

**Public Affairs Standing Committee Meeting held on Monday 26 May 2025**  
**Online via Teams**

**Present:** Ms Alice Brown (Convener of PASC)  
Ms Candice Donnelly  
Mr Devin Scobie  
Dr William Duncan (Secretary of the General Council)  
Mr Gordon Cairns (Convener of the Business Committee)  
Mr Bruce Nelson (Vice Convener of the Business Committee)  
Ms Alison McNulty (Assistant Secretary of the General Council)

**In attendance:** Mr Chris Cox, Vice-Principal Philanthropy and  
Executive Director of Development and Alumni  
Dr Dorothy Welch (ASC)

**1. Welcome and apologies**

The Convener, Alice Brown (AB) welcomed all attendees, especially Chris Cox (CC), Vice-Principal for Philanthropy and Executive Director of Development and Alumni. The meeting aimed to discuss collaborative efforts between Development and Alumni (D & A) and the Public Affairs Standing Committee (PASC), aligning General Council (GC) activities to avoid duplication of effort and support mutual goals effectively.

Apologies received from Arron Ashton.

**2. Presentation from Chris Cox, Vice-Principal Philanthropy and Executive Director of Development and Alumni**

- CC commented on the ongoing and nuanced challenges faced by the University, highlighting the dual aspects of the University's media coverage which includes positive research breakthroughs and occasional negative articles;
- He stressed the importance of keeping alumni informed and engaged with the University's challenges and achievements through publications like DigestEd, an occasional summary of news from the University which is circulated to 500 key alumni volunteers worldwide to bring the graduate community up to date with topical issues;
- CC referred to communication issues about :
  - **University finances:** The different funding models for students based on their geographic origins and the implications on university finances;
  - **Freedom of Expression:** The challenges associated with maintaining open dialogues on controversial topics while managing external perceptions and potential controversies;
  - **AI in Education:** How the University is adapting to the opportunities and challenges posed by AI technologies like ChatGPT, ensuring that the University remains at the forefront of maintaining academic integrity;
  - **Political Climate and Impact on Higher Education:** the political weaponisation of higher education and its potential impact. Examples from both the US and UK, highlighted the importance of maintaining a balanced, non-partisan approach in University policies and communications.

- CC stressed the importance of strategies to engage the wider community in public understanding of the important role of university's and their wide-ranging impact; This could take several forms including:
  - attendance at the General Council Half-Yearly meetings, particularly to hear the University's annual report given by the Principal in February, when alumni have the opportunity to ask questions and comment;
  - events to demonstrate the Universities wide-ranging societal impact, for example, in medical research;
  - robust and effective communication strategies to engage various stakeholders, including alumni, and encourage open dialogue around contentious issues.
- CC reported that the final draft of the Race Review is expected to be considered by the University Executive in mid-June; its recommendations will focus strongly on issues of contemporary racism and problematic historical associations; a media plan is being developed to deal with the expected polarised media and social media reactions.
- AB asked the committee to consider the type of events the GC should be involved in, as distinct from D & A's own activities, and spoke to the need to refine strategies for alumni engagement which align with the University's Community Plan.

AB thanked CC for his impressive presentation and an open, frank discussion and looked forward to further productive meetings in the future. CC left the meeting at this point.

### **3. Minutes from the meeting held on 8 May 2025**

The minutes were approved.

### **4. Matters arising from the meeting held on 8 May 2025**

- General Council Videos

Filming for the second video, which focuses on the work of the Business Committee and Standing Committees, will commence on 2 June;

- Usher Event - 22 May

This was described as an "excellent" event and feedback will be requested from participants in the form of a short survey circulated by the Events team based at the Usher Institute.

### **5. Review Budget and Workplan for 2025-26**

- WD reported that the GC allocation for 2025-26 is still undecided and may not be known until after the Court meeting in late June when the budgets for the main cost centres in the University will be decided;
- AB commented on the need for strategic planning in light of uncertain budgets, particularly emphasising efficient utilisation of funds in engaging with alumni and enhancing GC events;
- She outlined future activities which will include: the production of Billet, a possible third GC video about the GC Prince Philip scholarships, two Half-Yearly statutory meetings, more "showcasing" events, the "In Conversation" event in October and the Christmas Reception;

- BN advised preparing a work programme on a “rolling basis” to justify budget allocations;
- WD said there should be an ambition to attract greater online participation at HYMs, recognising the potential to involve a significantly larger portion of GC membership.

**6. Any other business**

- There was some discussion around planning for political engagement, particularly before the Holyrood elections in May 2026; As part of the “town and gown” programme, DS proposed a ‘hustings’ type of event in early Spring involving prospective candidates on a broad cross party basis