

Minutes of the International Standing Committee held at 4.30pm
Tuesday 4 November 2025
Online via Teams

Present:	Ann Cormack, Convener of ISC Richard Andrews Max Browning Mary Gunn Gordon Cairns, Convener of the Business Committee 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:	Chris Yeomans, Director Edinburgh Global John Gillies (ASC) Jessica Williamson (FSSC)

1. Welcome and Introductions

The Convener warmly welcomed everyone to the initial meeting of ISC for this academic session. After the introductions, AC invited CY to address the committee in his role as Director of Global Engagement. CY has senior management responsibility for the University's global partnerships and its community and regional portfolio, including the service projects and activities across those areas, and provides senior support to the Director of Edinburgh Global, Alan Mackay. CY is also Director of the University's Confucius Institute.

2. Apologies

No apologies had been received.

3. Presentation by Chris Yeomans, Director of Global Engagement

CY used slides during his presentation which covered the following areas:

THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

- The University is facing a shifting landscape in the global higher education sector, marked by significant geopolitical changes and competitive pressures;
- Notably, the rise of China and India has led to substantial investments in their higher education research, and development sectors, creating new challenges and opportunities for universities worldwide;
- China's research and development budget is nine times that of the UK's, accelerating developments there faster than in Western counterparts. Furthermore, Asian universities have climbed in global rankings, while traditionally dominant English-speaking institutions have seen stagnation or decline;
- This global shift is impacting student flows, with traditional streams towards English-speaking countries no longer reliable;
- The University has observed a reversal in the growth of Chinese applicants, a trend that demands strategic adjustments to maintain student numbers. This includes increasing offer rates to secure the desired number of enrolled students;
- The broader educational landscape is evolving as regions like China, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia enhance their educational infrastructures, meeting local student demands and decreasing their need to study abroad;
- By 2030, it's expected that regional demand for higher education will be met locally, potentially

reducing the number of international students seeking education in countries like the UK. This backdrop calls for a re-evaluation of international strategies and operations in response to these global shifts;

- The University is navigating a complex environment shaped by UK government policies and global politics, presenting both challenges and opportunities;
- Recent government approaches, particularly towards immigration and international partnerships, have significantly affected universities;
- Changing regulations on how international students can remain in the UK post-graduation have impacted prospective student decisions negatively, while fluctuating governmental approaches to international relations, especially with China, have prompted universities to adapt swiftly to evolving diplomatic stances;
- A notable instance was the previous UK government's directive to potentially shut down Confucius Institute partnerships, demonstrating direct intervention in university affairs. However, shifts in government attitudes toward China have led to a more balanced approach, now characterised by operation, competition, and challenge, allowing more pragmatic engagements while acknowledging the need to manage the risks;
- The University faces operational difficulties like adapting to new administrative and regulatory demands, including the need to register influences from overseas, but there are also supportive frameworks like the Trusted Research Framework and the Research Collaboration Advisory Team, between governments and universities, which aid in navigating these complexities;
- Additionally, collaborations, particularly in AI between the UK and China, highlight the importance of international partnerships in maintaining world-class research outputs, emphasising the delicate balance between national interests and global academic collaboration;
- In response to some of these challenges, the University is actively working towards becoming more agile to better operate within the complex global educational landscape;
- Changes in regulatory frameworks are being considered to allow for more flexible collaborative and degree models, such as joint degrees and potentially international branch campus franchises - modes of operation previously avoided by the University;
- This agility extends to new models of internationalisation like transnational education, where UK degrees are increasingly being delivered overseas, and distance learning opportunities are expanding, with a large percentage of the University's students currently enrolled on online courses residing outside the UK;
- To guide these efforts, the University has implemented a set of nine **Principles for Global Engagement** after three years in development, approved by the University Executive at the end of 2024;
- These principles serve as a consistent baseline for decision-making in international affairs, ensuring transparency and integrity regardless of external changes;
- Additionally, the University is focusing on the Trusted Research Evaluation Framework to measure progress in terms of security, human rights, and export control issues in global engagements, aiming to enhance compliance and ethical standards in its international operations.

INTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS

- CY discussed a series of strategic reforms and organisational restructuring at the University, led by the Provost, Professor Kim Graham. These changes are aimed at enhancing the University's agility and alignment with global trends in higher education;
- Strategic Consolidation: The University has abandoned the practice of maintaining separate

strategies for different aspects like internationalisation, opting instead to integrate these into the three core missions of the university: Teaching and Learning, Research and Enterprise, and Civic Engagement. This shift supports a more unified and mature approach to global operations;

- **Leadership Restructuring:** Leadership for international affairs has transitioned from a Vice-Principal International to a distributed model across the Senior Leadership Team, ensuring that international priorities are embedded across all University functions. Furthermore, Regional Deans roles have been removed, and will be replaced by two University-wide International Deans who will support the University's international priorities. Regional Directors remain in Edinburgh Global but their role is more operational than strategic;
- **Global Plan:** A new single global plan is being developed to outline the objectives for the University's international activities and how they support its three core missions. This plan is overseen by the Global Partnerships Group, chaired by the Provost, which provides centralised oversight and has significant authority to guide and assess the University's global strategies;
- **Stratified Partnerships:** The University is refining how it categorises its various partnerships. The goal is to clearly differentiate between university-level, college-level, and school-level partnerships, allowing for more targeted management and resource allocation;
- These initiatives are part of a broader move to make the University a more globally oriented and responsive institution in the face of rapid international changes in higher education.

INNOVATIVE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

- CY highlighted the evolution and strategic development of the University's international partnerships, illustrating this through the following examples of collaborations with Zhejiang University in China and Gujarat Biotechnology University in India;
- These partnerships signify a shift from traditional educational exchanges to deep, integrated collaborations that include not only education but also research and potentially commercial ventures;
- **Zhejiang University Partnership:** Collaboration in Biomedical Sciences, initiated in 2016 this partnership has grown into a robust model of transnational education, transitioning from a small cohort of students to now engaging 750 students in a mixture of joint and Edinburgh-only degrees. It establishes a significant presence of the University in China, including the provision of 1300 square meters of dedicated University research lab space, demonstrating a research-led approach in an international setting;
- **Gujarat Biotechnology University (GBU) Partnership:** This partnership represents innovative collaboration where the University played a crucial role in designing India's first dedicated biotechnology university. This involved creating the curriculum, academic policies, and faculty development programmes in partnership with a local institution, thus embedding the University within the educational ecosystem of India;
- These examples reflect the University's strategic direction in fostering global partnerships that are diverse in function, deeply integrated into local contexts, and innovative in scope - pushing beyond traditional academic boundaries and emphasising active participation in global innovation ecosystems.

IMPACT

- CY discussed the impactful role the University plays in global education and community support through various partnerships and programmes;
- These efforts highlight the University's commitment to positively influencing global challenges and civic responsibilities. Key examples include:
- **Tara Shchenko University Partnership:** This twinning partnership with the National University of

Kiev aims to foster collaborative research and create new opportunities for students. A significant aspect of this partnership is to support learning in Ukraine during ongoing conflict, exemplified by facilitating the education of seven Ukrainian students at Edinburgh and securing over £1 million in external funding to aid Ukraine's education sector during the war;

- **MasterCard Foundation Partnership:** This long-standing association enhances access to education and employability for young people from Africa. The first phase has already provided scholarships to 240 students from 26 African countries, involving 13 schools within the university. The second phase aims to offer 850 postgraduate scholarships by 2030, supporting education in Edinburgh and digitally within Africa;
- **Education Without Borders Programme:** This programme supports displaced student and staff refugees by providing scholarships and online education opportunities. It currently covers regions like Sudan, Gaza, Ukraine, and others, offering a total of 30 postgraduate scholarships and 20 online scholarships, helping displaced individuals continue their education despite being unable to travel to the UK.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

- CY outlined several challenges and opportunities facing the University in its efforts to expand and optimise global engagement. Key points include:
- **Capacity Challenge:** The University faces significant constraints in terms of the available capacity of academics and students who are already committed to their current responsibilities. This limitation means the University must turn down significant opportunities due to a lack of resources to adequately support new activities and maintain the infrastructure required for a global institution. Expanding this capacity is crucial for the University to capitalise on the most significant opportunities that arise.
- **Intentionality in Strategy:** Historically, the University has been more reactive rather than proactive due to the abundance of incoming opportunities, such as international recruitment and partnerships. However, there is a growing need for the University to become more intentional and strategic, independently identifying gaps, challenges, and areas for growth without relying solely on external offers. This approach will be particularly important as transnational education becomes more central to the University's operations.
- **Opportunity through Transnational Education (TNE):** CY considers TNE as potentially the most significant factor in the next phase of internationalisation for UK universities. Emphasizing TNE could redefine the University's global engagement and educational delivery.
- **Improved Internal Dialogue:** Enhancing communication and co-ordination among the various University departments and leaders is critical. Establishing a unified internal dialogue regarding global strategies could transform the University's ability to engage globally and achieve its core objectives in research, teaching, and impact.

Discussion

- MB raised concerns about the decreasing number of applications from Chinese students to the University and suggested that this was due to several factors including higher tuition fees, perceived safety issues in the UK, insufficient language support, and a lack of overall student support. He also noted the damage to the UK's reputation on Chinese social media;
- CY responded by acknowledging these challenges, while noting that, as far as he was aware, negative experiences of Chinese students was not in the majority, and discussed the steps the University is taking to address any issues, which includes working closely with the Chinese embassy and understanding the challenges from both the UK and Chinese perspectives;
- CY also mentioned efforts to influence UK government policies that affect international students

and highlighted the ongoing work to improve support for these students at the University;

- In response to a second question from MB about what the University does to help its overseas graduates obtain employment, CY explained that the University has a range of partnerships with business for research funding and degree opportunities, though admitted that creating internship and employment opportunities through these partnerships remains a challenge due to conflicting principles between the University and potential employer organizations;
- CY confirmed that, while these partnerships don't currently generate many employment opportunities, efforts are being made to develop them in alignment with the University's principles;
- RA raised concerns about the perceived lack of a clear strategic approach at the University and how to effectively manage its numerous partnerships involving 300 HE institutions and 190 global partners;
- CY acknowledged the challenges of maintaining such a broad portfolio and indicated that while a direct reduction of partnerships is unlikely, there will be more stringent assessments of their value and alignment with university goals leading to natural attrition;
- In relation to a second question from RA on potential external pressures similar to those experienced by Sheffield Hallam University, which was urged to close a human rights centre due to overseas political influences, CY stated that the University has not faced comparable pressures;
- He mentioned if, for example, a request from an overseas embassy to take down specific content from the University's website were received, it would be refused and highlighted that such interactions would be handled diplomatically without succumbing to external pressures, maintaining the integrity of the University's academic freedom;
- In a discussion regarding challenges faced by international students in the US, JW enquired if these challenges could present an opportunity for the University to attract those students. She suggested that the University considers increasing support and resource, particularly in PR initiatives, to become a more appealing option;
- CY acknowledged the evolving geopolitical contexts that impact international student decisions. He mentioned a specific challenge from the US government related to the University's equality, diversity, and inclusion policies, illustrating external pressures not usually associated with the US. Despite these challenges, he reported that the number of US applicants has slightly increased, which might indicate a shift of student preferences due to these geopolitical factors;
- JG expressed reassurance about the University's stance against intimidating foreign influence while also highlighting broader geopolitical complexities, such as the UK's relationship with China as both a partner and an adversary. He highlighted the importance of vigilance in maintaining the University's integrity and reputation amidst such pressures;
- CY concluded that, although there is no substantive change in recruitment campaigns, the University continues to leverage its competitive advantages in attracting students;
- He conceded that future strategies might need to consider broader shifts in global student flows and adapt to changing circumstances in international educational dynamics.

AC thanked CY for a comprehensive and fascinating presentation and he left the meeting.

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 12 May 2025

The minute had been previously circulated and was approved.

5. Matters arising from the minutes of 12 May 2025

Item 5: Any other competent business

- Suggested inviting Professor Liz Baggs, Interim VP Research and Innovation, to a meeting of ISC in Semester 2;
- Interim Director of Communications and Marketing, Niall Bradley, had addressed a meeting of the Public Affairs Standing Committee on 9 October.

6. Meeting to discuss Work Plan for ISC 2025-26

Action:-

AC will engage with individual committee members for their input.

7. Any other competent business

None.

8. Date of next meeting

Tuesday 14 April 2026 online via Teams.

Action:-

Time of meeting and speaker tbc.