

Minutes of the Finance and Services Standing Committee
4.30pm on Tuesday 6 May 2025
Braid Room, Charles Stewart House

Present: Almira Delibegovic-Broome, Convener, FSSC
Lucy Hunter Blackburn
Manya Buchan (online)
Kirsty MacGregor
Alan Ross (online)
William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council
Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee
Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee
Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council

In attendance: Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal and Chief Information Officer, and Librarian to the University

1. Welcome and apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited Gavin McLachlan (GM) to speak to the committee about updates to the University's digital infrastructure.

As is normal for FSSC meetings, only FSSC members, Business Committee Office Bearers and secretariat were present.

There were no apologies.

2. Presentation by Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal and Chief Information Officer, and Librarian to the University

- Powerpoint slides used during the presentation covered the following areas. Each focus area contributes to a holistic approach toward modernising and securing the University's operational and educational frameworks against a backdrop of technological advancement and digital transformation.

Library Services:

- The University's library system includes ten libraries (one main library and 9 site libraries) with over 6000 study spaces predominantly focusing on study space provision over physical book collections, which now account for less than 4% of total holdings;
- Many books, especially in subject areas like art, history and architecture, are still issued physically but the majority, especially scientific and medical journals, are digital;
- Integration of the roles of CIO and librarian reflects increasingly digital library operations;
- New College Library hosts the Church of Scotland's heritage collections (originating from the 6th century) in secure and stable storage conditions;
- Completed amalgamation of various support services (finance, library, IT) into a unified platform called 'EdHelp'.

Heritage Collections, Museums and Galleries

- University's collection facility (UCF) is situated near the airport and contains around 25m rare books;
- Any item requested for viewing can be transported to the Centre for Research Collections within the George Square Library;
- WD expressed interest in a future tour of the UCF for GC members;
- St Cecilia's Hall is now a unique tourist destination and entry is free to the public.

Digital and Physical estate

- The Digital Estate Heatmap consists of the largest 70 digital platforms of the over 1200 software platforms and hardware elements with a detailed review system coded red, amber, green, blue and grey according to status e.g., red/amber = end or nearing end of life; green = in good shape; blue = looking to upgrade or currently installing a new system; and grey = areas of the digital estate which are currently missing such as certain areas within cyber security, although GM added that it would be impossible to guarantee complete protection over criminal attacks;
- Emerging risks within the next 5 years include the Student Record System (EUCLID). This system is critical as it contains extensive student records and is nearing the end of its operational lifecycle with concerns about its replacement, indicating potential high costs and extensive project duration (over 4 years);
- Physical estate maintenance involves major projects like the New College renovation, ensuring safety from fire hazards and updating facilities, and Operational IT such as lighting control systems, CCTV, and fire and security monitoring;
- The Smart Campus system can monitor the number of people on campus at any one time, better supporting use of the estate. However is fully anonymized and does not track individuals or identify individuals.

Automation and AI

- Introduction of a new consolidated service for the University:
 - Automation – Sharepoint support model is the exemplar
 - AI – ELM is the University's AI language model and supports Researchers, Educators, Students and Professional Services. Guidance and support available on the University website
 - Digitisation - Digitise any remaining paper, documents, books, textbooks. Eliminate any paper processes, forms, e.g., Assessments, thesis, exams, HR letters...
 - Self-Service - Drive Self-Service as the default norm. Underpin with ELM based AI Chatbot, Other examples: Dashboard of information, online form, ...
- Implementation of AI through 'Elm chat bot' on EdHelp desks to manage a high volume of queries records a 98% accuracy rate. The chat bot is designed to recognise its limitations and refer to human operators when necessary, embodying ethical AI use principles.

Cybersecurity

- The University faces threats from cybercriminals, activists, and nation states;
- Mitigating measures include Multi Factor Authentication (MFA), immutable back up

- and Information Security Essentials training for staff;
- GM stressed the ongoing challenge of protecting against increasingly sophisticated cyber-attacks.

Educational Technology Landscape (EdTech)

- The consolidation of various platforms to streamline learning processes including staff training (People and Money);
- LEARN is the virtual learning environment for all matriculated students;
- Short Courses platform is brand new and discussed potential expansion in online short course offerings for lifelong learning and continuing professional development;
- Massive Online Open Learning courses (MOOCs) is a free platform for knowledge exchange and more than 5.25m people have engaged so far.

Sustainability in IT Operations

- An examination of 'Operational IT' involved in management systems within buildings included efforts to measure and optimize building utilisation for efficiency and cost reduction;
- GM gave a detailed review of data centres' power usage efficiencies, illustrating a commitment to reducing carbon footprints through more efficient energy use;
- Information Services (IS) is actively working on de-duplicating platforms to reduce costs e.g., discontinuing Zoom in favour of Microsoft Teams, which is included in their broader licensing package with Microsoft and considered more feature-rich. This initiative extends to approximately 12 other major platforms deemed redundant, with plans to phase out the lesser-used options;
- Target 50% reduction in printing, 448 metric tonnes carbon, and around £900,000 of savings over 5 years. Demand for printing reduced due to flexible working and increased digitisation. Phased reduction 700 to around 365 printers;
- Sustainable devices policy sets expectation that staff should have one device, typically a laptop, and controls the purchasing of devices.

Discussion

- GC raised the need for effective communication strategies to staff and students impacted by change. GM said that IS can identify and target communications to specific user groups affected to ensure they understand the rationale behind decisions to withdraw or replace certain services;
- WD asked about learning from other universities' experiences and GM cited a number of established networks and collaborations across various groups and sectors where knowledge and strategies are exchanged. This networking is deemed crucial for developing effective solutions and avoiding costly errors, especially concerning large IT projects like student admission systems;
- BN raised concerns about the carbon footprint of AI initiatives, particularly around the use of large language models like Chat GPT. GM said that the University addresses these by hosting some models locally in an efficient data centre which are monitored for their carbon footprint, thus reducing the environmental impact while still expanding AI access and functionalities;
- Responding to queries raised by KM, GM said that continued investment in

cybersecurity is necessary as threats evolve, especially from AI-enhanced attacks. The inevitability of increasing cybersecurity budget allocations to maintain safety and continuity in digital operations was discussed, emphasizing that this trend will likely continue;

- The rapid pace of digital transformation, including the increasing integration of AI into everyday devices, presents both opportunities and challenges;
- The potential for AI to streamline operations and personalise learning is counterbalanced by ethical considerations and the impact on human skill development and psychological well-being;
- LB highlighted concerns about how digital transformations, like AI chatbots for student services, affect student satisfaction and mental health and GM said that the University plans to invest more in analytics to monitor and improve student engagement and satisfaction;
- MB touched on the importance of Open Access to research and learning materials, acknowledging the challenges when some international organisations do not reciprocate transparency;
- The consensus seemed to be that Open Access is a huge benefit to society, although geopolitical issues can impact global participation.

The Convener thanked GM for a detailed and interesting presentation and he left the meeting.

3. Minutes from the meeting held on 4 March 2025

The minutes were approved.

4. Matters arising from the minutes of 4 March 2025

None that would not be covered under other agenda items,

5. General Council Budget

- Paper 2, previously circulated showed GC expenditure so far in the current academic year and projections for 2025-26;
- WD reported a likely significant underspend at the end of the current financial year, largely due to a significant reduction in the cost of producing and distributing Summer Billet;
- As the University is seeking to reduce its operating costs by 10% next year, there was uncertainty about how this would affect the General Council budget and the possibility of a future 5% reduction (or possibly more) could not be ruled out at this stage;
- In future, there will need to be better forward planning by producing detailed costed work plans for each of the Standing Committees before the start of the academic year ;
- Key GC priorities are improving communications with members, including commissioning videos for the website, and increasing the number of engagement initiatives such as showcasing events, which are seen as valuable for both improving relations with alumni and boosting the University's public image.

6. Any other business

- LB referred to the need for the University to avoid potential legal and financial risks arising from claims related to infringing academic freedom or freedom of speech, or from the recent ruling by the UK Supreme Court on the Equality Act in relation to women's rights;
- We should not avoid controversial topics or speakers, but the importance of robust event planning and security was highlighted to manage potential disruptions;
- The discussion concluded with an acknowledgment of the need for strategic handling of these complex issues, balancing legal compliance with internal culture and public engagement;
- The potential financial risks were noted as areas for ongoing attention by the Business Committee.