


ACCESS AND ALLIES

BY SUSAN DALZELL



U.K. universities collaborate with their governments to reach U.S. alumni

Many people conjure up images of whiskey, bagpipes, and men in kilts when they think of Scotland. Kate Perkins had a different vision in mind in August 2014 when she accepted her post as the second secretary for Scottish Affairs at the British Embassy in Washington, D.C.

“Yes, we have whiskey and kilts but also biotech, creative industries, the finance sector, and world-class higher education,” Perkins says.

Her job—to promote a modern and dynamic Scotland to U.S. citizens and organizations—led her to work closely with Scottish universities. “We wanted to reach out to a wider network of ambassadors,” she says, “to help us spread the message about what a modern Scotland has to offer the world as a place to study, visit, and do business. Scottish university alumni are the perfect resource.”

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While universities in Scotland—and around the world—are eager to take advantage of these kinds of missions, they are often hampered by limited resources and can struggle to draw enough alumni to North American events to make the planning and effort worthwhile. These institutions have discovered that joining forces—with each other, the government, and private organizations—is the key to building a more effective international alumni engagement program.

America the Bountiful

Over the past decade, U.K. universities have greatly increased their alumni efforts in the U.S. For many U.K. universities, the U.S. is the country, outside of their own, with the largest number of alumni, a population that includes not only Americans but also Brits and other expats. The U.K. is also the top study abroad destination for Americans, according to *Open Doors 2015*, an annual report produced by the Institute of International Education.

Despite the strong numbers, those graduates can be hard to find. “We have a lot of support from American alumni, in terms of volunteering and donating,” says Rachel Newberry, head of alumni and friends engagement for the U.K.’s Lancaster University. “Our challenge is that they are all spread

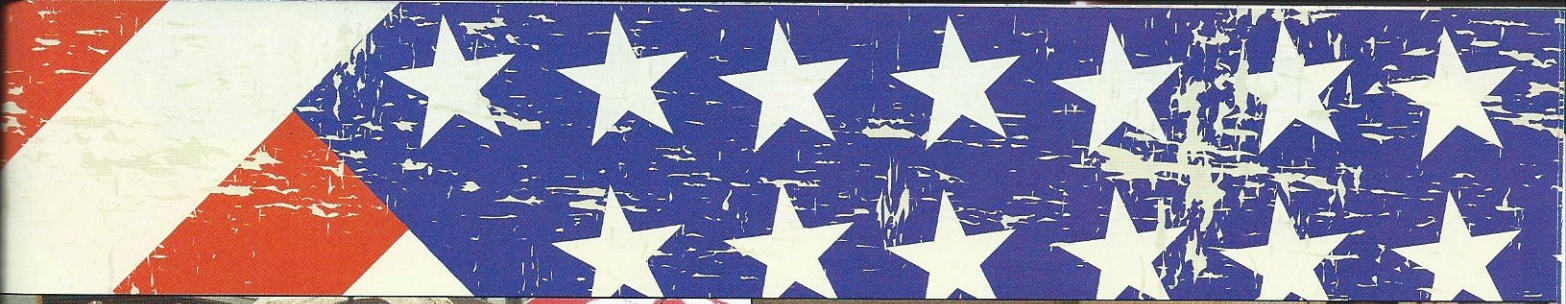
about. We have about 5,000 across the States.”

Even in large cities with a strong alumni concentration, getting a good turnout at events can be difficult, says Grainne Ferrigan, an alumni relations officer for the U.K.’s University of Aberdeen. “It takes a lot of resources to plan an event, and maybe five attendees show up in cities like Chicago or San Francisco,” she says. “It’s not great for the university or for the alumni, who may be coming because they want to network.” The U.K.’s University of Leeds hosts successful U.S. events but can’t host them frequently enough. “There’s a limit to what we can do from the U.K.,” says Phil Steel, head of alumni engagement, noting the ineffectiveness of hosting infrequent events in one city. “We want a way to ensure that engagement goes on throughout the year so it feels like a true community.”

Finding alumni can also be an issue. Databases are often incomplete or inaccurate. “One of the biggest challenges we have with international alumni is the validity of our data. It’s a continual work in progress,” says Leigh Dilks, head of alumni relations and events for Edinburgh Napier University in Scotland.

Power in Numbers

To alleviate the frustrations they face in reaching American alumni, universities are coordinating efforts



through Scottish Affairs and the British Council. Perkins works with a growing alumni network of 10 Scottish universities to co-host events throughout the U.S. In January 2016, the British Council—the U.K.’s international organization for cultural relations and educational operations—launched the Education UK Alumni Network in New York. Alumni from the participating universities are invited to exclusive monthly networking and cultural events.

The events Scottish Affairs hosts are free for institutions to participate in. They range from dinners honoring Scottish poet Robert Burns, which attracted 160 people in 2015 in Washington, D.C., to National Theatre of Scotland performances in Chicago and Brooklyn, New York. In April 2016, alumni from 15 Scottish universities—nearly double the number from 2015—marched in the 2016 New York City Tartan Day Parade and attended a drink reception. Alumni also attended an event at the World Bank in New York with Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. In the future, Perkins would like to host more career and professional development events.

This group approach has worked well for Edinburgh Napier. “We all have alumni associations, Dilks says, “but sometimes we may only have one or two staff members in our alumni offices and are stretched in

PAINTING THE TOWN TARTAN: Edinburgh Napier University and other institutions partner with Scottish Affairs to host alumni at the annual Tartan Day Parade in New York City. From left, in 2015 ENU festivities included a pre-parade brunch where alumni and friends viewed the work of Scottish artist Gerard Burns; ENU alumni, board members, and friends march in the 2016 parade; the University of Aberdeen’s New York Alumni Chapter represents in the 2016 parade despite the rainy weather; and alumni attend a 2013 exhibition of ENU alumnus David Eustace’s work “Highland Heart.”

time and money. While we can’t get to the States, the Scottish government is already there.”

An Engaging Partnership

The British Council has been testing an alumni program that charges a £2,100 fee for the first year. The Education UK Alumni Network began as a pilot program subsidized by the U.K. government’s GREAT Campaign, which aims to promote the U.K. internationally as an exceptional place to visit, study, and do business.

“A lot of the more established universities—Cambridge, Oxford, the London School of Economics, and King’s College—have offices in the U.S.,” says Stephanie Blochinger, education officer for the British Council. “The smaller universities don’t have as strong of a reach, with maybe 500 or 1,000 alumni in the U.S. This program is a good fit for those universities who have a large number of alumni in the U.S. but not so many that they can fill an event hall on their own.”

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Lancaster University, one of 10 institutions participating in the partnership, found the £300 cost per event to be worthwhile. “The British Council was offering a program of events that we could pay for with one flat fee,” Newberry says. “Budget-wise it would have cost us the same for one event, and we wouldn’t have nearly the number of attendees.” And while Lancaster alumni volunteers organize successful social events in the States, Newberry loves the informative content of the Education UK events.

The seven events have included professional networking opportunities and panel discussions on industry-specific topics such as fashion, finance, and nonprofits. One event, held prior to Britain’s June 2016 vote to leave the European Union, featured academics from Rutgers and Cornell universities speaking on EU and U.S. relations. Universities handle the invitations, and the British Council manages the program and venue, usually the consulate in New York City. Participating institutions invited new students heading to the U.K.

BRITISH INVASION: The British Council partners with U.K. universities to host alumni engagement and networking events in New York City for its U.S.-based graduates. From left, alumni mingle with finance experts at a January 2016 networking event; U.K. alumni enjoy a photo phone booth moment during a career development event; Matthew Rycroft, Britain’s permanent representative to the United Nations in New York, speaks at the 2016 Education UK Alumni Gala; attendees toast during a pre-departure briefing for incoming study abroad students bound for the U.K.

to hear a panel of alumni speak about their campus experiences. Each event attracted 50 to 60 people. The crowd, usually a mix of young and old alumni, Brits and Americans, often takes full advantage of the time allotted for networking, Blochinger says. In the coming years, organizers aim to expand the Education UK Alumni Network to other U.S. cities, including Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.

An added bonus: The events help to grow and update the participating universities’ alumni databases. Alumni are welcome to extend the invitations they receive to friends—often other alumni—so the final attendee list is often greater than universities’ original invite lists.

“The advantage is, because it’s the British Council office, they are based there in New York. The messages and support can go on all year,” Leeds’ Steel says. The quality of the events and the cachet of affiliating with the government doesn’t hurt, either. “The British Council has always had a good reputation and profile,” Steel says. “There is a credibility we gain by working with them.”

Welcome to the World

The U.K. is not alone in showing increased interest in international alumni. In April 2016, the Australian



government launched the Australia Global Alumni Strategy in an effort to reach the 2.5 million international students who have studied in Australia during the past 50 years. Germany's DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), the Netherlands' EP-Nuffic, and the U.S. State Department also sponsor programming to keep in touch with international alumni of their country's scholarship and fellowship programs.

"Everyone is trying to reconnect with their alumni," Blochinger says. "There's a desire to share stories of alumni success and raise the profile of education in their countries."

International alumni relations consultant Gretchen Dobson agrees. Dobson has worked with both the Australian and the State of Victoria governments on their respective global alumni initiatives, as well as with universities and governments in the U.S., Asia, and Europe. From the government's perspective, alumni, she says, can be useful assets, influencing trade, tourism, research and industry, and national reputation.

"How does a country sustain its influence? How will they sustain their reputation and influence in the world?" Dobson says. "That's something I help governments and NGOs think about. International education is a huge export."

Keep the Momentum Going

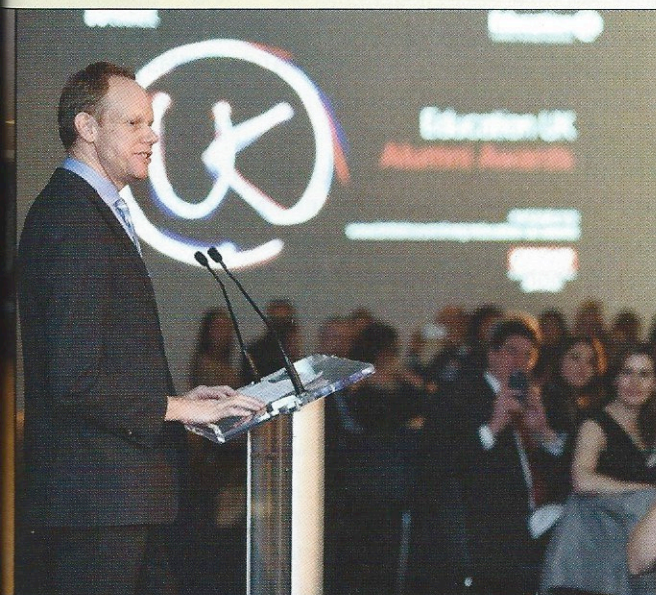
Partnerships between institutions and government organizations can be quite fruitful, but are they sustainable? What happens if funding priorities change when a new administration takes over?

Even if government aid vanishes, several U.K. universities will be prepared to continue engagement work, thanks to the British Council. For several years, the council has sponsored meetings for volunteer leaders of U.K. alumni chapters in New York. "Alumni volunteers exchange best practices and develop resources to support their own alumni relations initiatives and outreach," Blochinger says.

This is a huge benefit to universities, Dobson says, and can help ensure that alumni programs survive long term. "Training international alumni volunteers to be the key coordinators and local champions of initiatives," Dobson says, "can help to keep initiatives moving forward, even when decision-makers within the government move on."

The effects of these kinds of leadership gatherings are beginning to show. David Drinkwater, a University of Birmingham graduate, has volunteered to organize social events in New York for U.K. alumni. He was originally contacted by the British

OPPOSITE PAGE: PAULINE DOWDALL (LEFT), JORGE FRANCO (RIGHT); THIS PAGE: MARC HALL (LEFT), JARROD TREDWAY (RIGHT)



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Great Scot!

The case for governments courting alumni

Governments partnering with overseas alumni may not always see immediate results from their efforts, but here's how building these relationships fits into the country's long-term goals:

Arts and Culture

Both Scottish Affairs and the British Council view culture as a valuable U.K. export. Whether inviting alumni to attend a touring production of the National Theatre of Scotland or introducing graduates to fashion designed by art students at Glasgow Caledonian University New York, government-sponsored events can expose U.S.-based alumni to modern U.K. culture.

Prestige and Reputation

When universities engage with alumni, they raise the profile of U.K. education. Alumni who attend events may better understand and appreciate their U.K. alma mater. Programs like the annual Education UK Alumni Awards, which celebrate alumni achievements, create media opportunities for U.K. education.

Student Recruitment

The British Council encourages students from around the world to attend British universities, and engaging alumni is another way to support that goal. Alumni can also help those students succeed: New students heading to the U.K. were invited to a recent Education UK Alumni Network event featuring a panel of alumni speaking about their experiences on campus.

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Consulate to facilitate an informal network with other alumni chapter leaders. What used to be three or four people showing up for a quiz night or happy hour has turned into an event with 20 or 30 people from 25 different universities. "You meet people you would not have come in contact with otherwise in New York," Drinkwater says. "It's rewarding both personally and professionally."

Kirsten Hartil, chair of the Aberdeen Alumni New York Chapter, has participated in the British Council's volunteer leader gatherings and welcomes the ability to enhance her chapter's offerings. Aberdeen includes information about Drinkwater's U.K. events and the Scottish

Affairs gatherings in messages to alumni. "For a small chapter such as ours, it is a great way to provide our alumni in New York with access to events that we don't have the capacity to organize ourselves," Hartil says. "The opportunity to network with a larger group of people or just meet individuals who may have had similar experiences is too good of an opportunity to turn down." ■

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