report was noted, including Senate's decision to rescind an honorary degree previously awarded to Vyacheslav Nikonov.

KEY ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION/DECISION

5 National Student Survey Results 2022

Paper D

Results from the National Student Survey (NSS) 2022 and an update on actions to improve the student experience were considered. While the result for the overall satisfaction measure (72.81%) has given some encouragement in having improved upon the previous year and in comparison to the Russell Group average, it remains well below the University's aspiration. Survey question results relating to teaching are relatively strong, with survey question results relating to student and academic support less strong and survey question results relating to assessment and feedback very disappointing. Student and academic support is expected to be improved by the new student support model and new assessment and feedback principles and priorities will be introduced in the current and next academic year – it was cautioned that both may take time to flow through to survey results given that it is final year students who are surveyed and on the whole of their degree course. The survey itself is also likely to be revised for 2023, which may make trend comparisons difficult to make. The following comments were made in discussion:

- The Students' Association survey question result is linked to the provision of facilities and demonstrating that the student voice is being heard and acted upon at College/School level. The Association is working on engagement with students such that students better understand its role and activities;
- The impact on staff workloads of student experience projects and other strategic change projects have not been assessed and will be significant – this will be considered within the individual projects as they progress;
- In the context that the relevant survey results on the existing curriculum are generally positive, a risk that work on curriculum transformation could reduce time and resources deployed on work to improve assessment and feedback – curriculum transformation should be a complement and not a substitute to work in this area;
- Whether additional support is needed for a return to in-person assessment this year – the Students' Association are exploring student views on this and there is some student anxiety towards in-person assessment as it returns across the sector;
- There is desire amongst staff to improve the student experience but perhaps a lack of capacity and resourcing;
- Other measures outside of the National Student Survey find areas of strength that are more encouraging; and,

- Organisational acceptance of whether the survey results provide a clear and representative platform for understanding student experience and hence for determining actions and interventions for agreement by the relevant leads, with those responsible held accountable for delivery within a specific timescale. In discussion, it was emphasised that the intention is improve the student experience in a holistic way, which should over time improve measures of student satisfaction, including the National Student Survey. Leaders at all levels have responsibility, from the Principal and the Senior Leadership Team, Deputy Secretary Students and Heads of School and Directors of Professional Services.

6 Students' Association and Sports Union Reports

Papers E1-E2

Reports from the Students' Association and Sports Union were reviewed, noting in the Students' Association report the sabbatical officer objectives included as an appendix and that a section relating to work on the cost of living had been accidentally omitted from the main paper and would be circulated after the meeting. Other aspects highlighted included the success of Students' Association and Sports Union welcome events for new students, the work of the Association's Advice Place in assisting students with accommodation difficulties, a recent troubling incident of racial harassment of a student and increasing support for students who experience harassment. The Association's work to develop options to better support students at the King's Buildings campus was welcomed and work on supporting trans and non-binary students discussed.

7 Director of Finance's Report

Paper F

Updates on the draft (unaudited) Statement of Comprehensive Income and Expenditure for 2021-22, the estimated financial impact of recent UK Government announcements on utility costs and national insurance, and the long term debt position, including a recommendation to establish a long-term debt repayment vehicle, were received. Following review by the Investment Committee and Policy & Resources Committee, a proposal was approved to establish a long-term debt repayment vehicle overseen by the Investment Committee.

8 Student Recruitment – 2022/23 entry

Paper G

An overview of the likely outturn of the student recruitment cycle for 2022/23 entry was presented. It was noted that the main priorities had been to meet planned intake levels, having, in common with peer institutions, exceeded these during the pandemic, and to increase the number and proportion of students from widening access backgrounds. While figures are not yet finalised, indications are that planned intake levels will be met very closely, along with a significant increase in students from widening participation backgrounds. The following comments were made in discussion:

- The increase in widening participation student numbers and the meeting of overall planned intake targets was welcomed;
- Media commentary on widening participation was discussed, noting that: the overall number of places for Scottish domiciled undergraduate students is capped by the Scottish Funding Council; the University maintains minimum

entry levels on all courses; and, that a range of measures are used to identify applicants who may be from widening participation backgrounds. Support was reiterated for improving numbers of students from widening participation backgrounds, with further briefing information on measures used to identify widening participation applicants to be circulated;

- Ambitions for the next cycle in improving the speed of offer-making to applicants; and,
- Links between student experience and the growth in the student population in recent years – developing long-term planning for the desired future size and composition of the student population is underway and Court will be updated on this.

**9 Scottish Funding Council Research Excellence Grant uplift: Paper H
Proposed Approach**

Court approved a proposal for the allocation of the University's expected share of the Scottish Funding Council's Research Excellence Grant over the next five years, which will increase following the University's strong performance in the Research Excellence Framework 2021. For the current year, allocations will remain as agreed to give certainty for Colleges and Schools in their planning. In the following years, the intention is to provide the existing 'core' allocation to Colleges and Schools plus an overall uplift and for the remaining expected uplift, use this to support strategic interdisciplinary investments in five themes aligned to Strategy 2030.

10 International Risk Mitigation Paper I

An overview of the rapidly changing geopolitical climate in which the University operates and international aspects of student recruitment, institutional collaborations, research and commercial income, philanthropy and other sources of funding was considered, with scenario planning and the importance of diversifying international activities discussed.

ITEMS FOR NOTING OR FORMAL APPROVAL

11 Microsoft Agreement Paper J

Court delegated authority to the Principal to approve the contract and to the Vice-Principal, Chief Information Officer & Librarian to the University to sign the contract for a new three year agreement to licence Microsoft services and software across the University.

12 Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) Follow-up Report Paper K

The follow-up report to the University's Enhancement-Led Institutional Review was endorsed prior to submission to the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland.

13 Annual Report to the Scottish Funding Council on Institution-led Review and Enhancement Activity 2021/22 **Paper L**

The annual report was approved for submission to the Scottish Funding Council and the signing of a supporting statement by the Senior Lay Member authorised.

14 Donations and Legacies; Alumni Activities **Paper M**

Court noted legacies and donations received since the last meeting and an update on current alumni relations activities. The Principal commented on the benefits brought to the University by philanthropic giving and it was suggested that this could feature as a supplement to the Principal's Report in future.

15 Any Other Business

An update on the topic of academic freedom following discussion at the Court Seminar held in October 2021 was requested for a future meeting.

16 Date of Next Meeting

Monday, 5 December 2022