

GENERAL COUNCIL & ITS BUSINESS COMMITTEE

AN INTRODUCTION

(updated 19 March 2021)

Information about General Council and its Business Committee can be obtained at:
www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/

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1 WHAT IS GENERAL COUNCIL?

General Council was set up by Act of Parliament in 1858, and, with Court and Senate, it is one of three arms of University governance. The same structure was applied to the three other Scottish universities that existed at that time – Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow. Since then, Dundee is the only other Scottish university to have adopted a General Council. The Conveners of the Business Committees of all five universities are in regular contact with each other on matters of common interest, and meet once a year.

General Council's function can be described in two parts:

its formal duties

- scrutinise new ordinances and resolutions
- elect the Chancellor (*also* President of General Council)
- nominate two General Council Assessors as members of Court
- hold twice-yearly meetings;

its representation role

“...take into consideration all questions affecting the well-being and prosperity of the University, and to make representations from time to time on such questions to the University Court, who shall consider the same, and return to the Council their deliverance thereon.”

University Ordinances that are especially relevant to General Council are Nos 96, 112, 125, 129 and 132.

www.st-andrews.ac.uk/assets/university/about/documents/governance/ordinances-resolutions/acts-ordinances-resolutions-july-2019.pdf

General Council’s Standing Orders also govern the conduct of General Council and its Business Committee.

www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/standing-orders/

2 WHO ARE MEMBERS OF GENERAL COUNCIL?

Membership of the General Council is granted, by right, to:

- the University Chancellor.
- all graduates of the University, including honorary graduates and holders of the licentiate in dental surgery.
- members and former members of Court.
- professors and former professors of the University.
- readers and lecturers of the University who have been in office for more than one year.
- former University readers and lecturers who were members of the Council during their tenure and who continued working for the University until their retirement.

General Council has almost 60,000 contactable members out of a total database of nearly 80,000. (March 2021).

Membership of the General Council is governed by University Ordinance No 96.

3 WHEN, WHERE DOES GENERAL COUNCIL MEET?

By statute, General Council meets at least twice a year, normally:

- the morning of the last Saturday in June, immediately after graduation week
- the morning of the Saturday in late November, closest to St Andrew’s Day.

All General Council members who can be reached by email receive invitations to attend. Notice of the meetings are also posted on the General Council pages of the University’s website.

The meetings take place in St Andrews, usually in Parliament Hall. They are formal in character with University maces preceding a robed procession and traditional prayers in Latin at the start and end of the meeting.

The meetings are presided over by the Chancellor. There are the following customary addresses:

- a report on the Business Committee's activities by the convener of the Business Committee
- the University Address by the Principal
- a presentation on a topical subject, such as a significant issue facing the University.

Depending on General Council's current business, there may be other agenda items. Ample time is allowed for those attending to raise points or ask questions.

There is also time before the meeting for members to mingle over tea and coffee.

Exceptionally, in 2020, as a consequence of the restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, neither meeting took place physically. The billet was circulated both in June and in November. The Chancellor recorded a message to the General Council and the Principal broadcast her University Address via the University website on 28th November and this was available to view for some weeks. The text of the address is available at:

www.st-andrews.ac.uk/assets/university/about/documents/governance/general-council/minutes/general-council-principals-address-28-11-2020.pdf

4 WHAT IS THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE?

The Business Committee was set up about a year after General Council was established. It performs the executive function of General Council, arranging and carrying out its business.

Its remit is as follows:

- Transact business remitted to the Committee by General Council
- Frame the programme of business to be submitted to meetings of the Council
- Act on behalf of the Council under powers specifically conferred upon the Committee, or in circumstances of emergency.

The Constitution and duties of the Business Committee as determined by General Council, are set out in General Council Standing Orders.

5 WHO ARE MEMBERS OF THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE?

5.1 Composition of the Business Committee

The Business Committee is made up of four Ex Officio and twelve Elected and Co-opted members, as follows:

Ex Officio

- Principal
- Chancellor's Assessor on Court
- two General Council Assessors on Court
- conveners of all other committees (and standing sub-committees) of General Council (none at present) and of the Business Committee (only one at present – Ordinances and Resolutions Sub-Committee)
- Two co-opted members of Court who are alumni

Elected

- twelve members
- four year term
- eligible for re-election for a second four year term
- elections every other year

Co-opted

- co-options to fill vacancies among elected members until the next round of elections
- co-opted members must be confirmed at the next General Council meeting
- the total of Elected and Co-opted members must not exceed twelve.

The Convener and Vice Convener of the Business Committee are elected by the Elected and Co-opted members of the Committee.

5.2 Membership of the Business Committee (September 2017)

Convener: Ms Wendy Russell

Vice-convener: Mrs Grace Lyon

Ex-officio members

Principal — Professor Sally Mapstone

Chancellor's Assessor — Mr Adrian Greer (until 31 July 2024)

General Council Assessors— Mr Jonathan Hewitt (until 31 July 2022) and Mr Iain Anderson (until 31 July 2024)

Convener of Ordinances and Resolutions Committee — Ms Wendy Russell

Elected members (until 30 June of the year stated)

2021: Dr Alison Baverstock, Mrs Brittany Collins, Ms Wendy Russell, Mr Stuart Bryan.

2023: Mr Alan Chalmers, Ms Annabel Hamid, Mrs Grace Lyon, Mr Gregory Newman, Dr Stephanie O'Rourke, Ms Eliane Sum

Co-opted members

None

Ordinances and resolutions sub-committee

Ms Annabel Hamid, Ms Wendy Russell (ex-officio) - convener

5.3 Other key figures involved with General Council and the Business Committee

President of General Council - Chancellor of the University - The Rt Hon Lord Campbell of Pittenweem CH CBE

Registrar and Clerk to General Council - Vice-Principal Governance - Mr Alastair Merrill

Alumni Relations Manager (Development Office) – Mrs Elaine Cartwright

5.4 Demographics of Elected and Co-opted Members

Total numbers: elected members 10; co-opted members 0, vacancies 2.

Gender: men 3, women 7.

Place of residence: Scotland 4, England 3, Overseas 3 (Egypt, Singapore, USA).

Decades of graduation

1960-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	2000-09	2010-19
1	2	3	0	0	3

Professions/disciplines represented: accountancy, business management, communications, consultancy, education, entrepreneurship, equality and diversity, finance, government, higher education, information technology, insurance, investment management, journalism, marketing, public services, publishing, social media, theology and others.

6 HOW IS THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE ORGANISED?

The Business Committee currently meets three times a year, on Saturday mornings, in January, May and September. Meetings generally take place at the University or at a venue to suit the majority of Business Committee members. Since April 2020 all meetings have been conducted via videoconferencing.

The Business Committee runs its own meetings including the taking of minutes and preparation and distribution of papers. The Committee's principal point of contact with the University is the Registrar and Clerk.

University updates, relevant reports and information for the Business Committee meetings can normally be found on the University's website. If required, other documents can often be obtained via the Registrar and Clerk.

7 WHAT IS EXPECTED OF A BUSINESS COMMITTEE MEMBER

Business Committee members are expected to contribute their time, skills and experience in pursuit of the work of the Business Committee, the interests of General Council and the well-being of the University. Knowledge of how the University functions and some involvement in alumni activities would be useful attributes. Members of the Business Committee are expected to attend its scheduled meetings (usually in St Andrews). Arrangements may be made for members to join meetings by tele/videoconference.

It is hoped that, in addition, members will attend the twice-yearly meetings of the General Council. One is towards the end of June in St Andrews on the Saturday morning following Graduation Week; the other is in late November, also on a Saturday morning in St Andrews. However, it is accepted that much will depend on the circumstances of the individual members as to whether this is feasible.

Papers for Committee meetings are forwarded to members before the meeting and members are expected to familiarise themselves with the relevant issues and be prepared to discuss them. It should also be noted that the Committee's proceedings are confidential and a measure of discretion from its members is expected. Members may be expected to undertake tasks between meetings, individually or in small groups. These would normally be agreed on a voluntary basis at Committee meetings, and are not onerous.

Members are expected to be up to date with the business of the University and to understand developments in the outside world that might affect it.

Much of the Committee's business is conducted by email. It is essential that members are computer literate.

8 WHAT DOES THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE DO?

- General Council meetings focus on issues facing the University, for example: the new University strategy; the University's finances; the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill and its consequences for the University; the opportunities offered by the Guardbridge and Madras College developments; the University's international business.

- Business Committee members engage with the General Council Assessors, enabling the Committee to be better informed about the University's strategy, policies and issues.
- The Business Committee was consulted during the development of the University's new corporate strategy and made recommendations which were subsequently adopted.
- Although not resolved, the Committee has explored ways in which General Council members can overcome the geographical constraints of a meeting in St Andrews and can take part remotely. In November 2020, due to the cancellation of the planned physical event, the Principal pre-recorded her address to General Council and this was made available to view on the University website from the 28th November.
- The Business Committee has been fortunate in recent elections to have established improvements in diversity.
- The University promulgated a number of new and amended ordinances in order for it to comply with the requirements of the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act. The Ordinances and Resolutions Sub-Committee reviewed these and made recommendations, some of which were adopted.
- The Business Committee made representations in the review of the Scottish Code of Good Higher Education Governance, calling for the Code to stipulate that two places on Court should be kept for representatives elected by the graduate body (in our case, the General Council Assessors).
- A major campaign in 2015 to mobilise General Council members to support the University by opposing the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill prompted over 300 to write to the Scottish Government. St Andrews led the way and the strength of their General Council members' argument helped to ensure that the resultant Act was more palatable.
- Good relations and lines of communication have been established with the Business Committees of the other 'Ancient' universities, resulting in regular exchanges on matters of common interest.

Issues that are on the current (April 2021) Business Committee's agenda include the following.

- The ambition to improve the awareness of graduates regarding General Council and to increase their engagement with it.
- Building closer relationships with Development Office in order to improve engagement with General Council members.
- Explore with the University what more can be done to increase its income from "non-traditional" sources. The Committee would like to tap into the reservoir of talent among General Council members to help find and develop fresh opportunities for enterprise.

- The efficiency and effectiveness of General Council and the Business Committee was reviewed in 2013/14 and again in 2018.

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by Wendy Russell
Convener, General Council Business Committee