

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
BUSINESS COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 19 JUNE 2025

Present: Duncan Macniven (Convener), Jenny Mordue (Vice-Convener), Fiona Dormandy, Derek Duthie, Hugh Galbraith, Norman Hutchison, Mark Lindley-Highfield, Jan McRobbie, Dan Montgomery, Ogutu Okudo, Mel Roberts, and He-Liang Shi.

Apologies: George Boyne, John Campbell, Colin Duncan, Iona Fyfe, Dorsa Naderimehr, Graeme Nicol, Arnab Paul, Christina Schmid, Judith Taylor, Samantha Waters, John White, and Haiyan Zhang.

In Attendance: Ross Anderson, Executive Support Officer (Clerk), Dr Hulda Sveinsdottir, Director of Strategic Planning, Project & Corporate Governance, Ruth Buckingham (observer), Liam Dyker, Academic Services (for item 2) and Mark White, Chief Financial Officer (for item 3).

1. Welcome and apologies

The Convener welcomed attendees and noted the apologies received from members.

2. Omnibus Resolution 2025-26 (Paper BC25:1906.3)

Liam Dyker, Administrative Officer in Registry, introduced the Omnibus Resolution 2025-26 on which the Business Committee has been invited to comment on before it is returned to Court on 25 June 2025.

Liam answered several questions from Business Committee members about the relationship between the main and other PhD supervisors and the arrangements for receipt of annual reports by Senate for degrees by research. A paper would be developed for Court to outline the comments made by the Committee and the response to them.

3. Financial Update

Mark White, Chief Financial Officer, provided a financial update to the Committee. His presentation covered the 2025/26 budget setting process, noting that a three-year financial plan would go to Court on 25 June 2025.

The CFO noted that the University had £4.7m of unavoidable staff cost increases and inflationary pressures. Extensive actions to make savings had already been made, including reducing operational spend, removing vacancies and revisiting previously rejected voluntary severance applications. Court had approved a similar deficit to 2024/25 of £6.5m, to achieve which an additional £5.5m of income and/or savings (recurring) was required.

The three-year financial plan (2025/26 to 2027/28) included the development of a revised institutional operating model for implementation from 2025/26 which will cover both Schools and Professional Services. The University aimed to return to revenue growth (including income from Transnational Education activities) with break-even set against a much-revised cost base.

The CFO provided information on the undergraduate and postgraduate taught (PGT) courses with 5 or fewer students: 16% of undergraduate and 28% of postgraduate taught (PGT) courses, out of 1,442 total. His presentation also looked at student:staff ratios and various changes in the University population, including the country of origin of current students. The CFO noted that, at the current level of deficit (£6.5m), the University's current cash reserves would run out in seven years. The two bonds on the balance sheet are scheduled to be fully repaid in 2044. The CFO noted a recent report by HSBC on the domestic market which noted that by 2030 there would be half the number of young people in UK schools than there was in the 1970s.

Recent changes in UK visa conditions had reduced international student numbers coming into the country. However, the CFO noted the recent announcement by the University that, subject to Court approval, the University of Aberdeen would be the first Scottish ancient university to have a campus in India. International fee income was projected to increase by 2% this year, as a result of increased student numbers since fees had not been increased. The equivalent projection for the current year had proved very accurate.

In terms of non-fee income, the CFO noted that little increase was projected. The forthcoming Tall Ships event in Aberdeen offered a good opportunity, including letting out accommodation at Hillhead halls of residence.

The Convener thanked the CFO for his presentation and his responses to members' questions and noted that it was an unenviable time to be a University Financial Officer.

4. Minutes of the last meeting and Matters Arising

The Committee received and approved the minutes of the previous meeting on 24 April, subject to a typo correction in item 6. The Convener noted that General Council had approved the Business Committee remit at its meeting on 17 May 2025.

5. Convener's Report (Paper BC25:1906.1)

The Committee received and discussed the Convener's Report. It was noted that ten members were elected to the Committee at the General Council meeting on 17 May. The Convener regretted that current member He-liang Shi was not re-elected. He-liang noted he had enjoyed being a member of the Committee for the last four years.

The General Council meeting had agreed that it would be helpful to submit to Court a report on the work of the Committee. The Convener invited comments on the draft attached to his report, including any drafting changes by email over the next week or so. The Committee suggested mentioning the diversity of members' skills, the need to strengthen links with Court and putting the final report on the webpage.

The Committee congratulated Norman Hutchinson and Dan Montgomery on their election to Convener and Vice-Convener respectively, from 1 October 2025.

The Convener briefed the Committee on a meeting held that afternoon with Ruth Buckingham, who was carrying out a governance efficiency review of the University. It had been a useful discussion about the role, strengths and weaknesses of the General Council and Business Committee and the problems in maintaining a close relationship with Court.

6. Strategic Topics (Paper BC25:1906.2)

The Committee discussed strategic topics for the coming year. The conclusions were:

- Of the topics listed in paragraph 3 of the paper, international student recruitment (led by Derek Duthie) and the role of the University in the economy and well-being of the north-east of Scotland (led by Dan Montgomery) seemed the best;
- The potential of artificial intelligence (AI) was an attractive topic, though perhaps too wide. For the next Committee meeting in September the Clerk would invite Dr Georgios Leontidis, Director of the University's Interdisciplinary Centre for AI & Big Data, to speak about how the institution is embracing AI as a research topic.
- It might be timely to review the governance of the General Council and Business Committee, building on the work carried out by Louise Thomson and on the output of Ruth Buckingham's work: Fiona Dormandy might be willing to lead the topic.
- The fundraising campaign was a further important topic. The Clerk would approach Clare Livingston, Interim Director of Advancement.

It was agreed that a final decision on the choice of topics would be taken after the new cohort of Committee members had taken up their roles from 1 October.

7. University Update

Dr Hulda Sveinsdottir, Director of Strategic Planning, Project & Corporate Governance, attended in place of Samantha Waters, University Secretary. Her update covered:

- Progress with the Principal's recruitment process;
- The India University Grants Commission's permission for a University of Aberdeen campus to be established in Mumbai. This needed to be approved by the University Court at a meeting on 2 July. Courses that the campus would deliver included computing and business management;
- The recent immigration white paper which proposed reducing the UK post-study work visa from 24 months to 18 months and which could be expected to reduce the attractiveness of the UK for international students. Sponsored visas to the UK had also declined by 10%. A levy on international fees was also proposed but is not expected to apply to Scottish universities.

- The Scottish Funding Council's recent analysis of the financial sustainability of the Scottish higher education sector.

8. AOCB

A member requested a note of who is leaving the Committee after September's meeting. A member noted that the Business Committee minutes on the website only go up to 2024, which the Clerk will resolve.

9. Date of next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of the Business Committee would be on Thursday, 25 September 2025 from 4pm to 6pm in Committee Room 2, University Office and via Microsoft Teams.