

Public Affairs Standing Committee Meeting held on Thursday 24 September 2020 4pm Online via Zoom

Present: Professor Ann Smyth (Secretary of the General Council)
Sir Philip Mawer (Convener of the Business Committee)
Ms Candice Donnelly (Convener of PASC)
Ms Moyra Forrest
Right Rev. Brian Smith

In attendance: Ms Theresa Merrick (Director of Communications & Marketing)
Alison MacLeary (Assistant to the Secretary of the General Council)

1. Welcome and Introductions

The Convener of PASC welcomed Theresa Merrick to the first meeting of the session and thanked her for coming along to speak to the committee on the theme of communications.

2. Presentation from Theresa Merrick, Director of Communications & Marketing

- Communications, engagement and marketing have been recognised as critical in the efforts of the University around its adaptation and renewal, the work set up by the Principal to deal with the pandemic crisis and ensure that the University emerges strongly;
- Covid response microsite brings together all the responses to the pandemic including community engagement activities by staff, students and alumni (e.g. Augment Bionics is a business run by alumni who print facemasks); showcases the work of world class researchers as well as government advisers;
- Staff Survey undertaken to evaluate response to home working;
- Stakeholder engagement – the City of Edinburgh Council and other agencies e.g. Police, NHS and the four Edinburgh universities are working in support of a council-led campaign called #AlltogetherEdinburgh to promote the benefits of living and working in Edinburgh, as well as visiting Edinburgh;
- Community Plan (CP) – Gavin Donoghue (Deputy Director, Stakeholder Relations, Communications & Marketing) had previously attended meetings of PASC in 2018 and 2020 to feedback on the new draft CP;
- Theresa Merrick presented the CP, which was warmly welcomed, to the University Executive on 8 September - the formal launch will be later this year;
- This was a joint piece of work with Lesley McAra (Assistant Principal, Community Relations) and Dave Gorman (Director of Social Responsibility and Sustainability) to ensure the University is seen as a powerful partner within the City and that the students are recognised as good responsible citizens; alumni are seen as critical to help deliver positive change to the community;
- CAM will attend future meetings of PASC to feedback on the delivery of the CP so that PASC and BC can take to their alumni networks and continue to keep the dialogue open with CAM and colleagues who are happy to talk about other areas of interest.

Discussion

- The University receives a lot of media coverage due to the strength and quality of its research and the high profile of experts in public health; despite the fast pace of change public health messaging has been communicated effectively; UK government used a film made by CAM for its own publicity;
- Student satisfaction results were not deemed to have changed significantly as a result of the

crisis but the impact on student experience remains to be seen going forward, particularly with regard to social life, which is very different under the current circumstances; this is a general issue within the HE sector and not specific to the University; messages of warmth and support to students have been key in all communications;

- The pandemic has acted as a prioritising mechanism which has accelerated the activities of CAM and cemented its work as a strategic function within the overall University strategy delivering a better quality of service as teams across departments have had to work together and become more aligned and more confident as a result;
- It was felt that it is too early to evaluate the response of the City to the return of the student community, although many efforts to welcome have been made by the city council and the four universities; it is a complicated and dynamic scenario involving different interactions with different agencies and there will be a settling in period before the true picture is known;
- The community plan, which includes 32 different projects involving various stakeholders and its development will be reported on as it evolves;
- The use of digital means for meetings and communications has become more important than in the past, online meetings having the benefit of more efficient access and greater focus; this has relevance to GC HYMs.

The Convener thanked Theresa for giving the committee the benefit of her experience and looked forward to working with her throughout the year to improve the GC communications.

3. Apologies for absence

Apologies received from Gordon Cairns, Francis McManus and Sophie Marshall.

4. Notes of the meeting held on 22 June 2020

- The notes from the above meeting approved.
- Brian Smith noted that the Black Lives Matter movement was raised at this meeting and that limited communication on this subject had been released from the University;
- The Secretary reported that ISC is due to have a meeting with James Smith, VP International, who is Chair of the Action group tasked with the wider programme of work ongoing within the University around this matter;
- The GC office received a number of emails about the renaming of DHT, forwarded to D & A who formulated a co-ordinated response; the Secretary has asked Grant Spence for a copy of the reply and the Convener of the BC, Philip Mawer, will raise this matter at the next BC meeting in October.

5. PASC's work plan 20-21

Focus on the General Council communications strategy:

1. Who does the GC want to engage with and what is the most effective way to do this. Currently information about the Half-Yearly Meetings and elections to the Business Committee are published in Billet, Enlightened and on the GC website.
2. General Council website
 - The Secretary suggested that PASC hold an online workshop and invite interested members of the BC to review the draft GC website on EdWeb and feedback before it goes live.
 - Reminder that this is an opportunity for a new way of engaging with members, which is different from the former site; improve content and user flow;
 - Use resources from the GC budget to invest in technical support

Action – Secretary to arrange a date for the workshop and explore which team is responsible for additional technical support for the website

General Council Communications

- Candice Donnelly asked members to feedback views on how communications could be made better - who is the target audience for the GC and what is the purpose of the communications;
- Philip Mawer stressed that the correct messaging is vital and interesting and dynamic content is more important than the platform;
- This is a continuing theme for future meetings of PASC and a key issue to be discussed at a future meeting of the Business Committee;
- GC membership includes more than just the graduates of the university (250,000 alumni)
- Only a small percentage of this group are aware of the GC, who it is and what it does, with lower numbers still of active members and those who engage in the yearly elections to the Business Committee;
- GC has a valuable ambassadorial role alongside the activities within D & A; PASC to consider the role the GC plays in promoting the University and its messages.
- Grant Spence (D & A) will be invited to report on the development of Platform One at a future meeting of PASC and the role of the BC within this;
- PASC's focus to include consideration of ease of access to communications
- The University's online systems continue to present technical challenges.

6. Future Events

- The next PASC meeting in November (tbc) is with Grant Spence, Director of Alumni Relations;
- There will be two Business Committee meetings this semester: 15 October and 3 December;
- The Christmas Reception planned in the Talbot Rice Gallery has been cancelled and an alternative virtual event, proposed;
- Contingency planning for the Half-Yearly Meeting (Saturday 6 February 2021) to take place online via MS Teams Live Events; final decision in October for publication in winter Billet;
- The next summer Half-Yearly meeting on Saturday 12 June 2021 in the McEwan Hall will take forward the Chinese themed event postponed in June 2020 due to coronavirus;
- It was suggested that the "town and gown" event (initially proposed for June 2021 to coincide with the announcement of the Community Plan), could now take place in February 2022; this would be a departure from the usual format for the February statutory meetings but members supported the idea of a more interactive event.

Action – Secretary to contact the members of the General Council on the Christmas party invitation list

7. Any other business

- Follow up the development of the Community Plan;
- Future meeting with Dr Lesley McAra, Assistant Principal Community Relations, who has a key role in the Edinburgh Futures Institute;
- Philip Mawer acknowledged that PASC will have a busy year ahead.