

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY COURT

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 25 FEBRUARY 2026

- Present:
- Gary McRae (Chair (except for Mins 191 to 194))
 - Martin Barker
 - Lesley Birse
 - Neil Calvert (Chair for Mins 191 to 194)
 - Ewan Cameron (up to Mins 212.6)
 - Owen Cox
 - Dónall Curtin
 - Peter Edwards
 - Iona Fyfe (via Teams for Mins 166-180 & 197 onwards)
 - Luke Halliday
 - Ayten Hajiyeva (for Mins 187 to 205)
 - Karim Hurtig
 - Fiona Islam (for Mins 197 onwards)
 - Donna Leith
 - Helen Martin
 - Caryn Miller (up to Mins 212.5)
 - Lorenzo Moretti (via Teams)
 - Christina Schmid
 - Karen Scott
 - Trevor Stack
 - Bert Timmermans
 - Adaku Ufere (via Teams)
 - Ilia Xypolia
- In attendance:
- Iain Torrance KCVO
 - Senior Management Team Members/University Officers:
 - Fraser Bell (except for Mins 187 to 190 & 218)
 - Hannah Brian (Interim CGO & University Secretary)
 - Nicholas Edwards (except for Mins 187 to 190 & 218)
 - Nicholas Forsyth (except for Mins 187 to 190 & 218)
 - Jo-Anne Murray (except for Mins 187 to 190 & 218)
 - Mark White (except for Mins 187 to 190 & 218)
- Clerk:
- Bruce Purdon
- Apologies:
- Alison Rankin

WELCOME AND RECTOR'S REPORT

166. The Court welcomed Dr Bert Timmermans to his first meeting as newly elected Senate Assessor to Court.
167. The Rector provided Court with a verbal report on recent activities undertaken in the role.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND REMINDER OF COURT AND MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

168. The Court noted the standing reminder of Court and Court Member responsibilities. [CT20260225_2]
169. The Court noted that a number of standing interests had been recorded by correspondence in advance of the meeting. The following were also noted in terms of declarations of interest specific to the agenda:
- Pete Edwards, [Minutes 9-12], as Trustee (ex officio) of Development Trust SCIO
 - Owen Cox, [Minutes 14-15] Sector Update as a Branch Trade Union Official and [Minutes 33-47] Adapting for Continued Success in relation to Trade Union membership of workstreams.
 - Helen Martin, [Minutes 14-15] Sector Update (s 11 and 22.1 of the paper) as a member of UCU and [Minutes 33-47] Adapting for Continued Success in relation to Trade Union membership of workstreams.

MINUTES AND NOTE OF EXTENDED DISCUSSION DAY

170. The Minutes of 3 December 2025 [CT20260225_3.1] were approved subject to one amendment to a reference to Trade Union representatives on Court to instead correctly refer to these as Trade Union Nominated Members of Court.
171. A note of the Court's Extended Discussion Day of 1 October was received and noted. [CT20260225_3.2]

ACTION LOG, MATTERS ARISING & DECISIONS BY CIRCULATION

172. The Court received and noted the Action Log [CT20260225_4]. As part of this, it also received a "fast facts" briefing note to assist members in their advocacy of the University.
173. The Court formally noted that it had reached the following decisions by circulation since its last meeting:
- 1) Approval of additional disclosure statements and minor amendments included within the final annual report and accounts document for 2024-25;
 - 2) Approval of the appointment of Gary McRae as Interim Senior Governor;
 - 3) Approval, on recommendation of Audit and Risk Committee, of the US GAAP accounts 2024-25.

MATTER ARISING - CONFIDENTIAL MINUTE

174. The Court received, for approval, documentation that would govern the future relationship between the University and the University of Aberdeen Development Trust SCIO [CT20260225_4.1].

175.

[REDACTED]

176.

[REDACTED]

177. Following discussion, the Court approved:

1. Memorandum of Understanding;
2. Service Level Agreement;
3. Data Sharing Agreement; and
4. The Notice of Termination of the Data Sharing Agreement dated 21 May 2018.

REPORT FROM THE INTERIM SENIOR GOVERNOR

178. The Interim Senior Governor provided Court with a verbal report on activities undertaken in the role since appointment in December 2025, noting in particular a number of meetings and discussions they had held with a variety of internal and external stakeholders.

REPORT FROM THE PRINCIPAL AND UPDATE ON HE SECTOR/UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENTS

179. The Court received a report [CT20260225_6] on developments within the University and in the wider higher education sector, which the Principal supplemented with a presentation and discussion on current key issues. This included:

- The Scottish Government Budget for 2026/26 and Spending Review with a particular focus on its implications for higher education;
- The Framework for the Future Success and Sustainability of Scotland’s Universities – a joint review by The Scottish Government and Universities Scotland;
- The Institute of Fiscal Studies report on the decline in Scottish Funding Council teaching resource in real terms since 2013 set against the increase in costs;

- The progress of the Tertiary Education & Training (Scotland) Bill including new responsibilities and powers assigned to the Scottish Funding Council to enable greater oversight over HE institutions;
- The UK Government’s new International Education Strategy and current issues with UKVI Visa processing;
- The implications of a decision by an English university to settle tuition fee Covid-disruption claims out of Court.

180. The Principal also reported that Professor Nick Forsyth had been appointed as Provost and Dr Heather May Morgan appointed as Vice-Principal Regional Engagement and Innovation.

FINANCE

Finance & Resourcing Committee Report

181. The Court received and noted a report on the main items of business considered by the Finance and Resourcing Committee at its meeting on 2 February 2026. [CT20260225_7.1]
182. The Court noted the Committee, for its part, had recommended for approval the University’s updated Procurement Policy which Court would consider separately under the Audit & Risk Committee Report later in the agenda.

Forecast Budget Position Post-January Intake

183. The Court received and noted the Financial Management Report for January 2026 [CT20260225_7.2]. This reported a deficit projection of £3.0M versus the budget deficit target of £5.2M. Court noted and welcomed that the University was expecting to achieve its January 2026 student intake targets. While the overall Schools Saving Target of £7.7m was projected to be met in total, performance was variable across the Schools, with six Schools achieving their targets and six missing them. In addition, five Schools were currently predicting deficits at the year end of a total £9m. The Court noted there was a point at which generating savings from operational spend becomes unsustainable and this would be discussed further as part of the Adapting for Continued Success agenda item.
184. The Court also noted that research grants were currently c£3.0M behind the budget target although applications and awards were on track. Should the shortfall not be recovered, however, there would be an almost equivalent reduction in costs. It was noted that the pool of funding for research grants was shrinking and becoming more focused and competitive. The Court agreed it would be helpful to receive at a future meeting an overview of the pipeline of research grants and further information on how the funding of these equated to costs and overheads. Action: Provost

REPORTS FROM SENATE AND COURT COMMITTEES

Senate Report

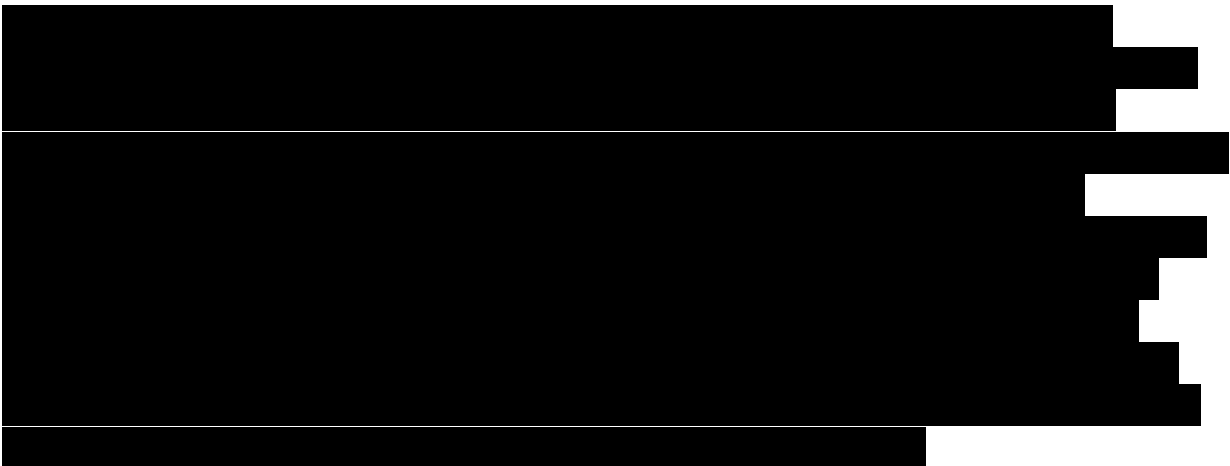
185. The Court received a report which detailed the main items of business considered at the meeting of Senate of 4 February 2026 [CT20260225_8.1]
186. The Court, on the recommendation of the Senate, approved a draft Resolution Degree Regulations, to be appended to the University’s existing General Regulations for First Degrees, for a new Business School partnership programme of MA Finance (4+0) at South China Normal University (SCNU). The Court also agreed in accordance with Section 6 (2) of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966 to pass the Resolution forthwith so that amended provisions could be applied with immediate effect.

Governance and Nominations Committee Report

187. The Court received and noted a report of the main items considered by the Governance and Nominations Committee at its meeting of 27 January 2026 [CT20260225_8.2.1].
188. The Court noted that the Committee had considered the forward arrangements for the appointment of the new Senior Governor, according to the requirements of the 2016 Higher Education (Scotland) Act and the Scottish Code of Good HE Governance (2023). The report noted that the Committee had given its approval to an initial outline timeline. In addition it was recommending to Court that it delegate authority to the Committee to agree the composition and membership of the Appointment Committee and to develop the role criteria [see minute 26-29].
189. The Court on the recommendation of the Committee approved the role outline for the appointment of a new Court Equalities Champion. Expressions of interest from members of Court in undertaking the role were invited.

Strictly Confidential Minute – Restricted to Court

190.



The Interim Senior Governor withdrew for the next item and the Chair was passed to the Senior Independent Member.

Senior Governor Recruitment and Election Process

191. The Court received a paper that outlined the legislative requirements and the Court’s rules governing the process for the recruitment and election of the University’s next Senior Governor [CT20260225_8.2.2]. It also outlined two potential timelines for the process and recommended a preferred option to Court.
192. The Court considered the two options, which were:
- Option A: which would launch in early March and conclude with elections in early May. The new Senior Governor could take up post from August onwards.
 - Option B: which would launch in April but which seeks to provide a longer period of time for the search and interview/scrutiny of candidates phase of the process concluding in June and then the election would take place in September in the first week of teaching. The new Senior Governor could take up post from October onwards.
193. The paper outlined the advantages/disadvantages of both options, however, Option B was preferred for a number of reasons, including that it would avoid holding elections during examination periods (which Option A would have required), would allow Court to receive and consider the criteria for the role, and a greater lead in time to extend the recruitment search if necessary and to raise awareness of the election phase to maximise participation, particularly from the student community.
194. The Court, therefore:
- 1) Approved Option B as the broad timeline for the process;
 - 2) Approved the delegation of authority to Governance and Nominations Committee at its meeting of 26 February to agree the composition/ membership of the Appointment Committee.
 - 3) Noted that consideration would now be given by the Governance and Nominations Committee to extending the Interim Senior Governor’s substantive appointment as an independent member of Court which currently concludes on 30 September to provide continuity in the transition to the new Senior Governor.

Audit and Risk Committee Report

195. The Court received and noted a report which detailed the main items of business considered at the meeting of Audit and Risk Committee of 3 February 2026 [CT20260225_8.3]. The Court discussed further several items within the report including:
- the Committee’s consideration of the University’s arrangements for cyber security and business continuity.
 - the Internal Audit Report of Transnational Education
 - updates on the progress of some outstanding Internal Audit Actions.
 - that the Committee had endorsed in principle the extension of the University’s existing Revolving Credit Facility noting that it would require further negotiation before being brought to Court for its approval.

196. The Court, on the recommendation of the Committee, approved the revised institutional Procurement Policy (noting also the Finance & Resources Committee approval of the same).

Remuneration Committee Report

197. The Court received a verbal report from the Committee Chair on the business considered at a meeting of the Remuneration Committee the preceding day, this having been scheduled in proximity to the meeting of Court to facilitate an in person meeting of members. Noting that a written report would be shared in due course with Court, the Chair noted the following as the main items of business that had been discussed:

- Changes to the composition and quorum of the Committee;
- The process for the setting of the Principal's Objectives which the Interim Senior Governor would engage with Court on further in due course;
- Deferral of a decision on the Senior Staff Pay Policy until later in the year. It was noted that the Committee also had discussed the potential implications for the gender pay gap should the decision be, for a third year, to apply no Senior Staff Pay Policy.
- A revised approach to provide more consistency in the process for setting Senior Staff salaries, as part of which the Committee would focus on setting Senior Management Team roles and the Principal setting senior roles beyond that, subject to appropriate reporting for assurance to the Committee.
- Approved the remuneration parameters for the roles of Provost and VP for Regional Engagement;
- Approved the remuneration to be made available for the Senior Governor role. This had included a small increase of £2k from the level set in 2021 of £20k for a 50 days per year time commitment.
- Gender Pay Gap at the Senior Staff Level with further discussion.
- Future development sessions and topics for the Committee

ADAPTING FOR CONTINUED SUCCESS (ACS)

Presentation and Paper from the Senate ACS Consultation Group

Dr Nathaniel Greene, Professor Patience Schell and Professor Justin Borg Barthet joined the meeting for this item on behalf of the Senate ACS Consultation Group.

198. The Court welcomed representatives of the Senate ACS Consultation Group to receive a presentation and paper on behalf of Senate with regard to the ACS process [CT20260225_9.1].

199. The presentation and paper set out a number of suggestions from Senate with regard to how it considered the ACS process could be improved. These related to:

- The legal context and the role of Senate in proposals for change to academic structures and its concerns about whether the ACS programme allowed Senate to fulfil its statutory obligations;

- Concerns regarding the engagement with Schools to date having been inadequate
- The financial context
- The robustness and availability to Senate and wider community of current data in relation to the process
- The opportunities, costs and opportunity costs of potential changes
- Areas where current structures and processes created blockages to improving collaboration and generating new revenue streams
- Potential impacts on morale and productivity of staff
- The future relationship of Court, Senate and Senior Management

200. There then followed an extensive discussion with members of Court on the presentation/paper and the views of Senate. This included discussion of the financial context and regarding whether the Senate had articulated alternative proposals for change, with some members of Court noting the paper and presentation was silent in this regard. The Senate representatives outlined that Senate had not developed alternative proposals but that Senate's view was that the academic structure of Schools was not the issue and that a Faculty structure would not address barriers to academic innovation and income generation. Senators also noted that they were keen to be involved directly in the ACS workstreams.

201. Some members of Court noted that the University had for three years been in a deficit position, which was unsustainable and which the Court was obligated to address as an urgent priority, including having a demonstrable and credible plan to do so in order to meet the requirements to be considered a going concern. The consequences of making cuts year on year to minimise but not eradicating those deficits, including structurally embedded ones, and the resulting lack of resource for investment in staff were also discussed.

202. The Court expressed its thanks and appreciation to the ACS Senate Consultation Group for the paper, the presentation and the discussion.

ACS - Proposals for Change (Part-Confidential Minute)

203. The Court received a detailed paper on the ACS programme, with a focus on proposals for change from the two Organisational Design workstreams [CT20260225_9.2]. The paper also set out the ongoing financial context for the programme, this being the institutional income generation and/or savings target of £12m over the coming two-year period in order to achieve the Court's agreed break-even position by 2027/28.

204. It was clarified at the outset of the discussion that the decisions before Court were not of a "go or no go" nature but would if agreed allow the Senior Management Team to take forward the necessary formal consultative stages with Trade Unions and others, and the wider assessment of the impacts and benefits/costs of each to be reported to Court to inform any decisions at its next meeting.

205. The Court discussed the financial context for ACS. This included debate on the extent to which alternative revenue streams to international students could address the deficit and whether the University had time to see if an improvement in either income stream could be achieved. The Principal expressed significant caution on whether the market for international students would significantly improve in the near future and that Court needed to carefully consider whether it would be prudent for the University's financial future to depend on this. The Principal also noted that while there had been changes to academic structures, it had been a number of decades since the University had changed its strategic focus and shape in response to the external competitive environment. Equally, there had been a series of general voluntary severance schemes over the years rather than a strategic intervention to focus on investing and growing areas of excellence. The Senior Management Team considered that there were inadequacies in the School structure and there was equally a desire to enable decision making at the lowest level and to remove blockages to innovation. The ACS programme was intended to address these issues.
206. The Court discussed in depth the proposals taking in turn the themes of:
- The current and future financial context both in terms of the University's financial sustainability and ability to deliver the investment needed in staff, facilities and the student experience to ensure its future academic success;
 - Proposals for a transition from a 12 school academic structure to a four-faculty model;
 - Research and the Research Excellence Framework Exercise (REF);
 - The degree programme portfolio review;
 - Student:Staff Ratios both for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines and Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts for People and the Economy (SHAPE);
 - Professional Services Re-design;
 - Staff Wellbeing.
207. Some members of Court noted that their sense was that there was considerable opposition in the academic community to the potential changes. The potential impact of changing to a faculty structure and changes through ACS on REF and student experience were noted as key issues for Court to be assured on. Likewise, and more generally, it was suggested that Court needed to also evaluate the implications for the University of doing nothing, not least in terms of its financial sustainability.
208. The Court discussed a range of issues with relation to the proposals around stopping PGT programmes with low student numbers and adopting minimum student number threshold for UG and PGT programmes. It was noted that there might be some programmes which for strategic, regional or national reasons were exempt. It was suggested by one member that a distinction should be made between programmes, degrees and courses and that the focus should be on courses with low student numbers. The Court also discussed in depth the outline proposals around minimum SSRs and linked reductions in academic

staff to achieve savings of [REDACTED]. A number of members noted the significance of this and therefore the need for Court to receive more information to ensure it understood both the proportion of academic staff that might be impacted and the impacts on REF and student experience, with information on any impact on students and student services being particular important.

209. Following the above discussion, the Court was presented at the meeting with an amended set of recommendations to take account of the debate.

210. With regard to point 4 below, it was confirmed that this did not represent “step 2” in the change management process but would at this point require collective consultation.

211. With regard to point 5, it was confirmed that the University had received legal advice on the process to be followed to pass a Resolution with regard to academic structure as set out in the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966. It was confirmed this could be shared with Court. The intention was for a Resolution on academic structure to be provided to Senate and then to Court in that order. Action: Interim CGO & University Secretary

212. Following a vote, the Court by a majority:

1. Approved the strategic programme vision for the future of the University, as set out in Section 2 viz to “Deliver a rebalanced University that is robust, resilient, relevant and adaptable, both now and in the future; with an academic structure that is repositioned to ensure effective leadership and voice; with emboldened educational and research offers that underpin the pursuit of excellence, while enhancing accessibility to interdisciplinarity; supported by first-in-class, complementary professional services that optimise support of academic delivery.”
2. Approved the recommendation to stop recruitment to PGT courses with fewer than 6 students enrolled, considering the acute financial situation. It noted that before this matter was taken forward for removal from the portfolio via Senate, that Court must see satisfactory EIA and SIA at its April meeting.

Court further noted that collective Consultation with the Campus Trade Unions would take place on the implementation of this measure.

3. Approved SMT adopting a minimum 10 student threshold on all UG and PGT programmes in their next phase of planning, as part of a portfolio consolidation process. Noted that the detailed impact of this by School would come to the Court meeting in April. At that meeting final approval would be subject to satisfactory EIA and SIAs.

Court noted that Collective Consultation with the Campus Trade Unions would take place on the implementation of this measure.

4. Approved SMT adopting a minimum SSR threshold of 20:1 for STEM disciplines, and 25:1 for SHAPE; in their next stage of planning to deliver financial savings of

approximately [REDACTED] via a reduction of [REDACTED] academic staff. The detailed impact of this by School would come to the Court meeting in April. At that meeting final approval will be subject to satisfactory EIA and SIAs.

The Court noted Collective consultation with the Campus Trade Unions would take place on the introduction of SSRs and these ratios.

5. Approved SMT moving forward with the re-design of the University's academic function, with the establishment of a new four-faculty model. The detailed structure and costing of this structure would come to the Court meeting in April. At that meeting final approval will be subject to satisfactory EIA and SIAs.

The Court noted that this approval would trigger a Resolution to Senate, which would also be sent to the General Council Business Committee.

6. Noted the update on re-design of professional services, which sits under the delegated authority of the Principal. This includes Directorates and plans for the provision of professional services support within the new faculty structure, subject to approval of recommendation 5. In taking forward this work, the University will initiate and follow the internal Change Management Policy where it is required, as appropriate.

It was confirmed that a further recommendation in the paper which sought approval that the financial savings associated with the proposals were sufficient to meet the Court approved Financial Plan was withdrawn and would be considered at April meeting.

It was noted that the above revised and agreed recommendations would be circulated for information to members following the meeting.

Action: Interim CGO & University Secretary.

MUSEUMS & COLLECTIONS – REPATRIATION REQUESTS

213. The Court received and approved, on the recommendation of both the Advisory Group on Collections and Deaccessioning and Repatriation and the Senior Management Team, two repatriation requests – one being in relation to Shawnee ancestral remains [CT20260225_10.1] and the other, the return of a stone scraper to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre [CT20260225_10.2].

GOVERNANCE AND REGULATORY

Severance Policy

214. The Court received and approved minor amendments to the policy which had been required following the splitting of the University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer role into two separate roles [CT20260225_11.1]. It was noted that the Remuneration

Committee had also, at its meeting of 24 February 2026, approved the proposed changes to the policy.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

215. Students' Association Nominated Members of Court gave a presentation on the experiences of international students. This highlighted the sacrifices made by many students and their families in order to study in Aberdeen and the challenges and difficulties that many faced, both during their time as students and upon graduation, including cost of living pressures, immigration restrictions and employment prospects.
216. The Court noted that where the issues highlighted were within the University's control, the Senior Management Team should work with AUSA on these. Court would also welcome further discussion with AUSA on the matter in due course.

COURT SCHEDULE OF BUSINESS

217. The Court's schedule of business was received and noted [CT20260225_16].

REVIEW OF THE MEETING

218. The Court held a brief discussion to reflect on the meeting and members' contributions to it.

Deferral of Business to Future Meetings

219. The Court agreed that to maximise time available for discussion of the Adapting for Continued Success business, including the engagement with the Senate Consultation Group, the following papers while received and noted would be deferred for discussion at a future meeting.
 1. Education – Curriculum Transformation [CT20260225_12]
 2. REF2029 – Institutional Preparations and Assurance Overview [CT20260225_14]
 3. Transnational Education Update [CT20260225_15]

ITEMS FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND NOTING

220. The Court noted the following further items for information.
 1. Report from the Partnership, Negotiating & Consultative Committee [CT20260225_18.1].
 2. Media Evaluation Report for July to December 2025 [CT20260225_18.2].

Record of Thanks

221. The Court recorded its thanks and appreciation to Iain Grant, Professional Services elected Member of Court, for his service to Court and its sub-committees following his resignation from Court in December 2026.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

222. The Court noted the next meeting would be on Wednesday, 29 April 2026 - 9am to 4pm.