



UNIVERSITY COURT

24 February 2025, John McIntyre Conference Centre, Pollock Halls

Minutes

- Members Present:** Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member
Simon Fanshawe, Rector
Rushad Abadan, Co-opted Member
Frank Armstrong, Co-opted Member
Shereen Benjamin, Senatus Assessor
Richard Blythe, Senatus Assessor
Alastair Dunlop, Chancellor's Assessor
Ruth Elliott, Students' Association Vice-President Community
Ruth Girardet, Co-opted Member
Dora Herndon, Students' Association President
Tobias Kelly, Academic Staff Member
Peter Mathieson, Principal & Vice-Chancellor
Sarah McAllister, Professional Services Staff Member
Douglas Millican, Co-opted Member
Jock Millican, General Council Assessor
Hugh Mitchell, Co-opted Member
Kathryn Nash, Trade Union Academic Staff Member
David Ovens, General Council Assessor
Mark Patrizio, Trade Union Professional Services Staff Member
Alistair Smith, Co-opted Member
Sarah Wolffe, General Council Assessor
- Member Apologies:** Robert Aldridge, City of Edinburgh Council Assessor
Kavi Thakrar, Co-opted Member
- In Attendance:** Leigh Chalmers, Vice-Principal & University Secretary
Gale Macleod, Rector's Assessor
Claire Sarafilovic, Governance Apprentice
- Presenters & Observers:** Lewis Allan, Senior Governance Advisor to the Vice-Principal & University Secretary
David Argyle, Head of College, Medicine & Veterinary Medicine
Nirmal Borkhataria, Interim Director of Finance
Christina Boswell, Vice-Principal Research & Enterprise
Iain Gordon, Head of College, Science & Engineering
Colm Harmon, Vice-Principal Students
Kim Graham, Provost
Catherine Martin, Vice-Principal Corporate Services
Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal and Chief Information Officer, and Librarian
Sarah Prescott, Head of College, Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences
Rona Smith, Deputy Secretary, Governance and Strategic Planning
Daniel Wedgwood, Head of Court Services (clerk)

Philine Rouwers, President of EU Sports Union (for item 7)
Damien Toner, Director of Estates (for item 8)
James Saville, Director of HR (for item 9)

OPENING ITEMS

Opening and welcome

Simon Fanshawe, Rector, opened the meeting and noted the apologies received. He welcomed David Ovens, the new General Council Assessor, and Claire Sarafilovic, the new Governance Apprentice, to their first meeting of Court.

The Rector noted Court's sadness at the death of Lord Cameron of Lochbroom, a former Chancellor's Assessor, noting that the University had been represented at his funeral and had offered condolences to his family.

The Rector had recently chaired a half-yearly meeting of General Council and had been the after-lunch speaker at this event, speaking on the theme of academic freedom.

Some staff members had contacted the Rector in the context of the Principal's recent all-staff communications relating to finances. They had sought further information on any criteria for future decision-making and ways in which the University would enhance its capacity to manage change.

1 Minutes

Paper A1

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2024 were approved, subject to agreed corrections to the minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Report to Court and the Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report.

2 Matters Arising & Review of Action Log

Paper A2

Matters Arising:

Ordinance 217 (General Council Membership & Registration)

Janet Legrand, Senior Lay Member, notified Court that the Privy Council had approved the University's Ordinance regarding the membership and registration rules for the General Council, which Court had approved in February 2024. The Secretary of the General Council was working with University colleagues to formulate an implementation plan, which would be submitted to Court in due course.

Action Log

It was noted that the Action Log had been updated to include some on-going actions relating to implementation of the 2024 externally-facilitated effectiveness review of Court.

It was suggested, and Court agreed, that the Action Log should include communication of the timelines for developing the Responsible Investment Policy, as referenced in the minutes of the previous meeting of Court.

3 Principal's Report

Paper B

Peter Mathieson, Principal & Vice-Chancellor, invited comments and questions on the report. He noted that the Court seminar session on finances that had preceded this meeting had enabled Court to provide valuable input into relevant work.

Court discussed procedures for handling communications and any enquiries received on the University's financial position.

4 Committee Business

Exception Committee

Paper C1

Court noted the report.

Policy & Resources Committee

Paper C2

Court noted the report.

Governance & Nominations Committee

Paper C3

Court noted the report. It was noted that the process to appoint new co-opted lay members of Court was in progress.

Knowledge Strategy Committee

Paper C4

Court noted the report.

Senate

Paper C5

Peter Mathieson, Principal & Vice-Chancellor, introduced the report as Convener of Senate, noting that four sets of Senate minutes had been approved and transmitted to Court. He expressed gratitude to Lisa Dawson, Academic Registrar, and the Senate support team for recent process improvements that had facilitated greater efficiency in this area while continuing to provide for appropriate input from across the membership of Senate.

The Principal and the Senate Assessors noted recent improvements in the degree and style of engagement in Senate meetings and welcomed increased prominence of the student voice within Senate.

It was noted that the Senate Task & Finish Group on the implementation of Senate's effectiveness review was engaged in discussion of the interaction of Senate with its standing committees.

The work of the Senate Budget Working Group, analysing the potential impact of budgetary restraint on learning and teaching, was highlighted and it was proposed that the outcomes of this work should be shared with Court in due course.

KEY ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION/DECISION

5 Finance and Planning Update Report

Paper D

Nirmal Borkhataria, Interim Director of Finance, introduced the paper, noting that Court had discussed the University's financial position and financial targets in the preceding Court seminar session and inviting any further comments and questions.

The following points were made in discussion:

- The timescale of 18 months in which to rebalance income and expenditure had been decided upon on the basis that this was an achievable goal, in the context that it was felt to be desirable to complete this process over a reasonably short and self-contained timescale.
- It was observed that setting too narrow a timescale for achieving the required change could negatively affect decision-making and reduce opportunities to ameliorate the impact on staff, but also that too long a process would entail protracted uncertainty, which would itself have negative impacts, including on staff.
- The timescale had not been driven by obligations towards lenders, but it would be important to continue to monitor debt covenant margins. It was agreed that information on covenant margins would be provided to the next meeting of Audit & Risk Committee.
- Further information on the criteria for key decisions would be welcomed both by Court members and by members of the wider community. Removing duplication would be a primary focus for decision-making.
- Protecting and enhancing the University's excellence should be an overarching priority and a key part of the context for decisions regarding cost saving measures and the timescales for achieving these. Stated intentions to protect the quality of the student experience should not be achieved at the expense of the University's research excellence, nor vice versa. Rather, the focus would be on the appropriate scale and means to deliver these.
- While the immediate proposals focused on a particular set of targets and measures, the overall aim should be to develop the capability to adapt in order to maintain efficiency and sustainable success in the longer term, preventing the need for further exercises of this kind in the future.
- It was recognised that opportunities to grow income must be pursued strenuously alongside management of costs, but noted that there was no realistic opportunity for additional income generation of sufficient scale to rebalance the University's finances to the required degree.
- It was noted that large-scale change programmes themselves carry costs and that these would need to be managed and accounted for. Details of relevant financial reporting would be formulated with input from the University's external auditors.

- The University would need to consider carefully its capacity to deliver change at the required scale. Appropriate lessons must be drawn from previous change programmes. It was observed that the University Initiatives Portfolio Board provided a structure for oversight of multiple workstreams at organisation-wide scale. Consideration should also be given to the potential benefits of commissioning external support for planning and implementation of relevant change.
- Consistency would be important to the success of the programme of change, both in communications and in dealing with people across the organisation.

Court noted the proposed framework to return the University to a sustainable financial position, which would be subject to further development.

6 Student intakes 2025-26 – Early application insight

Paper E

Rona Smith, Deputy Secretary Governance & Strategic Planning, introduced the item, noting that this was in addition to the normal cycle of reporting to Court on student recruitment and provided relevant context for the discussion of University finances and planning.

Recruitment in the previous academic year had been short of targeted levels, although higher than the year before. What had been achieved, in the context of sector-wide reductions in demand, was a significant achievement and reflected substantial efforts on the part of colleagues working in student recruitment. In the current recruitment cycle, colleagues continued to work hard to achieve targets,

7 Students' Association and Sports Union Reports

7.1 Students' Association Report

Paper F1

Dora Herndon, President of the Students' Association, introduced the report, noting that the election process had begun for the Association's office-bearers for the next academic year, candidate lists having been published. The Association's democracy review was highlighted and welcomed, noting that this one part of reviewing the Association's policies and practices to enhance its relevance and effectiveness. Also highlighted was the contribution of Dylan Walch, Vice President Education, to improving the student voice within Senate.

In discussion, Ruth Elliott, Vice President Community, was invited to comment on student accommodation issues. She noted that many students had reported difficulties securing suitable accommodation and that she had led efforts to coordinate campaigning on this issue across the Students' Associations of Scottish universities.

It was observed that the University had made a major contribution to a significant expansion in available student accommodation over the last decade.

7.2 Sports Union Report

Paper F2

Philine Rouwers, President of the University Sports Union, joined the meeting and introduced the report. She noted a number of recent achievements of the Sports

Union, including a significant governance and policy review that had resulted in a new draft constitution and code of conduct and improvements to a number of policies. In addition, an independent report on the value of Sport at the University had been published recently. Edinburgh had enjoyed a number of successes in BUCS (British Universities and Colleges Sport) competitions in different sports.

The tender process for University sports kit was discussed. This was nearing completion and it was expected that the preferred supplier would be announced in the near future. The value of University branding on sportswear was noted.

Ahead of the forthcoming elections, the Principal noted the positive contributions made by all of the current Students' Association and Sports Union sabbatical officers.

8 BioQuarter – Scottish Power Energy Network Upgrade

Paper G

Damien Toner, Director of Estates, introduced the paper. He also explained the intended approach to capital projects in the current financial context. Given this context, a comprehensive review of capital projects was planned, with a view to pausing projects where appropriate.

It was agreed that the results of the review process would be shared with Court, following consideration by the University Executive and Estates Committee, in order to ensure appropriate oversight of decision-making regarding prioritisation and resulting expenditure.

It was noted that the BioQuarter SPEN upgrade would enable the University to fulfil understandings reached with partner organisations and would facilitate potential future investments.

Court approved, in principle, the University's contribution to partnership funding for the power upgrade.

9 Annual People Report

Paper L

James Saville, Director of Human Resources, introduced the Annual People Report for 2023/24. Recognising the time elapsed since the period covered by the report, he noted an intention to deliver such reports to the December meeting of Court in future years. As examples of positive developments, it was highlighted that: the triennial valuation of the Staff Benefits Scheme had resulted in reduced staff contribution rates; there had been progress in simplifying the academic promotions process; and there had been a notable reduction in the University's gender pay gap.

Court noted the report.

ITEMS FOR NOTING OR FORMAL APPROVAL

10 Edinburgh Innovations Strategy Update and Knowledge Exchange & Innovation Fund **Paper H**

Court approved submission of the strategy document to the Scottish Funding Council.

It was clarified that references to increasing the number of innovation-active academic staff did not entail new staff recruitment but rather encouraging and supporting relevant activity among existing staff.

11 Self-Evaluation Action Plan **Paper I**

Court noted the University's annual report to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) on activities to effectively manage quality assurance and deliver on enhancement.

References within the document to the student voice and to the Research Postgraduate (PGR) experience were particularly welcomed. It was noted that PGR students were likely to be impacted in a number of ways by the financial context as it affected the University and the wider university sector.

12 Donations & Legacies and Alumni Relations Activity **Paper J**

Court noted the report.

13 Resolutions **Paper K**

Court approved the following Resolutions:

- No. 1/2025: Alteration of the title of Personal Chair of Politics
- No. 2/2025: Foundation of a Personal Chair of Neuroinflammatory Medicine

14 Any Other Business

There was no other business.

15 Date of Next Meeting

Monday, 28 April 2025