



University Executive Briefing Note

Purpose

This briefing note gives a high level overview of the University's institutional governance arrangements and in particular the role of the University Executive.

The Principal

The Principal, [Peter Mathieson](#), has a dual management/governance role as both the most senior manager of the University and as a member of the University's governing body, the University Court. The Principal's responsibilities are set out in more detail [here](#).

Senior management structure

The Principal has established a University-wide senior management structure involving two bodies, the Senior Leadership Team and the University Executive.

Senior Leadership Team (SLT)

The [Senior Leadership Team](#) comprises the 11 most senior executive officers of the University. This includes the three Heads of College and the three Heads of Professional Services Groups (sometimes known as the six budget holders as they have responsibility for managing the budgets in their College or Professional Services Group, which are approved each year by the University Court), as well as the Director of Finance, the Vice-Principal Students and the Vice-Principal Research & Enterprise.

The SLT members are:

- Principal, [Peter Mathieson](#)
- Provost, [Kim Graham](#)
- Vice-Principal and Head of College of Medicine & Veterinary Medicine, [David Argyle](#)
- Vice-Principal and Head of College of Science & Engineering, [Iain Gordon](#)
- Vice-Principal and Head of College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, [Sarah Prescott](#)
- Vice-Principal & University Secretary, [Leigh Chalmers](#)
- Vice-Principal Corporate Services, [Catherine Martin](#)
- Vice-Principal, Chief Information Officer & Librarian to the University, [Gavin McLachlan](#)
- Vice-Principal Research & Enterprise, [Christina Boswell](#)
- Vice-Principal Students, [Colm Harmon](#)
- Interim Director of Finance, [Nirmal Borkhataria](#)

The SLT meets regularly (often weekly) to consider matters of significant strategic importance to the University usually at an early stage. Their meetings also give the opportunity to air operationally focused items where a shared agreement among the senior leadership of the University is beneficial. Agenda items are collectively generated and generally papers are not produced for SLT meetings.

University Executive

The [University Executive](#) is chaired by the Principal and is the main decision-making forum for management and operational matters in the University. It also develops the University's strategic and planning objectives and supports the Principal in overseeing their implementation and delivery, as well as agreeing University-wide policies and procedures. It scrutinises and shapes strategic proposals that are then submitted to the University's governing body, the University Court, for approval.

Membership includes the 11 members of the Senior Leadership Team and the other Vice-Principals and University leads on cross-cutting topics, one Head of School from each of the three Colleges, senior professional services staff and the Students' Association President. It therefore brings together the academic, financial, human resources and physical and digital estate aspects of planning and assists the Principal in delivery of the University's strategy. The University Executive also provides advice and views on proposals and reports and ensures a consistent approach to activity across the University. Its current membership is available [here](#).

All members are encouraged to participate in meetings considering the best interests of the University as a whole whilst bringing their particular knowledge and experience to the discussion. Whilst decisions are formally recorded in the Minute, no opinions are attributed to individual members to support full discussion of matters in a collegial manner.

The University Executive meets monthly and standing items on the agenda include: Principal's update; verbal feedback from SLT meetings; Finance Director's update; People Report from HR; and, a Student Experience/Curriculum Transformation update. Other regular items relate to: monitoring progress against the key performance indicators for the Strategic Plan, [Strategy 2030](#); the annual budgeting and planning round for the University; internationalisation and strategic partnerships; review and approval of cross University policies. Key decisions are cascaded through the monthly 'Essential Updates' email circulated by Communications and Marketing.

The University Executive is not part of the formal governance structure of the University, which consists of the University Court, the Senate and the General Council and their respective committees (covered below). Instead, it is an executive group that the Principal has established and has chosen to vest some of his decision making authority into that can support him in his responsibility for operating and managing the University. This has the advantage that proposals can be scrutinised by a wide group of senior academic and professional services managers (and the President of the Students' Association) before a decision or recommendation is made and that collective senior management responsibility for decisions and their successful implementation is achieved.

A number of other management committees, boards and groups also report into the University Executive, as shown below:

University Executive Reporting Structure



February 2025

Formal governance structure/oversight of senior management/delegation of authority

The governing body, the [University Court](#), is the senior decision-making body of the University and is the legal employer of all staff and the custodian of the University's assets. It appoints the Principal and delegates authority to the Principal and to senior management to operate the University and ensures that the Principal's performance is monitored. It also appoints a Secretary (the Vice-Principal & University Secretary, [Leigh Chalmers](#)), who reports to the leader of the University Court, the Senior Lay Member ([Janet Legrand](#)) on governance matters in addition to reporting to the Principal on management matters for the operation of the [University's Secretary's Group](#). The University Court is responsible for safeguarding the values and the reputation of the University and approves the University's strategy ([Strategy 2030](#)) and the annual budget and the capital plan. The full list of primary responsibilities of the University Court is available [here](#).

The University Court currently has 23 members, 14 of whom are 'independent' or 'lay' members (i.e. they are not a member of staff or a student) who are either appointed for their relevant professional expertise following a skills-based recruitment exercise or are nominated or elected by a stakeholder group. The names, photographs and biographies of the University Court members are available [here](#).

The delegation of authority from the University Court to senior management is achieved through the [Delegated Authority Schedule](#) and the [Delegation to the Principal](#) documents, as well as decisions made by the University Court at its meetings to delegate authority on a case-by-case basis and some delegations made to its own [committees](#).

Senate

The [Senate](#) (formally called the ‘Senatus Academicus’ but generally referred to as the Senate) is the University’s supreme academic body with a core function to regulate and superintend the teaching and discipline of the University and to promote research. It has positions for approximately 300 members, divided into:

- 100 elected academic staff members (non-professorial), equally divided by College
- 100 elected academic staff members (professorial), equally divided by College
- 30 elected student members
- Up to 80 ex-officio members (including Heads of Schools, Heads of College, the Provost, Vice-Principals, Assistant Principals, and College academic staff nominees such as College Deans).

Elections for academic staff members are conducted annually, usually in Semester 2.

Senate is chaired by the Principal and meets at least four times a year. Normal meetings of Senate are preceded by an electronic Senate through which some routine business is conducted.

In order to conduct effectively the business of Senate, a range of powers of are delegated to three Senate Standing Committees: [Senate Education Committee \(SEC\)](#), [Senate Academic Policy and Regulations Committee \(APRC\)](#), and [Senate Quality Assurance Committee \(QAC\)](#).

General Council

The [General Council](#) is the third part of the University’s tripartite formal governance structure, along with the University Court and the Senate. It was established by the same 1858 legislation that created the University Court and the position of Chancellor. The bulk of the approximately 295,000 members of the General Council are the graduates of the University and it also includes the Chancellor, University Court members and many current and former academic staff in its membership. It is not a decision-making body but has a statutory voice in matters affecting the continuing well-being and prosperity of the University. To help fulfil this role its committees will from time to time invite senior staff to update them on activities in their portfolio, in addition to two meetings a year that include presentations and question and answer sessions with the Principal and other senior staff on topics of interest.

Further information

For further information on corporate/institutional governance, please contact Governance & Court Services by email at court@ed.ac.uk. For further information on academic governance, please contact the Senate Support Team by email at SenateSupport@ed.ac.uk.