

**Meeting of the Public Affairs Standing Committee
At 4.30pm on Thursday 9 October 2025
Online via Teams**

Present: Professor Alice Brown (Convener of PASC)
Ms Candice Donnelly
Dr Kate Richards
Mr Devin Scobie
Mr Thomas Wrench
Dr William Duncan (Secretary of the General Council)
Mr Gordon Cairns (Convener of the Business Committee)
Ms Alison McNulty (Assistant Secretary of the General Council)

In attendance: Mr Niall Bradley, Interim Director of Communications and Marketing
Ann Cormack (Convener, ISC)

1. Welcome and introductions

The Convener, Alice Brown (AB) welcomed all attendees, especially new members of PASC, Kate Richards (KR) and Thomas Wrench (TW), and led the introductions.

The Interim Director of Communications and Marketing (CAM), Mr Niall Bradley (NB) was invited to speak on a range of issues of particular interest to the Committee, followed by discussion.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies received from Bruce Nelson.

3. Presentation from Niall Bradley, Interim Director of CAM

- NB began his oral presentation to the Committee by giving a brief background to his new role, having worked in a number of different roles at the University over the past 20+ years, including Schools liaison, Student Recruitment, Admissions, and Communications and Marketing;
- He stepped into his current role following the retirement of his predecessor, Teresa Merrick, emphasising the need for stability within his department while managing imminent changes in marketing and communications across the University.

Organisational structure of CAM

- Heather McBain, previously Head of Marketing, has been promoted to Deputy Director, replacing Niall's former position. Other deputy directors, Ben Hall, Philip Graham, and Lynn McMath, have maintained their roles in external communications, internal communications, and stakeholder relations, respectively;
- NB reported that the department has experienced some recent staff losses that will not be replaced due to financial constraints, leading to a smaller team. An impending University-wide review of marketing and communications, influenced by previous challenges relating to the devolved nature of this resource and financial restrictions, is expected to lead to structural changes.

Communications strategies for dealing with contentious topics that can attract negative responses that impact on the University's reputation

University Finances and budget reductions

- The University is facing significant budget restrictions. It aims to handle this situation with maximum transparency;
- Misreporting in the media has been a specific issue, with incorrect reports of budget deficits, which the University has endeavoured to correct;
- The financial sustainability issue is not unique to UoE but affects all Scottish universities and similar issues are evident across the UK. The recent SFC publication on sustainability highlighted that this is a widespread problem, underlining the importance of addressing it as a sector-wide concern;
- A review of the university sector's funding gap by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is due to be published in June 2026. This development is seen as a very positive step and some members of senior University staff will be directly involved;
- Efforts have been made to inform the narrative around these financial issues by being on the front foot of communications. Strategies included placing opinion pieces, proactive interviews with media e.g., BBC Scotland, and attempting to raise the focus on broader sector issues;
Engaging openly with the media and other platforms has helped to deliver more favourable coverage and a better public understanding of the issues facing the HE sector in Scotland.

Ethical Investments and disinvestment campaigns

- The University has established a Responsible Investment Advisory Group;
- Up to date information on this can be found on the University's website:
<https://sustainability.ed.ac.uk/sustainability-in-operations-and-estates/responsible-investment>;
- Important to get the message across, not just to the wider community, but also the University's own student community that the funds that have been invested are not student fee income but from endowments;
- Noted that, while the University's endowment is a substantial financial resource, there is concern that this could lead to misconceptions regarding the University's need for additional financial support from the government.

Race Review

- The goal of the communications plan was to proactively manage adverse outcomes from the release of sensitive information contained in the findings of the University's Race Review report;
- Despite the potential risks and negativity, the University decided a transparent, proactive approach was essential;
- CAM worked closely with The Guardian and this included organising interviews and exclusive content over two weeks before the public release;
- The comms strategy involved creating a separate website, videos, stock imagery, and publishing the review itself, which was supplemented by briefings, detailed statements from the Principal, interviews with the key people involved and FAQs;

- Information release was strategically sequenced to control the narrative and prioritise internal communication before public engagement:
 - Internal messages to staff were disseminated the Friday before the public announcement
 - The Guardian released the story on the Sunday morning
 - The University's dedicated website went live at 6am on the release date, followed by all-staff and all-student emails at 6.10am
 - A press release was issued at 6.45am the same day
 - Political stakeholders were contacted later that evening
- The communication efforts led to high engagement levels with emails and extensive media coverage (positive and negative). It was a top story in The Guardian for several days, featuring nine in-depth articles under a dedicated banner;
- The communications plan anticipated and prepared for continuous management of media and public enquiries post-publication.

Sex and gender issues

- Issues relating to sex and gender are complex and highly contentious areas for the University to deal with;
- Any decisions or actions taken by the University are heavily scrutinised and often criticised by the media and public;
- An example given was a course on Queer Geography, offered within the School of Geosciences, which was paused, alongside four other courses, due to low student uptake;
- Despite this straightforward reason for pausing the course, media coverage has been critical, with accusations that the course was paused for financial reasons or because of its focus on queer geography;
- There has been significant backlash to the existence of such a course, as well as criticism over its discontinuation, showing polarised views on the topic;
- NB mentioned that the course might be offered again if there is sufficient interest in the future, but notes that public and media reactions remain a challenge to manage.

Town and Gown relations

- Acknowledged the recent successful launch of the University's Community Plan (CP), indicating a shared interest and participation in city-wide initiatives;
- University representation from Lynn McMath, Deputy of Stakeholder Relations, who actively participates on the Edinburgh Partnership Board on a voluntary basis. This involvement is significant as it connects the University to strategic city planning processes, helping to guide improvements at the local level;
- The University contributes to various partnership subgroups focused on sectors such as housing (chaired by Lynn McMath) economic development and community planning;
- Regular meetings are held concerning planning issues with community and city councillors, highlighting the University's integral role in addressing pressing local issues;
- Quarterly meetings take place with senior leadership at the University and City Council, including its Chief Executive, Paul Lawrence;

- Mentioned areas of shared interest e.g., Bioquarter, City Deal issues, tram extensions, and future funding opportunities around innovation and AI;
- Would welcome any potential support from the General Council to further enhance these town and gown relationships. This is not just about being involved but also about helping disseminate unified messages, ensuring broad and interactive engagement beyond key individuals and CAM is happy to provide briefings on items or topics in advance of meetings.

Parliamentary relations

- Described extensive and strategic engagement between the University and various political stakeholders, primarily focused on improving relations and perceptions among politicians;
- Significant engagement in relation to the Supercomputer project, requiring discreet and continuous interaction behind the scenes;
- Since August 2024, the stakeholder relations team has intensified its efforts towards more outward-facing activities, shifting towards a proactive engagement strategy aimed at hosting high-profile events and visits that not only enhance the University's perception but also broaden political support across different parties. This strategic pivot aims to align more closely with the University's goals and has resulted in a 38% increase in recorded visits;
- Over the last 18 months, there has been an upscale in activity directed towards Westminster, involving meetings with high-profile political figures such as Patrick Vallance, the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, the Innovation Minister, and the past and current Secretaries of State for Scotland.

Improving public awareness of good news stories

- A new approach to improve public awareness of positive stories and protect the University's reputation includes being selective and creative in how and with whom stories are being shared e.g., successful collaborations with major media outlets such as The Guardian, The Times and Channel 4 News;
- A notable success was a nine-minute segment on Channel 4 News, resulting from the University's "Decode ME" study into ME, which received extensive positive coverage.

Discussion

- AB pointed out that the University often hears feedback questioning why it appears to be reactive and defensive rather than proactive and positive about promoting good news stories that are happening at the institution;
- NB acknowledged the feedback and agreed that there has been a deliberate strategic shift towards being more proactive. He explained that the University is aiming to focus on fewer, more impactful stories, despite the abundance of positive developments they could potentially showcase. He cited the previous example of 'Decode ME' to illustrate how dedicating more resources to fewer stories can lead to greater media coverage and overall impact, even though this approach may result in less attention for other notable stories;
- Collaborating with media partners such as The Times and Channel 4 for the 'Decode ME' story, allowed CAM to create a more detailed and impactful narrative compared

to simpler press releases. This method, while time-consuming and resource intensive, resulted in significantly better media coverage;

- AB suggested that understanding public sentiment through tools like the Scottish Social Attitude Survey could inform and enhance their efforts to engage more effectively with the public by focusing on issues that resonate widely;
- KR asked about the alignment of internal communications received by staff with external messaging;
- NB spoke about the significant time and effort devoted to internal University communications, something he has observed since taking up his post, and highlighted that one of his primary concerns has been the University's financial communications;
- CAM have been working on new messaging strategies regarding financial matters that are intended for both internal purposes and integration into their broader media strategy. The goal is to provide University colleagues with consistent key messages to unify communication across various parts of the institution, and he notes a growing appreciation for structured guidance on what to communicate, especially regarding complex subjects like finance where colleagues may feel less confident outside of their own areas of expertise;
- Working closely with finance colleagues is seen as essential for simplifying the complex nature of the University's finances and making them understandable for all staff members;
- DS shared his concerns about ongoing misrepresentations of the University by MSPs, MPs and local Councillors;
- NB responded by advocating for increased personal engagement with politicians through events and formal gatherings on campus as these settings provide valuable opportunities to influence perceptions and correct misunderstandings in a more relational and nuanced manner than press releases might allow, while also acknowledging the challenges of scaling such engagement with limited resource;
- He emphasised the importance of quiet, targeted diplomacy, as demonstrated in the University's response to the loss of Exascale, as effective strategies for managing and improving the University's relationship with political stakeholders;
- Mentioned collaboration with other local universities to tackle shared challenges such as housing. By pooling resources and presenting unified reports, they aim to foster a more positive dialogue and correct misconceptions;
- AB spoke about the effectiveness of breakfast meetings, previously run by the University during the initial years following the establishment of the devolved parliament in Scotland, which allowed MSPs to ask questions and learn about significant issues related to their legislative responsibilities. This strategy was designed not only to educate new legislators but also to establish the University as a valuable and accessible resource for parliament, enhancing its reputation and fostering strong governmental relations;
- NB expressed interest in learning more about these methods, particularly as this presents a proactive opportunity to engage in anticipation of upcoming Holyrood elections and can follow up with AB;
- In response to a question from TR, NB discussed the challenges of managing a broad and active engagement programme within a large university and the increasing reliance on Customer Relationship Management software (CRM). This software helps

record and monitor engagements more efficiently and allow the team to provide further briefings and clarification;

- Highlighted the extensive preparatory work that goes into engagements such as media and event training for staff and detailed briefing documents to ensure everyone is well prepared and on-message for these interactions;
- A specific example is the campaign related to the supercomputer project, where consistent messaging and a well-constructed argument were critical. The success of this campaign was attributed to rigorous preparation and the repeated use of clear, concise messaging across multiple interactions;
- WD asked whether NB would be involved in drafting the narratives about the University's financial situation in the next Annual Report and Accounts, given the importance of that document in clearly setting the public record straight about any possible surplus for 2024/25 and the financial outlook for the next couple of years. NB confirmed CAM was involved;
- NB responded enthusiastically to AC, agreeing with the potential for leveraging the University's alumni networks as a resource to help share good news stories, and confirmed ongoing collaboration with Tom Mortimer who heads up the communications team within D & A;
- A directory of experts could be shared with alumni clubs and societies to identify possible speakers for alumni events, especially in locations like London where many alumni are active, but also further afield through virtual meetings and events;

AB thanked NB for a comprehensive and lively presentation and discussion, and he looked forward to engaging with the Committee at a future meeting. NB left the meeting at this point.

Action:-

Follow up with NB on issues identified.

4. Minutes from the meeting held on 26 May 2025

The minutes were approved.

5. Matters arising from the meeting held on 26 May 2025

These were dealt with under other agenda items.

6. Feedback from the 'In Conversation' Event held on 7 October

- This successful, well-attended event was conducted in a respectful environment;
- Positive feedback received from GC members who had attended and indicated that they would like to see more of this type of event;
- The speakers had found it a valuable experience and had welcomed receiving briefings in advance;
- The ambience in St. Cecilia's Concert Hall had worked well for this type of event, while acknowledging that there was limited opportunity for offering hospitality if using this venue;
- The dinner afterwards in the Hotel Du Vin was enjoyable and a useful networking opportunity;

- A recording of the event will be sent to the speakers to review before appearing on the GC website;
- Committee members were invited to suggest ideas for similar events and WD highlighted the need to plan these well in advance.

7. PASC's work plan 25-26

- AB referred to Paper 2, which also included a summary of the work of PASC over the academic year 2024-25;
- During the current academic year 2025-26, the Committee will aim to focus on the following activities:

Communications Strategy

Production of a third GC video in the series, covering Prince Philip Scholarships:

- WD explained that whereas the purpose of the previous two videos was to raise awareness of GC and Business Committee, this third video would also have the aim of encouraging more donations to the fund, which has around £160k capital. This produces an income currently able to fund a steady state of 4 scholars in post, with one replacement appointed each year, but maintaining this would be difficult should the stipend be increased;
- The award (£3k for each year of a four-year degree) has not changed for several years and at some stage the University will need to increase this to allow for inflation and to avoid students from disadvantaged backgrounds (which the Prince Philip awards are for) leaving the University purely for financial reasons in the middle of their degree;
- The video will be produced with support from Development and Alumni (D & A);
- Existing scholars have been approached recently to ask if they would be willing to be filmed;
- There will be a budget of up to £5k to produce the video, which will be commissioned when sufficient participation is known.

Production of Winter Billet 2025/26 and Summer 2026

- Billet will be produced in-house on the same simplified basis used to produce the Summer 2025 issue, with the intention that members are encouraged to make even greater use of the website as the main source of information about the GC

Half-Yearly Meetings

- Professor Marion Thain, Director of the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI) where the February 2026 HYM will be held, has agreed to be the guest speaker at the lunch in the Playfair Library Hall, which follows the statutory meeting;
- Still to decide if a speaker will be needed for the June HYM. If, as seems likely, this can be held in the newly refurbished Teviot Row Union with tours and hospitality after the formal business, no speaker will be necessary. If the event is held instead at EFI, then having a presentation after the formal business would be highly desirable.

'In Conversation' Event on 7 October 2025

- Plans to make this an annual feature of the work of PASC. Although the following 'In Conversation' event is not expected to take place until early next academic year (2026-27), the planning will need to begin in 2025-26;
- AB spoke about a possible 'hustings' event around the Scottish elections in May 2026, previously proposed by DS, and suggested that Ailsa Henderson, Professor of Political Science at the University, could present on projections of the elections at this event. This would tie-in with the 'In Conversation' event but a proposal would need to be worked out. The tight timing of this event (end March/early April 2026) would mean that planning for it could be challenging.

Action:-

Follow up with sub-group.

Event to showcase some aspect of the University's activity

- Two options: The College of Science and Engineering or the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences;
- This would be held in Spring 2026 and will need advance planning and co-operation from the College on the same basis that the Usher Event in 2025 was organised;
- AB invited input from members of the Committee on the focus and topics for this event;
- TR suggested a theme around the University's new Supercomputer, echoed by WD, and AB proposed that a smaller sub-group should be established to take ideas forward.

Action:-

Sub-group to be established.

Christmas Reception

Arrangements are well in hand for this annual event, which will be held in the Informatics Forum on Tuesday 9 December 2025, and will include a performance from the Edinburgh University Chamber Choir.

Action:-

Invitations for the Christmas Reception will be sent out in late October and a draft guest list will be sent to WD, GC, BN and AB to review beforehand.

Engagement with GC members

- Ongoing engagement with the Director of D & A with a view to developing and agreeing a strategy for enhancing alumni participation in the life of the University and the General Council.
- Regular communications from the Secretary to the Business Committee to ensure members are aware of upcoming events.

Engagement with the wider Community

- Enhance the 'Town and Gown' relationship. Discuss possibility of identifying specific issue of mutual interest, e.g., how to manage the impact of Artificial Intelligence on both City and the University to achieve a positive outcome for both.

- Follow-up on the implementation of the University's Community Plan (launched on 8 October 2025), e.g., invitation to Gemma Gourlay to make a presentation to a future meeting of PASC.

PASC Budget for 2025-26

In line with the University's aim of reducing its operating costs by 10% in 2025-26, the General Council's operational budget allowance from D&A has been cut by 10% (c. £6.6K), but the significant reduction in the cost of Billet (from £32K to £2K) means there is sufficient scope within the allocation to PASC to fund its planned work programme and leave scope for further activities to enhance its remit. Ideas for this would be welcomed, recognising the constraints on the capacity of the General Council office to deliver new activities.

Action:-

AB will give a brief oral report on the busy programme of PASC's activities at the next meeting of the Business Committee on 16 October.

8. Future Events

Covered under Item 7.

9. Any other business

None.

10. Preparations and date of the next meeting

- Suggested speakers for the remainder of PASC meetings in this session included following up with Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact on engagement with the University's Community Plan, or perhaps inviting a Council representative to continue with the theme of "Town and Gown" relations. The Committee were invited to reflect and feedback;
- The next meeting will be held on 12 March 2026 at 4.30pm via Teams and will potentially focus on internal Committee business planning.