

**Minutes of the International Standing Committee held at 4.30pm
Monday 12 May 2025
Online via Teams**

Present: Ann Cormack, Convener of ISC
Richard Andrews
Max Browning
Bruce Nelson, Vice-Convener of the Business Committee
William Duncan, Secretary of the General Council
Alison McNulty, Assistant Secretary of the General Council

In attendance: Christina Boswell, Vice-Principal, Research and Enterprise
Chris Cox, Vice-Principal Philanthropy, and
Executive Director of Development and Alumni

1. Welcome and apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone to the final meeting of ISC for this academic year to hear presentations from each of the invited speakers concerning the University's relationships with its international alumni and to discuss some of the current activity taking place globally; and how implementation of the Research and Innovation strategy can support the University to achieve its objectives and enhance its international reputation.

Apologies received from Gordon Cairns, Mary Gunn and Nikhil Agarwal.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 31 March 2025

The minute had been previously circulated and was approved.

3. Matters arising from the minutes of 31 March 2025

Item 6: AOCB

- WD reported on 2 key items from the meeting of the Global Executive on 4 April:
- Concerns were expressed over a perceived lack of focus in the University's international affairs if the post of VP International is not filled;
- Reported that onerous legislation regarding issues around national security is now being imposed on universities when declaring research activities, and noted significant fines imposed by the Home Office if specific information is inadvertently not declared when attempting to navigate complex documentation;
- The next meeting of the Global Executive is scheduled for the end of June.

4. Presentations by Chris Cox and Professor Christina Boswell, followed by discussion

Presentation by Chris Cox, VP Philanthropy and Executive Director of Development and Alumni

- CC provided a detailed summary which discussed the various strategies and activities related to the engagement of the University's international alumni;
- Highlighted three main strategies of engaging alumni internationally:

1. Events and Delegation Visits

- This includes organising alumni events (there were 80 in 2024), most of which are international, e.g., Tartan Day Parade in New York. These also include collaborations with local alumni clubs, which not only helps in maintaining connections but also plays a role in promoting the university's achievements and ongoing activities.

2. Student Recruitment

- Strong connections have been established through alumni for promoting student recruitment. Alumni play a critical role here, acting as ambassadors and participating in student fairs, leveraging their experiences to guide and recruit prospective students.
3. Clubs, Groups and Regional Contacts
- The University supports a network of 52 recognised alumni clubs and regional contacts globally that help in organising local events and providing necessary support to visiting academics or University delegations. These groups vary in their levels of activity and commitment – highlighting the University Club of Toronto (EDUCT) as an exemplar - but play a crucial role in maintaining the University’s international presence and significantly contribute to strengthening the alumni network and keeping them engaged with the University’s activity;
 - Regular communications such as the newsletter “DigestEd, are sent to 500 volunteers worldwide and club leaders to keep them informed about University news, providing insights into challenges and developments at the institution so that they have an understanding of any issues and can act as ambassadors for the University;
 - Highlighted the following initiatives:
 - Alumni Recruitment Ambassadors Programme
 - Edinburgh Global recruitment team connects recent graduates with 650 alumni ambassadors in 57 countries, especially in strategic growth areas such as India, Indonesia, Japan, USA, Germany, Kenya, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to aid in recruitment and provide first-hand experience of the University to prospective students.
 - Insights Programme
 - A flagship initiative involving widening participation students who connect with alumni globally through online and in-person visits with over 600 students and 300 alumni who have been involved to date. The programme aims to provide students with transformative experiences that foster personal and professional growth and encourage an interest in leadership positions, noting that 3 out of the last 4 EUSA Presidents came through the Insights programme.
 - The University’s approach to alumni engagement is highly collaborative involving e.g., Schools and Research institutes, Edinburgh Innovations and Edinburgh Global;
 - Strategically focused towards harnessing the global distribution and connections of its alumni community to further University goals such as student recruitment, research collaborations, and expanding the University’s international presence;
 - Significant alumni populations exist in Scotland, the USA and China, with the latter showing a remarkable 370% growth over the past decade;
 - Development and Alumni maintains an extensive CRM database containing records of over 300k alumni, which facilitates targeted engagement based on specific demographic criteria and can be broken down into Undergraduate and Postgraduate numbers, noting that a large majority of postgraduate alumni are based outside the UK;
 - Mentioned a growth in the number of Schools and Colleges who would like to connect with their own alumni across the world;
 - Data analysis helps to identify key geographic areas and regions based on the concentration of alumni and strategic interests of the University;
 - There is an ongoing effort to maintain high contact rates (75-80%) with alumni to ensure effective communication and engagement;
 - The discussion also highlighted sensitivities around describing geographic regions, particularly the notion of “Greater China”, indicating careful attention to political and cultural nuances in international relations.

Action:- Slides used during the presentation will be shared after the meeting.

Presentation by Professor Christina Boswell, Vice-Principal Research and Enterprise

CB presented detailed insights into the University's international engagement under the Research and Innovation strategy and covered the following areas:

Strengthening Bilateral Partnerships

- Highlighted successful integrations with European partners like UNA Europa, particularly emphasising new initiatives like seed funding schemes aiding early to mid-career researchers to develop collaborations and secure funding;
- Specific examples include Copenhagen University and KU Leuven, which involved joint workshops and seed funding aimed at fostering research through diverse thematic avenues;
- Addressed hurdles particularly arising from cuts in overseas development aid (ODA) and shifts towards defence related investments by the UK government. Despite these funding challenges, highlighted robust partnerships with African institutions like Wits University and initiatives like the MasterCard scheme;
- Discussed dynamic engagement with institutions in North America, citing active collaborations with Cornell and Toronto. Described innovative schemes focusing on AI, health, and environmental sustainability;
- Asia presented more complexity, with ongoing projects mainly led by specific Colleges, and noted a period of strategic reassessment because of transitional changes due to the vacant post of VP International, affecting the focus and activity in Asia.

Prioritising Industry collaborations and commercialisation

- Outlined a strategic pivot towards fostering innovation-centric partnerships, emphasising industry collaborations and the development of regional innovation ecosystems;
- Introduced new partnership models involving HEIs as anchors in global hubs and city to city collaborations, mentioning potential initiatives with Toronto and Copenhagen focusing on innovation sectors;
- Continue to explore and solidify new models for innovation-oriented partnerships and assess their effectiveness over time.

Ethical Framework and Geopolitical challenges

- In response to ethical concerns raised by recent protests regarding international investments and defence-related research, CB led a working group to produce recommendations for a robust ethical framework to guide research in sensitive areas, emphasising a collective endorsement from various academic disciplines to continue such research under stringent ethical oversight, and to further develop and refine the ethical frameworks for research involving defence and security technologies;
- Discussed broader global geopolitical issues influencing partnership strategies, especially with China and the USA;
- Highlighted concerns about the impact of political climates on research funding, particularly federal funding in the USA, which poses significant material risks;
- Continue to monitor and adapt to geopolitical changes affecting international partnerships and funding;
- CB concluded by inviting feedback and thoughts on the discussed strategies and initiatives, expressing an openness to further dialogue to refine and enhance the University's global engagement under the Research and Innovation Strategy.

Discussion

- WD asked about the main purposes of alumni clubs and how they can maintain evolving relationships with alumni from different graduating years;
- CC responded by emphasising the balance between supporting the University's interests worldwide and directly supporting alumni;
- He acknowledged the challenges, noting that different life stages can affect the relationship with the University, for example, re-engagement is likely as alumni reflect back at the point when their own children begin to think about going to university, or as they near retirement age;
- He said that an ideal alumni club will have a range of ages involved and can begin to position its activities to appeal to different age cohorts;
- Highlighted strategies including collaboration with the career services and implementation of good governance structures like limiting the term on alumni clubs to two or three years to maintain vitality and relevance;
- RA queried about the existing partnership with The University of Sydney, and new potential University collaborations in Asia;
- CB addressed this by explaining that the University selected specific research-focused partnerships based on a range of factors, including tangible opportunities to leverage external funding;
- This was particularly highlighted in engagement with Horizon projects and collaborations around the Novo Nordisk Foundation tied to Copenhagen;
- She confirmed that Sydney remains an active partner, although the University is cautious about repeatedly channelling resources into the same partnerships year-on-year due to budget constraints and spoke to the benefit of allowing time to let projects come to fruition;
- CB touched on the intricacies of collaborations with Chinese and Indian institutions. She noted that existing partnerships are housed within specific University Colleges, such as Biomedical Sciences with CMVM and the Low Carbon College linked to the Business School;
- Significant risk concerns include navigating political and practical obstacles, data sharing, export controls, and the broader geopolitical context that influence these relationships;
- CC described the role of alumni boards, such as one based in the US and the Hong Kong Foundation, in influencing strategies, providing local intelligence, and aiding in navigating political tensions. He also mentioned the importance of alumni advice during sensitive global events;
- BN raised concerns about ethical challenges in partnerships, especially in politically sensitive environments;
- CB explained the University's approach to partnerships, focusing on adherence to a values-led strategy that avoids contributing to technologies that violate human rights and conducting due diligence for ethical partnerships and funding decisions;
- CC discussed the transition from D & A's former alumni site Platform One to LinkedIn to facilitate better connection and wider reach, though he noted geographic limitations in some areas like East Asia, and emphasised the importance of informal alumni gatherings, which have proved more successful in terms of engagement than large, formal events;
- Elaborated on how alumni can support University research initiatives, particularly mentioning the importance of philanthropic alumni contributions to fund pioneering research and start-ups, referencing significant initiatives in AI, health and climate studies and noted the strategic advantages of having alumni on advisory boards, especially in business and engineering, to leverage international connections for research and educational collaborations;
- Spoke about how membership of the General Council has become more global, and D & A is working with alumni clubs to promote attendance at the Half-Yearly Meetings, particularly to

hear an update from the Principal at the February HYM when he presents the annual report from the University;

- MB detailed concerns about the perception of a declining student experience at the University and its potential impact on future alumni engagement;
- CC acknowledged these concerns and pointed out ongoing improvements such as the introduction of student advisers to address student wellbeing;
- CB mentioned that the University offers a range of support services, events and excellent facilities designed to enhance the student experience and added that, while students receiving timely feedback is a particular area where the University is performing poorly, addressing this remains a top priority;
- AC suggested sharing the presentation from Lucy Evans (LE) at the meeting of ASC on 15 April, which included issues around the experience of students and also brought forward data to show the trends in improvements because of the focus that's been brought to aspects of student feedback.

CB and CC were thanked for their contributions to an informative discussion. The Convener concluded by wishing CB every success for future endeavours when she demits role in the autumn.

Action:-

AM will share slides of LE's presentation with CB, CC and members of the BC.

5. Any other competent business

Action:-

- ***Invite the new appointment for the role of VP Research and Enterprise to a meeting of ISC in the next academic session;***
- ***Invite the new Head of Communications and Marketing - when appointed to replace Theresa Merrick - to a meeting of the Business Committee in 2025-26.***