

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY COURT

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 30 SEPTEMBER 2025

Present: Julie Ashworth (Chair) (except 74-77)
Martin Barker
Lesley Birse
George Boyne (except 11-12 and 55-57)
Ewan Cameron
Owen Cox
Iona Fyfe
Iain Grant
Ayten Hajiyeva
Luke Halliday
Richard Hepworth-Young (from 24)
Karim Hurtig
Fiona Islam
Donna Leith
Helen Martin
Gary McRae
Caryn Miller
Lorenzo Moretti
Alison Rankin
Joachim Schaper
Christina Schmid
Diane Skåtun
Iain Torrance (via Teams) (to end 23 and from 32)
Adaku Ufere
Ilia Xypolia

In attendance: *Senior Management Team Members/University Officers*

Fraser Bell (Chief Operating Officer) (except 11-17 and 86-89)
Siladitya Bhattacharya (Vice-Principal Regional Engagement) (for 42-54)
Nicholas Edwards (Interim Director of People) (for 11-17)
Peter Edwards (Acting Senior Vice-Principal) (except 11-17 and 74-77)
Hulda Sveinsdottir (Acting CGO & University Secretary) (except 13-17 and 74-77)
Karen Scott (as Senate Assessor elect)
Trevor Stack (as Senate Assessor elect via Teams)
Mark White (Chief Financial Officer) (except items 11-17 and 74-77)

Clerk: Bruce Purdon

Apologies: Dónall Curtin, Neil Calvert

- 1 The Rector opened the meeting and offered a vote of thanks to demitting Senate Assessor members, Joachim Schaper and Diane Skåtun for their work in support of Court throughout their terms of office.
- 2 The Rector also welcomed new Senate Assessor members elect, Karen Scott and Trevor Stack, and new Governor Apprentice, Donna Leith to the meeting and to Court.
- 3 It was noted that Neil Calvert and Dónall Curtin had been appointed as new Independent Members of Court, but were unavailable to join the meeting.
- 4 The Court received and noted the Rector's report on recent activities and meetings undertaken in the role since the last meeting of Court.

REPORT FROM THE SENIOR GOVERNOR

Verbal item

- 5 The Court received and noted an update from the Senior Governor on recent activities and meetings undertaken in the role since the last meeting of Court.
- 6 The Senior Governor offered formal thanks to all Members of Court and to the Governance team for their work and commitment during 2022-25, which had seen a high number of additional meetings during a period of change for the University, not least as a result of the process to recruit a new Principal.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND REMINDER OF COURT AND MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

CT20250930_3

- 7 The Court noted the standing reminder of the responsibilities of Court and members as charity trustees. Owen Cox and Peter Edwards noted an interest in the agenda as Trustees of UASLAS.
- 8 It was confirmed that the meeting was quorate.

MINUTES

- 9 The Court approved the following minutes of previous meetings:

- 2 July 2025: subject to minute 15 being amended to confirm that Senate noted the proposals for the establishment of a branch campus in India. CT20250930_4.1
- 31 July 2025: subject to minute 17 point 3 being amended to confirm that Members of Court presented the query referenced within the minute. CT20250930_4.2
- 31 July 2025 closed session CT20250930_4.2.1
- 1 September 2025 CT20250930_4.3
- 3 September 2025 CT20250930_4.4
- 8 September 2025: subject to minute 2 being amended to reinstate missing wording. CT20250930_4.5

- 12 September 2025: subject to minute 9 point 13 being amended to refer to the Interim Director of People.

CT20250930_4.6

ACTION LOG, MATTERS ARISING AND DECISIONS BY CIRCULATION

CT20250930_5

10 The Court received and noted a report on Matters Arising and the Court Action Log.

UPDATE ON RECRUITMENT OF THE PRINCIPAL

Verbal item

11 The Interim Director of People provided an update on the ongoing Principal recruitment exercise, noting that an appointment proposal was anticipated for presentation to Court the following week, following the successful completion of the recruitment process, which had included focus group elements with staff and student representatives.

12 In response to queries, it was confirmed that a process and timeline for the conduct of a lessons learned exercise following the conclusion of the recruitment process would be agreed in due course.

RECRUITMENT OF THE CHIEF GOVERNANCE OFFICER & UNIVERSITY SECRETARY

CT20250930_6.2

13 The Interim Director of People presented a paper to outline the proposed selection process for the appointment of the Chief Governance Officer & University Secretary.

14 It was noted that, following approval granted by Court in July 2025, the University's recruitment consultants, Gatenby Sanderson (Gatenby) had undertaken screening and preparation for recruitment to the post and had commenced a public search on 10 September. It was anticipated that the selection process would conclude in December 2025, with the postholder commencing their role in early 2026.

15 Members queried why it was proposed to award authority to the selection panel to delegate to a smaller panel of its members permission to undertake any long-listing deliberations alongside the Interim Director of People and Gatenby. It was confirmed that this was simply to ensure flexibility in case of any issues with the availability of panel members.

16 It was reported that the Selection Panel composition would be finalised shortly, to include a nominated Senate Assessor and external member. A meeting of the Remuneration Committee would also be convened to finalise the salary parameters for the substantive appointment.

17 The Court approved the proposed selection process and structure of the selection panel, as presented within the paper.

18 The Court received an oral report from the Principal on developments within the University and in the wider higher education sector.

UPDATE ON FINANCIAL POSITION AND PROJECTION

CT20250930_8.1

19 The Chief Financial Officer provided an update on the 2025-26 financial position and the projection to 31 July 2025, based on the three-year Financial Plan as approved by Court in June 2025.

20 The key elements underpinning the current position were reported on, including: the final 2024-25 outturn; the outcome from revisiting the 2024-25 Voluntary Severance/Enhanced Retirement Scheme, progress made towards the delivery of School savings targets; and the initial position with regard to the September 2025 student recruitment round.

21 Noting that the £5.5m additional revenue and savings target required to achieve the Court-approved deficit of £6.5m was anticipated to be met, and that student fee income was projected to be up to £1m above budgetary targets, it was recommended to pay the proposed pay award for 2025-26, backdated to 1 August 2025, and Court approval was sought for its implementation.

22 Detailed discussion took place, during which Court considered the key elements underpinning their decision-making, including:

- The current in-year position, noting the early stage in the financial year and that September student intake figures remained provisional pending formal Snapshot 1 confirmation in October 2025
- The current position against budget and the Court approved deficit position for 2025-26.
- The forward requirements for additional cost savings in 2025-26 and 2026-27 and any associated risks to delivery given the continued economic pressures within the University sector and more widely.
- The requirement to return to a break-even position in 2027-28 and ensure that funds were available for reinvestment in key strategic areas as soon as possible.
- The responsibility of Trustees to ensure the financial sustainability of the University, and the need for evidence-based decision making.
- That, on the basis that it was possible to defer the pay award for up to 11 months, this had currently been factored into the 2024-25 budget only from Month 11 onwards.

- The importance of the pay award towards staff morale and the avoidance of industrial action.

23 On the basis of majority consensus, the Court approved the pay award in principle, subject to confirmation of the student intake position as at Snapshot 1 in October 2025 and confirmation of the anticipated impact on the 2025-26 and 2026-27 budgets.

PENSIONS: REPLACEMENT PENSION GUARANTEE
FACILITY FOR UASLAS

CT20250930_8.2

24 The Court received a paper to present the draft updated pension guarantee with the UASLAS pension scheme, noting that in June 2025, Court had previously given approval to enter into an agreement to work with HSBC to update the agreement, which was first entered into in 2019.

25 The draft guarantee had been prepared and reviewed by HSBC, UASLAS and the University's legal teams, with the wording the same as that currently in place, with the exception of the addition of an extended period that was agreed upon as part of the completion of the 31 July 2022 valuation exercise. It was confirmed that there was no requirement to include a clause stating that the guarantee would end should the UASLAS Scheme return to surplus, as this was included in the 2019 Security & Guarantee Agreement that remained in force.

26 It was noted that failure to provide an updated facility would require the UASLAS Trustees to report to The Pension Regulator and to increase deficit recovery contributions payable by the University in order to recover the deficit over a shorter period. Upon approval of the replacement facility, University management would work with Lloyds to discharge the existing guarantee.

27 Discussion followed as to the current status of the Pension Advisory Group (PAG), and it was noted that the operation of the Group was being reviewed and re-established under the incoming Chair, Neil Calvert, with a new membership to be confirmed in due course. It was noted the PAG would review the fund's technical arrangements at a future meeting.

28 The Court approved the HSBC Pension Guarantee as presented.

STRATEGIC RISK BI-ANNUAL REPORT

CT20250930_9.1

29 The Court received and considered a paper to present the bi-annual report on institutional risk management, including a summary of developments relating to risk management at institutional level and an update on the University's current strategic risk profile, with a copy of the latest iteration of the Strategic Risk Register (SRR).

30 It was noted that the SRR now included a ninth risk, specific to the University estate, relating to its quality, size and configuration relative to the business needs of the University and regulatory requirements.

31	In respect of Strategic Risk 6, relating to cyber security, it was agreed that cyber security training should be provided to Members of Court. ACTION: Acting CGO & University Secretary	ABERDEEN 2040: SUMMARY OF PERFORMANCE 2024-25	CT20250930_9.2 CT20250930_9.3
32	The Acting Senior Vice-Principal provided a summary of progress against the key performance indicators (KPIs) in place for Aberdeen 2040, noting that these KPIs would be used for reporting within the University's Annual Report & Accounts for 2024-25.		
33	Alongside, a presentation was given on the updated, year-end version of the Strategic Priorities Implementation Plan (previously approved by Court in November 2024), with the three key strategic priority themes identified as quality, new revenue and Adapting for Continued Success.		
34	It was noted that, as the initial five-year planning period for Aberdeen 2040 had reached its conclusion, it was intended to review the KPIs currently used to track progress over the year ahead, potentially as part of the Adapting for Continued Success (ACS) programme. A further update would be provided to Court in due course.		
35	In considering the update, the Court offered comments and questions as follows:		
36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was noted that the Vice-Principal Education was currently revising School National Student Survey (NSS) Action Plans, and Members queried whether there were particular areas for enhancement that had been identified. It was confirmed that the scores on assessment and feedback had been targeted for necessary improvement. 		
37	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members suggested that the review of KPIs could include a re-evaluation of the number of KPIs included – at 31, the current number was felt to be too high. 		
38	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Court endorsed the key strategic priority themes identified. Whilst noting that there should not be too many priorities for the University to effectively deliver, it was suggested that further consideration could be given to referencing a number of additional essential activities, including sustainability, student experience, philanthropic income and non-academic commercialisation. 		
39	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was also suggested that consideration could be given to including an explicit percentage reduction in the University's cost base as a target. 		
	ADAPTING FOR CONTINUED SUCCESS PROGRAMME BOARD PROGRESS REPORT		CT20250930_9.4
40	The Court received for information an update on the establishment of the framework for the Adapting for Continued Success (ACS) programme as a process, including initial outline proposals relating to:		

the programme governance arrangements; scope and workstreams; roadmap and reporting schedule; initial Communication and Engagement Plan; risk and benefits analysis; and a summary of progress made to date.

41 It was noted that Court would have an opportunity to engage in a set of discussions around the substantive workstreams of the ACS as part of its Extended Discussion Day on 1 October 2025.

UPDATE PRESENTATION ON CURRENT TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION INITIATIVES

Presentation

42 The Court received and noted a presentation from the Vice-Principal Regional Engagement to provide an update on the University's current Transnational Education (TNE) operations in Qatar and China, and potential new TNE initiatives in India, Greece and China.

Qatar

43 It was noted that a revised Cooperation Agreement (ACA) with the University's Qatar partner had been signed on 16 September 2025, following formal approval by Court in July and the Qatar Strategic Partnership Board (QSPB) in October.

44

45 It was reported that significant progress had been made in respect of the partnership's plans for campus expansion, with an extended programme portfolio planned, supported by pending National Committee for Qualifications and Academic Accreditation (NCQAA) accreditation, receipt of which would enable scholarships to be awarded to potential students, thus boosting student recruitment.

China

46 In respect of the University's Joint Institute with South China Normal University (SCNU), it was noted that the total student population now stood at just over 1200,

47 Two further initiatives were also being explored in China, including a proposed partnership with the [REDACTED] to establish a Government-approved [REDACTED] projected to recruit from September 2026, and a Joint Institute with [REDACTED] with programmes to commence in September 2027.

India

48 It was noted that Court approval had been granted on 31 July 2025 for the establishment of a Joint Venture with the University's Indian partner, [REDACTED] subject to specific conditions and the finalisation of a formal Joint Venture agreement, to be approved under delegated authority by the Principal and Finance & Resourcing Committee.

49 The University had received a Letter of Intent (LOI) from the University Grants Commission in India offering in-principle approval for the establishment of a branch campus in India within 2 years. Premises in Mumbai had already been identified, with a campus agreement currently subject to final review.

50 Proposed programmes for delivery had been approved by the University's Programme Management Committee (PMC) and were currently subject to approval by the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC), with an update having been provided on the initiative to Senate on 23 June.

51 An update on the current status of negotiations was provided in respect of the Joint Venture Agreement, which it was anticipated would be finalised for approval and implementation in November 2025, with campus fit-out progressing swiftly thereafter. A Letter of Commencement (LOC) would be sought from the Indian authorities in early 2026, with the campus launched planned for September 2026.

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

CLOSED ITEM OF BUSINESS: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] [Minutes 55-57 are confidential to Court]

CT20250930_11

55

[REDACTED]

56

[REDACTED]

57

[REDACTED]

GOVERNANCE AND NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE:
APPOINTMENTS TO COMMITTEES

CT20250930_12.1

58 The Court considered and approved a suite of recommendations from the Governance & Nominations Committee (GNC) for the membership of Court's standing sub-committees for 2025-26, which were presented in line with Court's agreed principles for committee compositions and memberships and the requirements of the 2023 Scottish Code of Good HE Governance.

59 In appointing Luke Halliday as Chair of the Audit & Risk Committee, following a competitive recruitment process, it was noted that they would subsequently demit from the roles of Senior Independent Member of Court and Chair of the Pensions Advisory Group, in line with the requirement for independence within the membership of the Audit & Risk Committee.

60 Members noted that the role of the Commercialisation Committee was currently being informally reviewed by the Committee Chair, Senior Governor and Acting Senior Vice-Principal. Whilst this process was ongoing, no appointments to vacancies within the membership of the Committee were proposed.

61 It was reported that the GNC had noted that the Rector was not at this stage a member of any of the sub-committees of Court, and that the appointments to the Audit & Risk Committee did result in a lack of gender diversity which would need to be further considered in any future appointments.

62 Discussion followed regarding the role of Governor Apprentice on Court, with clarification sought as to the specific requirements of the role in relation to members with full trustee status. It was agreed that the matter should return to GNC for further discussion, with an update and clarification to return to Court in due course.
ACTION: Acting CGO & University Secretary

AUDIT & RISK COMMITTEE REPORT

CT20250930_12.2

63 The Chair of the Audit & Risk Committee provided an update on the key business conducted by the Committee at its meeting on 9 September 2025, as outlined within the circulated paper.

64 Members' particular attention was drawn to the Committee's consideration of a presentation by the external auditor on the lessons learned for the sector from the Gillies Report, and an update from the internal auditor regarding the process and timeline for the conduct of an internal review on the lessons learned from a University of Aberdeen perspective.

65

[REDACTED]

66

[REDACTED]

67

On the recommendation of the Committee, the Court approved the Audit & Risk Committee Terms of Reference for 2025-26, noting that there were no substantive changes proposed. However, in response to the recommendations of the Gillies Report, it was intended that the Chairs of the Audit & Risk and Finance & Resourcing Committees would conduct a further review of respective Committee remits to ensure they remained in line with financial governance good practice.

FINANCE & RESOURCING COMMITTEE REPORT

CT20250930_12.3

68

The Chair of the Finance & Resourcing Committee provided an update on the key business conducted by the Committee at its meeting on 17 September 2025, as outlined within the circulated paper.

69

On the recommendation of the Committee, the Court approved the Finance & Resourcing Committee Terms of Reference for 2025-26, noting the inclusion of an additional term to specify the Committee's role in the scrutiny and endorsement of live TNE projects, given the University's key strategic focus on driving developments in this area.

ANNUAL STATEMENT OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

CT20250930_12.4

70

The Court considered and approved the Annual Statement on Research Integrity, as one of the University's commitments as a signatory to the Concordat to Support Research Integrity.

71

It was noted that the Statement highlighted a number of examples of activities undertaken during 2024-25 to support good research practice and positive research culture, and identified further key activities planned for 2025-26. The Statement also included an anonymised summary of research misconduct allegations and investigations undertaken during session 2024-25 involving members of staff and postgraduate research students, plus a case study on good practice in research integrity at the University.

72

In response to Members' queries, it was confirmed that the Concordat required approval of the Annual Statement by Court as the Governing Body of the institution, and as such it was not Senate's responsibility to approve the document. However, a copy would be provided to Senate for formal noting in advance of the submission.

73 The Court reflected on potential items of strategy and key business that should be the focus of its time over the course of the remaining cycle of meetings for 2025-26.

74 Additional items for inclusion within the draft were agreed as follows:

- A suggested joint meeting of University Court and Senate
- A review and update of People-related KPIs (via the Remuneration Committee)
- Further reporting and updates on the Adapting for Continued Success programme in February, April and June.
- A review of Court's Risk Appetite Statement
- Additional updates as required regarding the DT SCIO

ACTION: Acting CGO & University Secretary

CLOSED ITEM OF BUSINESS:
Minutes 75 to 78 are confidential to Court

CT20250930_14

75 [REDACTED]

76 [REDACTED]

77 [REDACTED]

78 [REDACTED]

ITEMS PROVIDED FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND NOTING

79 The Court received the following written reports for information and assurance:

- Update on HE sector and University developments
- Six monthly media coverage report

CT20250930_15.1
CT20250930_15.2

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Verbal item

80 The Court noted that its next scheduled meeting would take place on 3 December 2025.