

AHUA Executive Committee Minutes
Thursday 11th September 2025, 13.00 – 16.30
ONLINE

Present:

Wendy Appleby	Nicola Owen
Michaela Boryslawskyj	Eileen Schofield
Rachel Brealey	Mike Shore-Nye
Stephen Dudderidge	Richard Taylor
Stuart Fancey	Ben Vulliamy
Helen Galbraith	Amanda Wilcox
Louise Nadal	Helen Watson
Amanda Oliver	

Apologies: Andrew Young, Dave Hall, Lynda Brady

1. Apologies

- 1.1 The Chair recorded apologies from AY, DH and LB. The Chair welcomed SF to his first meeting as the new Scottish Secretaries nominee. The Chair also welcomed WA to the committee as the new Regional Convenor for the South.

2. Minutes

- 2.1 The minutes of the Executive Committee meeting on 6th June 2025 were confirmed as an accurate record.
- 2.2 There were no other matters arising that were not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

3. Dashboard

- 3.1 The Committee received an updated engagement dashboard. The Chair flagged that the report shows a significant influx of second members following changes to the membership criteria and that the feedback seemed to be that the new membership approach had been generally well received by members and helped build some resilience into membership and participation.

4. Financial Statement 2024/25 and annual accounts

- 4.1 The Committee Treasurer explained that the 2024/5 accounts show a significant improvement since the Q2 accounts, and that the year-end position returned close to the originally forecasted deficit after some uncertainty and represented a strong second half to the year, careful cost containment and good results on income generation. It was pointed out that the year end deficit, while planned and well within the reserves available, did represent a reduction in the free cash reserve and that we now have less capacity for capital investment, overspend and less tolerance for unforeseen downturn in membership participation, affiliation, sponsorship income etc.

- 4.2 The turnaround of the financial statements was commended and the move to an alternative accountancy explained as being due to unexpected changes in the previous firm and some useful and appropriate knowledge of an existing audit company.
- 4.3 The performance against a deficit budget was praised including some of the strong performance with conference and commercial sponsorship. It was pointed out that the reserves are now depleted as planned. The Executive Director ran through some of the key risks from the paper. It was stressed that the current context may require capital investment into key areas of work that add value to membership that might include specific project, additional capacity or expertise to run activity. In addition, we should ensure we retain sufficient financial capacity both to ensure we remain a going concern but also to retain sufficient agility to allow for us to explore future partnerships that deliver membership benefit and organisational sustainability.
- 4.4 The Committee asked about the impact or otherwise of the changes to the coaching offer. BV explained we had received 1 approach for coaching since the offer ended and that when it was explained this was no longer available, they took up action learning instead without complaint. The move away from coaching follows a spend of £40,000 on coaching in 2024/25. HW suggested that the Association could, in future choose to move to offering a small number of bursaries for coaching by applications if it appeared that the opportunity for coaching for those who might benefit it was not being met by institutions.
- 4.5 MSN pointed out that most institutions were reviewing cash balances in light of key risks changing and that it would be prudent for us to do the same. Conducting a simple review of cash held as a proportion of total operating costs and changing risk profile suggested we were not, at this stage, holding excessive free cash reserve. While spending some of our reserve a few years prior was prudent, risks of demand on the Association or changes to our income are increasing and as such a return to protecting a level of reserves similar to that currently held is wise. ES agreed that the current level of reserves (circa 4 months full costs) was a prudent level of reserve to retain.
- 4.6 The Chair noted that the work by UUK on the task force usefully leveraged partnerships and AHUA's growing partnership work (with sponsors, or with SUMS on an Organisational Efficiency maturity model for example) may be a model for AHUA to consider that can leverage specific expertise, funding or capacity to support specific initiatives and projects and avoid dependency on a relatively lean staff team and finance base.
- 4.8 **ACTION 1: The accounts were signed off as a true and accurate record of the Association's financial performance and health. Upload as AHUA resource and share at the next AHUA AGM**
- 4.9 **ACTION 2. The Committee resolved that we should look to retain the current level of free cash reserve in the current operating context and that this should show in our budgets and operating plans for the year ahead.**

5. **Chair and Directors Report**

- 5.1 The Chair presented a new summary report from the Chair and the Executive Director summarising key developments and performance statistics against the key organisational functions of membership development, membership advocacy and membership networking as well as some of the key AHUA organisational development priorities.

- 5.2 MB talked through the challenge of governance professionals' development with differing needs for Secretaries in comparison to clerks and more focussed and perhaps junior roles. Making sure the quality of offer between AHUA, AHEP, Advance HE and CUC (albeit their focus is on governors) is important. The Executive Director talked through the pause of the governance professional's development programme as challenging at this time but motivated by a need to ensure clarity of offer, fair pricing, and high quality. This required time to engage with other bodies on their training offer. The Executive Director explained that the May 2026 Clerks and Secretaries Event has been agreed as a joint AHUA and Advance HE event where Advance HE will carry the responsibility and risk for project management, venue booking, expenses etc (and retain the benefit of any surplus) but that AHUA will help secure turn out, help curate the sessions and speakers and retain a clear profile throughout the event. Advance HE have committed to offer the conference at a slightly reduced cost (the only program they haven't increased costs for in 2025/26). This venture ensures we are still offering some targeted opportunity for AHUA members with a governance specific interest but also may act as a pilot for if and how we might work more with Advance HE on a wider governance development partnership.
- 5.3 MSN encouraged AHUA to consider engagement channels and the extent to which different development content benefits from different engagement methods/ channels which in turn have different levels of affordability and accessibility. HG added that the proposed increase in curated online activity such as the membership exchange events or partnerships with tasters from private organisations can add significant value and should be prioritised amongst the AHUA team as we gain some stability in that.
- 5.6 **ACTION 3. AHUA to try to prioritise the role out of more online content as an accessible form of low-cost membership engagement and content.**

6. Liaison meetings

- 6.1 The Chair ran through some of the key liaison issues pointing out that immigration narrative and policy space remains a concern, that the task force is now trying to move from phase 1 of the transformation and efficiency work (which is focused on reassuring public and raising aspiration for change within the sector) and now moving to phase two with a more practical, action orientated programme coordinated by a new 'task and finish' style group.
- 6.2 AW ran through the session with OfS, it was very open and 2 way but exchanged a range of perspectives and concerns about the sector's governance. AW talked through how the OfS board remain concerned and perhaps anxious to take action on governance but that the key OfS personnel were trying to generate a good quality intervention rather than a rapid regulation of governance.
- 6.3 AW ran through key points from a conversation with the OfS on governance that shared some of their primary areas of concern and interest regarding sector governance. RT stressed that we need to help OfS gain a better insight with and understanding of Secretaries and governors experience and avoid over dependence on governors as one group with one range of perspective and to avoid reliance on anecdote or third hand perspectives of governance. AO stressed that CUC had engaged in a similar conversation and that contextualisation of matters was important and so that we avoid regulation by anecdote.
- 6.4 The Committee exchanged examples of preconceptions and inaccurate anecdotes and how these become problematic if they create the basis for a regulatory framework. SF shared some specific caution about the effects of regulation of governance in Scotland. MB pointed out that

we need to avoid being overly defensive about governance and instead try to show the continual push for good governance. MB stressed again the importance of the tripartite relationship.

- 6.5 ES pointed out that there may well be that an OfS England regulation of governance may well be at odds with Scottish regulation.
The Chair stressed that she feels the OfS is likely to regulate in this space and so we need to engage with the criticisms (even if they are limited to specific instances) to ensure that the regulation is based on fact and good quality interventions. The Executive Director explained that AHUA is in touch with the OfS governance lead and finding opportunities for them to meet with AHUA representatives. It has been agreed that they (Philippa Pickford) will be at the Advance HE and AHUA Clerks and Secretaries event in May albeit events may take over before then.
- 6.6 The Chair asked the Committee about the extent to which they would want AHUA (and partners) to propose a possible model contract to the OfS as had been suggested or whether we should push back against the contract being drafted by the sector and challenge the OfS to work on a model.
- 6.7 Committee members noted that previous efforts to design a model contract got caught in weeds swiftly, further, a model contract for autonomous and competitive institutions is a little odd. Collaboration with the AULP on recommended / standard / contractual terms? Student contracts have a lot in common though and it may be possible to develop guidance on recommended clauses or take an approach that didn't excessively standardise the contractual relationship between each institution and their respective student independently and autonomously. It might be a quick win that could build some goodwill if we find the right framework and should be an area where working with partners could be valuable. It was suggested that this could position piece with the AULP (and SHMA) on some of the key common areas and points of difference and try to answer the questions where there should be a migration towards a model contract. There may be a consumer choice question if we moved to a standard contract but there may be ways of supporting a level of common expectation about what is / isn't in contracts.
- 6.8 **ACTION 4: Executive Director to explore with AULP contractual guidance and to check with UUK their expectations and any plans they may have in this area.**
- 6.9 AO gave an update from CUC on the code and explained that while the review was moving slower than they would like it was proceeding and had started to gather traction with secretaries, chairs and boards. A working group has been established in addition to a steering committee giving seniority plus operational detail with greater agility. Expectations of what the code can deliver are growing and the code can't be a panacea for everything and particularly not behaviours. It's anticipated that the code will put more emphasis on relationships, culture and behaviours. Call for evidence goes out in the next 2 weeks and the steering group will steer that attached to the methodology. PWC and CUC have completed some significant desk-based research. We expect a February report which is much later than originally intended but the need to get this right requires more time. The review chair, Iain Cornish, has helped to bring some confidence and authority to the process and is due to be meeting with AHUA this month. PWC are due to be liaising with AHUA to set up some online forums to meet with AHUA members regarding the review. The AHUA Chair suggest that highly practical engagement with secretaries through AHUA on the code from CUC and PWC as the partner will be well received.
- 6.10 **ACTION 5: Executive Director to meet with Iain Cornish and PWC to identify opportunities for AHUA to feed into the review.**

- 6.11 AO suggested that there may be an opportunity to do a collaborative piece of work about sharing details of indicators for relationships being good or bad as a project relevant to the review and perhaps falling under AHUA and CUC interest.
- 6.12 CUC's new CEO appointment is still not public. The new CEO will start 1st October. Expected to be announced in the coming weeks.
- 6.13 The Chair ran through some key take aways from the UUK conference the prior week. NO confirmed that the communications strategy for the transformation of the sector was starting to underline the narrative arc for the range of dimensions of change that are affecting UKHEI's and our business model. The conference included examples of institutions adapting to seismic change and that there was a strong sense of one era drawing to a close as another starts to form but that the sector remains a knowledge business albeit ones that is being shaken up by digital and technological shift, social change and economic change. There is a piece of sentiment research due to be published soon which will show the correlation between specific demographic and stakeholder engagement with Higher Education, underlining the political context. The new OfS chair said they want to move to a model of 'exemplary regulation' including a panel of provider representatives and a 'depth and openness of relationships. Michael Barber gave a speech to close about the ability to create the new era as a new golden age. However, he went on to say that the immigration challenge will remain in terms of asylum claims from students and on concerns about exploitation of MRes route to study visa's / post work study visa's that needs to be resolved. MS stressed that the atmosphere and quality of conversation was far better this year – partly credit to shifting government relationships, partly as the sector becomes more collaborative and open to inter sector dialogues and partnerships albeit with the warnings of global shift that is a fundamental change that we are trying to navigate.

7. Devolved Nations Report

- 7.1 The Executive Director explained that the new approach of a devolved nations' report was designed to try to capture key political and policy issues from each of the nations ensuring some oversight of developments by the Executive Committee of the wider breadth of membership issues and some informal gap analysis of the various issues between nations.
- 7.2 ES explained that in Scotland the political contact is interesting with a May 2026 election dominating the agenda. A number of bills are being rushed through while others might be paused and these touch on a myriad of issues and create new duties. The Gillies report has reinforced a sense that there's a problem that needs to be seen to be fixed and politicians are seen to be fixing problems. Institutions want to be responsive but are trying to 'enhance' rather than 'fix' issues. Challenges at Dundee are ongoing – a recovery plan has been rejected. The recovery plan has been paused while the costing for a permanent team who can write a strategy and turnaround plan that is acceptable to staff and students and secures sustainability.
- 7.4 **ACTION 6: The paper format was endorsed for further use and to become a standing item.**
- 7.5 **ACTION 7: Executive Director to continue to explore how to connect AHUA with activity in each of the devolved nations in the most effective way.**

8. AHUA Research Project

- 8.1 The Chair welcomed Nottingham Business School and thanked them for an interesting and important piece of research. The Nottingham Business School research team joined the meeting. LO, NS and RG guided the Committee through the draft report stressing that:

- There is an urgency to address ethnic inequality in professional services in leadership roles despite the best efforts of Registrars, Secretaries and COO's as well as institutions more widely.
- Structural and cultural barriers exist and are often deeply embedded.
- There are existing EDI efforts that can be performative in some cases. Criticism of charter marks exist while it's also fed back that it's expected that institution should participate in, for example, the Race Equality Charter.
- Staff networks (formal and structured) were praised as high impact and there were examples of buddy schemes and mentoring that had supported people.
- Intersectionality is crucial but under recognised.
- Data gaps undermine progress and despite a range of other EDI quality marks, data collection exercises there's a lack of data on career progression in professional service as exists for academics.
- Some evidence that transitioning into the HE sector was challenging for people from ethnic minority backgrounds entering from other sectors. That the structural, cultural and language differences were not explained sufficiently meaning that some people failed to settle within these or that settling into their new HE career took a long time to the detriment of their career trajectory.

8.2 In terms of recommendations the research ran briefly through opportunities for:

- Structural reform and policy change
- Representation and inclusion that increased diversity and avoided tokenism or isolated appointments.
- Development support and research – the quality of education in and around the EDI space is key. Reverse mentoring and similar schemes seem to offer a significant opportunity.
- Cultural change and co-creation potential exists to (there may be potential for a funded PhD project)
- Sector level collaboration is important with transparent reporting across professional bodies.

8.3 The research group stressed AHUA are well placed to provide some stewardship and coordination of future work and developments in this area. They ran through a range of recommendations across individual, organisational and societal developments. It was commented that the WHEN project tracks 100 black women academic voices and they are considering doing something similar with women, black PS staff. They also mentioned that it could be possible to secure some support for a PhD project taking the research deeper.

8.4 In terms of dissemination, they are working towards a publication of the research report along with slide presentations and packs. There was the suggestion of HEPI briefings and wonkhe as well as other journals and the suggestion that Nottingham Business School and AHUA to work together on opportunities for publication and distribution.

8.5 The Chair talked through some opportunity to 'attract in' the right talent and diversity of personnel' and how, for example, financial and HR perhaps has greater diversity than some university corporate services. The research team pointed out that a significant number of people of colour came into the sector from outside and that inducting and adapting to the HE sector as a new employee of colour was difficult with a lack of support and information to support them

to translate their experience from other sectors into HE. Prior experiences in the corporate sector didn't easily translate for them and Universities weren't able to support that all the time.

- 8.6 HG asked whether there were any recommendations about the future of quality marks and kite marks where AHUA should make representations about these. HG also asked for any thoughts about the tensions between expectations and perceptions – for example, the desire to share lived experience of minorities v's not burdening people to share their voice as a minority experience. The research team talked about the importance of informal structures and relationships that gave them greater agency and control and autonomy. More work at the mid-level colleagues could be a way to create a strength of community and trust.
- 8.7 The REC and Athena Swan are not deeply trusted but seen as 'a tick box exercise'. That does not mean it doesn't demonstrate strategic intent and commitment but that must be articulated at an operational level and on an operational basis.
- 8.8 The Chair returned to the point about psychological safety within a team and the extent to which a mid-management tier might be key to consider and explore inclusive practice.
- 8.9 **ACTION 8: Executive Director and AY to follow up with the research team on the revisions to the report and the communication/ dissemination issue. Distribution to include Advance HE and their new CEO.**

9. **Organisational Efficiency Maturity Assessment**

- 9.1 The Executive Director explained that a full working MVP model was ready to share at conference and that feedback from that group would be used for final revisions prior to launch of the resource for the sector. We hope to secure a minimum of 20 early adopters for the tool who can feedback on it and we anticipate the MVP approach to launch of the beta model will help reduce risks / concerns and discomfort about participation and result in feedback that encourages the model to be more ambitious, to collate more sensitive data and push for greater potential application of the data .
- 9.2 The Executive Director explained that we are particularly keen to get further thoughts on data sharing where we are currently minded to implement a data sharing approach that requires a participant to agree that their data can be reproduced in aggregate form (including within an initially limited segment that could include nation and / or mission group where sufficient numbers from a nation or mission group had completed). This approach ensures we can review and use data for trend analysis, identifying key themes and also can use it to identify shared opportunities. We are also currently minded to promote primarily through UUK, CUC, AHUA and Advance HE (as well as through SUMS membership) retaining more control of the tools gradual role out within the sector.
- 9.3 **ACTION 9: The Committee suggested that the AHUA membership should retain some primacy on the data, coms and distribution and implementation at beta stage and that we should be cautious about promotional work that falls significantly outside of executive leadership at this early stage.**

10. **Conferences**

- 10.1 Planning for the Spring Conference in Exeter was starting next month.

- 10.2 AHUA will be working with AHEP on a pilot basis for the Autumn 2026 conference. Venues are currently being considered in Manchester.

11. Regional groups

- 11.1 The Executive Director reminded the group that we were trialling new quarterly online briefings this year which would take some of the information dissemination out of the regions and create more space in the regions for peer led conversations.

12. Elections report

- 12.1 The Honorary Secretary ran through the key points on the election and congratulated the new incoming Chair HG.
- 12.2 The Honorary Treasurer commended all the candidates and thanked them for stepping forward.
- 12.3 The group were invited to consider the wider Committee membership and in particular whether nomination from within the committee for the Honorary Treasurer and Deputy Chair should be passed to the executive director by the deadline of October 24th. Following successful appointments by the executive to the two roles of Honorary Treasurer and Deputy Chair we will seek to consider nationally elected vacancies and co-opted vacancies with a chance to bring in new executive committee members from the wider membership and to secure some expertise for key areas of association work and priority.
- 12.4 **ACTION 10: Executive Director to confirm the vacancy for current executive committee members to stand for Honorary Treasurer and Deputy Chair with nominations to the AHUA office by October 24th.**

13. AOB

- 13.1 There was no other business.
- 13.2 The Chair closed the meeting 16.25.

ACTION LOG

1	Exec Director	The accounts were signed off as a true and accurate record of the association's financial performance and health. Upload as AHUA resource and share at the next AHUA AGM	4.8	Spring 2026
2	Treasurer & Exec Director	Review budgets and forward plan with the target to retain the current level of free cash reserve.	4.9	Ongoing
3	Exec Director and AHUA office team	AHUA to try to prioritise the role out of more online content as an accessible form of low-cost membership engagement and content.	5.6	Review progress December 2025

4	Exec Director	Executive Director to explore with AULP contractual guidance and to check with UUK their expectations and any plans they may have in this area.	6.8	September 2025
5	Exec Director and AO	Executive Director to meet with Ian Cornish and PWC to identify opportunities for AHUA to feed into the review.	6.10	September 2025
6	Exec Director and Nations	Executive Director to continue to develop the devolved nations report as a standing item for the executive committee.	7.4	Ongoing
7	Exec Director and Nations	Executive Director to continue to explore how to connect AHUA with activity in each of the devolved nations in the most effective way.	7.5	Ongoing – update at Dec 2025
8	Exec Director and AY	Executive Director and AY to follow up with the research team on the revisions to the report and the communication/ dissemination issue. Distribution to include Advance HE and their new CEO	8.9	November 2025
9	Exec Director	The Committee suggested that the AHUA membership should retain some primacy on the data, coms and distribution and implementation at beta stage and that we should be cautious about promotional work that falls significantly outside of executive leadership at this early stage.	9.3	October 2025
10	Exec Director	Executive Director to confirm the vacancy for current executive committee members to stand for Honorary Treasurer and Deputy Chair with nominations to the AHAUA office by October 24th	12.4	Done

Ben Vulliamy September 2025