

**Minutes of the International Standing Committee held at 1pm
Friday 1st May 2026
Online via Teams**

Present: Ann Cormack, Convener of ISC
Richard Andrews
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: Kim Graham, Provost
Kate Richards (PASC)

1. Welcome and apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited Professor Kim Graham (KG) to update the committee on the implementation of the University's international strategy.

Apologies received from Max Browning.

2. Presentation by Professor Kim Graham, University Provost

The Global Action Plan, published on 14 April 2026, had been previously circulated.

Current context

- KG began by describing her position as the University's Provost, effectively serving as deputy to the Principal;
- She works closely with the Heads of College, as well as the senior leaders overseeing our research, innovation and international strategies;
- Working closely with Leigh Chalmers, University Secretary, and Lucy Evans, Deputy Secretary Students on student-related initiatives, the Provost plays a crucial role in shaping and executing the academic mission of the University;
- Following James Smith's departure from the role of VP International, the Provost now chairs the Global Partnerships Group, which includes College Deans of International, Deputy Vice-Principal International, and members of Edinburgh Global, Edinburgh Innovation, and other key University departments. This Group aims to manage a clearly-owned set of goals for international engagements aligned with the University's global action plan;
- UoE has an impressive international research and teaching profile, with nearly 50% of its students—over 25,000 individuals—from more than 130 countries studying either on campus or online. This proportion far exceeds the typical non-UK student ratio at other UK universities;
- Additionally, about a third of the University's staff are non-UK nationals, with nearly 60% of research-only staff coming from abroad;
- The global alumni network extends to over 360,000 members, with active clubs and networks in major cities worldwide, such as New York and Washington DC;
- The University's international reputation and operational effectiveness are significantly influenced by immigration policies at both Scottish and UK levels;
- Changes in these policies, as well as educational strategies aiming to educate more young people in their home countries are impacting international student recruitment and global priorities, across all UK Universities.

International Partnerships

- The University collaborates with over 300 universities worldwide, spanning various degrees of engagement, from school-level MOUs to significant partnerships, including collaborations with the Gujarat Biotechnology University and with the University of Witwatersrand, the latter in partnership with the MasterCard Foundation, focusing on education and climate sustainability in Africa;
- The Provost emphasised the importance of making international partnerships more strategic with the Global Partnerships Group prioritising more effective evaluation and rationalisation of our current international relationships;
- Focus has shifted towards ensuring that partnerships align with the University's core missions of Teaching and Learning, research and innovation, and civic impact;
- Examples include the Education Beyond Borders initiative supporting at-risk academics and students displaced by conflict (strongly aligned to our civic impact priorities), and the NEURii programme, a partnership aimed at using AI for dementia care, demonstrating the University's commitment to innovation in an international context;
- Additionally, the University aims to enhance its international innovation activities, leveraging existing relationships and exploring new collaborations with industry partners globally;
- This approach will extend the University's impact through a more thoughtful and strategic engagement in its international operations.

Una Europa alliance

- The University of Edinburgh is a founding member of the UNA Europa Alliance, which includes 11 leading research-intensive universities across Europe, such as Leiden, Zurich and Bologna;
- The collaboration offers joint degree programmes like a Joint BA in European Studies and a bachelor's in sustainability, along with virtual mobility opportunities, collaborative research projects, summer schools, and online courses;
- Additionally, the alliance features a virtual intercultural program known as the Student Project Incubator, which encourages students from various universities to work together on global challenges over an eight-week online collaboration;
- This initiative not only enhances cultural understanding and network building but also focuses on the practical application of research to address diverse global issues.

Insights programme

- The University's Insights programme is a significant initiative designed to support widening participation students by helping them build confidence, skills, and connections for their future careers; around 700 students have already taken part;
- For some, the programme includes an international component where students travel to cities like New York and Washington DC to meet with alumni and explore potential career paths, enhancing their global perspective and professional networks;
- This initiative leverages the University's global alumni network to provide valuable real-world skills enhancement for our students, making it a standout program that underscores the University's commitment to student development through global alumni engagement.

Geopolitical challenges

- Current geopolitical and geo-economic tensions are significantly reshaping the global environment, influencing international research and collaborations;
- The volatility in trade, partnership dynamics, and technological advancements in areas like AI

and quantum computing is prompting a critical evaluation of ongoing projects;

- These shifts necessitate enhanced security measures and thorough vetting of international partnerships, particularly in sensitive fields such as AI, semiconductors, and biosciences;
- This environment has led to closer cooperation among Edinburgh Innovations, the Edinburgh Research Office, and Edinburgh Global to strategically manage and develop these collaborations, ensuring they align with core strategic objectives and respond aptly to global challenges;
- Engagement with European institutions remains crucial, especially post-Brexit, for maintaining strong research and educational alliances. Such connections are vital tools for soft power and knowledge diplomacy;
- Domestically, there's a need to better communicate the University's relevance and impact to the public. This involves articulating the University's efforts in a holistic manner that integrates the international component as part of its broader civic impact;
- Financially, the University heavily relies on international student tuition fees, which constitute a significant portion of its income. Given increasing global competition in higher education, it's critical to remain attractive and competitive in international student recruitment;
- Strategically, the University has moved towards a more proactive and clearly owned international strategy, focusing on integrating international activities into its core academic mission;
- Discussions at the university level are also focused on transnational education and exploring potential new models and collaborations, particularly in countries like China, to adapt to the evolving educational landscape globally. This strategic shift is facilitated through platforms like the Global Partnerships Group, which helps streamline and enhance international engagements.

Conclusion

- KG concluded by highlighting that this is an exciting yet challenging time for implementing the international strategy at the University;
- She emphasised the necessity to evaluate and potentially discontinue certain activities that do not yield sufficient value, focusing instead on reshaping the University's portfolio to be more strategic, benefit-driven, and aligned with its values;
- Highlighted the importance of communicating the significance of the international dimension in the University's academic mission with a push for ensuring measurable outcomes and appropriate investment in these international initiatives;
- KG acknowledged the progress already made in articulating new directions for the University, particularly in enhancing civic impact, innovation, and new market opportunities, and invited feedback on the current strategy and suggestions for future directions.

Discussion

- RA expressed support for the University's international strategy and highlighted the challenge of managing numerous global partnerships. He emphasised the importance of maintaining strong relationships with major strategic partners, such as universities in Sydney, Toronto, and other global cities;
- KG discussed the strategic approach being taken, where the significance of each partnership is reviewed to decide on its continuation. The approach involves assessing current outcomes from collaborations, but also the future potential of existing partnerships, focusing on high-value relationships at the university level while allowing less critical connections to be managed at the school level. The goal is to optimise resources, streamline partnerships, and ensure impactful collaborations are prioritised and thoughtfully and effectively managed;
- BN expressed concerns about the University's reactive communication strategy and its past focus

on individual stories rather than conveying a strong message about the University's overall community benefits. He asked KG how she plans to enhance communications given the budgetary limitations and inquired how the General Council and Business Committee could assist in these efforts;

- KG emphasised the role of the General Council in spreading positive messages about the University's global work and impact, particularly highlighting its significant research impacts and successful student stories, for example around mobility abroad. She suggested that promoting these positive stories can help counteract the generally negative media coverage about higher education;
- KG acknowledged the difficulty of enhancing communications within budget constraints but mentioned ongoing efforts to improve our approach, with work underway to refine the University's website and communication strategies around its three core areas: civic mission, teaching and learning, research and innovation;
- KR expressed agreement with the need to diversify our international student cohort, highlighting the importance of not relying heavily on any single country, especially considering geopolitical tensions;
- She then asked about the University's knowledge of schools in countries targeted for Transnational Education (TNE) initiatives, using the example of Glasgow Academy's partnership with a school in India;
- She enquired whether the University has similar strategies to ensure continuity for students from these schools who may seek further education in Scotland;

Action:-

- KG offered to follow up on this query with Dr Shane Collins, the Director of Student Recruitment and Admissions, for a more knowledgeable response and report back to the committee;
- WD remarked on the importance of focusing on how innovation operates internationally, and referred to the forthcoming ISC meeting involving Dr Andrea Taylor. He acknowledged that the University's innovation outputs are only recently meeting expectations and emphasised the need to accelerate progress in this area;
- WD also highlighted the importance of alumni clubs as sources of potential ambassadors for the University and queried how best to leverage these relationships globally;
- KG discussed the strategic objectives of enhancing the University's brand, particularly in innovation hubs like London and internationally, and agreed this was an important objective for the future;
- She highlighted the work done with Edinburgh Innovations to assess and build on existing innovation ecosystems, such as in Nagoya and the Yangtze River Delta, leveraging established successes for future initiatives;
- Additionally, KG emphasised the importance of alumni clubs to the University, sharing insights from her recent engagement with the North American alumni, noting the diverse needs and interests of alumni in different regions, like New York and Washington DC, which influence the way they wish to engagement with the University;
- It was agreed that there was high potential for increased alumni involvement in supporting University initiatives, especially with opportunities to foster closer relationships through organised events and personal interactions;
- AC mentioned that MG had been discussing innovation with a focus on alliances, particularly citing an example led by UCL in pharmaceuticals;
- MG's enquiry was about how the University could play a leading role in forming alliances rather than just joining existing ones. She also suggested practical measures to foster innovation and hasten commercialisation, like using standard templates for legal processes in spin-outs to reduce

the time from concept to market, aiming for a more efficient two-month timeline rather than a year;

- KG agreed with the idea of speeding up the process, and considering where we needed to be present and visible, if we were not currently;
- RA voiced a concern about the University's decline in the QS World Rankings, where it fell from 15th in 2023 to 34th currently, while maintaining the 29th position in the THES rankings;
- Despite successes in specific subjects internationally, he questioned the reasons behind the overall ranking drop and asked what actions are being taken, beyond existing strategies, to improve the University's position in these rankings;

Action:-

- KG noted that the changes in rankings are sometimes influenced by factors beyond the University's control, including the performance of other institutions worldwide. She suggested she would provide a more detailed response to the question after the meeting.

AC thanked KG for a deeply stimulating presentation and she left the meeting.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2025

The minute had been previously circulated and was approved.

4. Matters arising from the minutes of 4 November 2025

None.

5. Any other competent business

- The final meeting of ISC will be held online on Thursday 28 May 2026 at 12.30, with Andrea Taylor, CEO, Edinburgh Innovations;
- This is a closed meeting to include a discussion on ISC's programme for 2026-27.