

Education, Children and Young People Committee of the Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 10th June, 2025

Dear Douglas Ross and members of the Committee,

Re: University of Edinburgh

As elected members of the Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh, we are grateful to you and your Committee colleagues for your attention to the current situation at the University of Edinburgh, as part of your consideration of the state of the higher education sector in Scotland. We share the concerns expressed by our Principal, Sir Peter Mathieson, in his testimony to the Committee on 4th June 2025, about the funding model of Scottish higher education and the need for government action.

However, as authors and signatories of the Senate papers relevant to the vote of no confidence in May 2025 we are keen to provide further context and clarification concerning that vote and the role of Senate. We also wish to emphasise that we remain committed to working constructively with the University Executive to address current financial challenges, whilst safeguarding and advancing the University's fundamental academic mission and values. There are three points we wish to make.

(1) It is not Senate's role to make alternative proposals for handling the financial situation.

In his remarks, Sir Peter noted that no alternative approaches to addressing the University's financial situation had been proposed by Senate or the wider academic community ('we've not had alternative proposals put to us', 'the paper did not contain any suggestions about alternative approaches'). This risks a misunderstanding concerning the role and contributions of Senate.¹ Senate does not have responsibility nor expertise for setting or agreeing the University's budget, as indeed we have been reminded at recent meetings. We respect the statutory division of responsibilities between Senate and Court and the role of the University Executive. We do not receive the detailed information that would be necessary for us to develop comprehensive 'alternative approaches,' nor have we been invited to develop these.

(2) Senate has engaged constructively as far as possible within our remit, which is above all to scrutinise the academic impacts of proposed measures without, however, receiving the detailed responses to our questions and suggestions necessary to fully support that engagement.

Sir Peter referred on several occasions to members of Senate and the wider University community as having missed opportunities to offer constructive suggestions. This

¹<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2016/15/section/21/enacted>

perspective, however, presents an incomplete reflection of the engagement and input that have been offered through various channels, and of the responses received to date.

- a. Sir Peter referred to a Sharepoint site on University finances and noted that no suggestions had been received. However, the Sharepoint site does not appear to offer a clear mechanism for staff to submit suggestions or ask questions. More broadly, there does not seem to be a clearly signposted channel through which University staff can make suggestions or pose questions to the Executive about their approach to the financial situation.
- b. In an effort to fulfil their responsibility of academic scrutiny, members of Senate requisitioned a special Session of Senate in March 2025 to discuss the academic impacts of the current handling of the financial situation. Specific questions put to the Executive in Senate's approved motions at this meeting² and submitted by Senate members³ ahead of the April special meeting requisitioned by the Principal still have not been answered in detail, either at the meeting or on the Sharepoint site. The University Finance Director left the April meeting early, without fully addressing questions.
- c. At the March special meeting of Senate referred to in Sir Peter's evidence, members of Senate asked the Executive to present a thorough analysis of the costs and benefits of its current and proposed actions.⁴ The paper also proposed a constructive suggestion, calling for 'a revised programme from the University Executive to address any necessary budgetary efficiencies over a longer timetable consistent with allowing appropriate University Court and Senate scrutiny.' We have seen no evidence that either of these actions has been taken.
- d. In his comments, Sir Peter referred to a report⁵ on the academic impacts of recent budgetary measures as 'a lot of expressions of concern.' It is important to note that this report was formally commissioned by Senate and prepared by its elected members, drawing on evidence submitted by hundreds of staff across the University. The report presents substantial and detailed evidence of the real and wide-ranging effects already being

² Paper S 24/25 4A, available here: <https://edin.ac/4kYEBFk>

³ Available here: <https://edin.ac/4dUwSVG>

⁴ .Paper S 24/25 4A, available here: <https://edin.ac/3FPfc0K>

⁵ Paper S 24/25 6L, available here: <https://edin.ac/43vuKQD>

experienced as a result of the Executive's decisions, not simply the views of the report's authors. It indicates the urgent need for a risk-based, evidence-informed approach to financial decisions regarding teaching and research. To date, however, we have not seen evidence that the Executive has considered these risks, despite repeated requests.

Finally, Sir Peter did not have the opportunity to highlight one of Senate's key interventions to date.

- e. Elected academic members of Senate presented a paper to the March special session of Senate⁶ to show how one of the Executive's first proposed measures – closing a tranche of postgraduate programmes, disproportionately consisting of part-time programmes – would not only harm access and inclusion, but would also yield minimal savings and indeed risk losing significant income. This is an example of the way in which Senate can work effectively to scrutinise the costs and benefits of planned changes, if allowed the time and opportunity, to the benefit of the University's academic mission. We further note that the initial decision to close these programmes was made without the input or approval of Senate or its committees.

(3) Senate's vote of no confidence represents its assessment of the Executive's failure to date to address the University community's clearly articulated concerns on these matters, and to secure their confidence.

The vote of no confidence reflects more than just Senate's disagreement with the proposed budgetary measures or a preference for a different approach, as described by Sir Peter ('the approach that the University Executive is taking to address our financial situation is not the one that they would choose'). Rather, it represents a deeper concern about the direction and implications of the University Executive's financial strategy, and our assessment that the Executive has not yet secured the University community's confidence in its approach.

The questions we have repeatedly put to the Executive about the rationale for the scale and pace of the proposed cuts – a scale and pace that, in our view, risks significant reputational damage to the University, risks damaging student recruitment, and prohibits proper consideration of the academic and indeed financial risks – have not been answered, and our requests for analysis of the academic impacts of the proposed cuts, and modelling of alternative approaches, have not been addressed. Therefore, we remain concerned that the Executive's approach to the University's

⁶ Paper S 24/25 4B, available here: <https://edin.ac/3TfG3Gl>

financial situation is not enabling Senate to fulfil its role as the supreme academic body.

Nevertheless, we remain committed to working constructively with the University Executive to develop robust plans that secure our long-term academic mission whilst addressing current financial challenges. We have done this and will continue to do so by submitting evidence of potential risks, proposing alternative approaches to explore and engaging with the wider community.

Once again, we are grateful to you and your committee for your efforts. We all agree that action is needed to ensure the future strength of the higher education system of which Scotland is justly proud. We would be happy to discuss these matters further with you.

Yours sincerely,

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Dr Tamara Trodd, Head of History of Art, Senior Lecturer in the History of Modern and Contemporary Art

Dr Ben Goddard, Reader in Applied Mathematics, School of Mathematics.

Professor Rachel Muers, Chair of Divinity, School of Divinity

Ben Morse, Professional Services Staff Elected Representative, College of Science and Engineering (Manager of Teaching-related Industrial Engagement and Strategic Relations, School of Geosciences)

Dr Enrique Sanchez Molano, Academic Staff Elected Representative, College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (Core Scientist, The Roslin Institute and Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies)

Professor David Ingram, Personal Chair of Computational Fluid Dynamics, School of Engineering.

Dr Charlotte Desvages, Lecturer in Mathematical Computing, Director of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, School of Mathematics

Dr Aidan Brown, Lecturer, School of Physics and Astronomy

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Professor Diana Paton, William Robertson Chair of History, Head of History, School of History, Classics and Archaeology