Preliminary Remarks

The object of this report is to remark on how alumni societies can enhance their engagement with new alumni (recent graduates) and with current students. To that end, this report attempts to offer tailored advice to each one of the societies based on their specific needs; it also highlights some deficiencies in how the alumni groups currently operate. Having said this, I was struck by the consistent professionalism and dedication demonstrated by each alumni group and the volunteers that contribute to the success of the program in each locale. It goes without saying that the contents of this report, while sometimes critical, should be taken as tips for future success than any indication for the need for root-and-branch reform.

Overall, I met with groups that had

- A regular schedule of events
- Committed leadership
- Regular communications with the Cambridge University Department of Alumni Relations (CUDAR)
- A desire to expand their reach and to engage (in particular) new graduates.

In short, every group demonstrated sound fundamentals and the motivation to improve or change given the new realities of social media and highly mobile young graduates.

Structure of the Report

I have divided this report into six sections – one for each location I visited, and a final section to conclude and glean any overarching trends. Since this report is limited in length, my comments are not exhaustive, and so I am happy to clarify further, either in person or in writing.

Edinburgh

The Cambridge Society of Edinburgh\(^1\) effectively represents the vast swathe of Cambridge Alumni in Scotland, around 5000 in all. Given these numbers, it is no surprise that the Scottish Society was by far the most robust I visited. It has a regular roster of events (including a Fresher’s welcome event) and has a very active committee.

The Scottish Society regularly engages with its members through a mass-email system and the committee communicates through that medium generally. It does not, unfortunately, have a website.\(^2\) The Society, while vibrant, does not currently use social media to any great extent, and is not active on Facebook or Twitter.

The overwhelming use of email is not surprising, given the makeup of the group. I gather that the vast majority of the membership, and the committee are all composed of mid-career or retired members. Contrary to my expectations, there are no current students on the committee. While this

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\(^1\) Hereinafter referred to as the ‘Scottish Society’. This shorthand will be used throughout.

\(^2\) Seeing that this will be rectified soon enough by CUDAR’s work, I will not comment further on this particular point.
was not necessarily a disappointment, I had read somewhere that a student representative sat on the committee. Since this was not the case I can not comment on whether or not such a position is helpful.

However, the lack of student representatives, or at least the small presence of new graduates may present a structural issue rendering it somewhat difficult to engage through non-traditional forms of communication. It may be worth considering either

a) Appointing a ‘Youth’ representative

Or

b) Appointing a committee member with specific responsibilities for using social media.

One of the ongoing issues in the future will be adapting to the incoming data protection regulations, which makes it significantly more difficult to identify and locate new graduates. This was a concern expressed to me by a number of the committee members, and is an issue already being considered. Ensuring that there is a Facebook Group for Cambridge alumni would the a good first step – since new graduates are very likely to want to self-identify that way.

Since it is also an area of some disagreement within the committee – I would strongly encourage them to deliberately target current students in their advertising and when asking for names from the University. While it is still an alumni society, the challenges faced by restrictive new data rules means that to fulfil this role effectively, it is vital to engage even current students, so they can self-identify down the road.

On a final note, I should also draw CUDAR’s attention to some minor disquiet on how the Society feels it has been treated. In particular, I know there are some ruffled feathers about the ‘idemnity’ and the recent signing of some legal documents. While this has somewhat subsided, there are persistent issues, on the Society’s end, about how they sometimes feel ‘directed’ or not consulted on what they should be doing. They feel as if they simply receive orders from on high.

In short, recommendations are:

1. Engaging on social media – particularly facebook and twitter.
2. Appointing a youth representative or someone specifically responsible for social media.
3. Actively target current students when planning and advertising events.
4. Engaging with the Scottish Society of the University. I have pledged to help with this, and I’m happy to say that the alumni Society is very keen.

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3 This was a concern also identified by other groups. For the purposes of this report, however, the wider point around the contract committees had to sign is moot.
Cambridge Society of Norway

The Cambridge Society of Norway is currently run by John Creed, an exceptionally dedicated alumnus who planned three wonderful days for me. However, having one very dedicated member is both a blessing and a curse.

From what I saw from my time in Norway, John runs the society virtually alone. While there are a couple of events and an active Facebook group of 121 members, it is clear that much of the impetus comes from John. While this is sustainable if the society is not looking for growth, I strongly suspect it is not sustainable in the long run or if the society is aiming to expand. According to Fiona’s blog from 2015, there are a couple of members who regularly attend events, and I would suggest asking John and them if they would like to get involved in the Society. This would help the society maintain a vibrant website and encourage more Norwegian students to apply. Otherwise, it does appear that the society operates as a labour of love, but a labour of one.

The recommendations are:

1. Encourage other members of the Society to get involved with the committee.
2. Develop a new website.
3. Continue engaging with alumni on social media.

Aarhus and Copenhagen

The Oxford and Cambridge Society of Denmark is a new organization, although the Oxford wing has existed for a considerably longer period of time unaffiliated to Cambridge. Happily, the society does have a very active online presence on Facebook and they have a well designed website. The fact that the committee is overwhelmingly young is probably a contributing factor to these successes.

However, the Society has significant issues going forward. The two active Cambridge members are in Aarhus, which is two and a half hours from Copenhagen and an expensive train journey. What is more, the Oxford and Cambridge halves have had difficulty communicating with one another. This has resulted in a Christmas Party not materializing, since there were significant last-minute issues. It has also been difficult for these reasons to find Cambridge alumni in Copenhagen.

As I see it, there are two options open to the Danish Society. Either the Oxford and Cambridge parts split again, in which case most of Cambridge’s operations will be run from Aarhus, or the Oxford part will be the much more active part, meaning most events will occur in Copenhagen. Ideally, CUDAR would help find Amelia and Nikola a Cambridge alum in Copenhagen, and it would be useful to liaise with both in this regard.

Ultimately, the society is doing much right, but there are significant communications and distance issues that need to be sorted for the group to get off the ground.
Amsterdam

The Oxford and Cambridge Society of the Netherlands is, like the Danish group, mixed, but there appear to be none of the communications problems that have dampened that group’s work. The Dutch Society has regular pub meetups, an annual Harvard Society dinner, as well as various talks. They also have an active website and Facebook page that is regularly used to advertise events.

One major concern, however, is the Society’s inability to recruit new members actively. I know the President has been quite concerned that they do not have access to any centralized list of emails, and that it has been quite difficult to engage new students for this reason as well. At the recent freshers event, for example, there were only a small number in attendance (around 10). What is more, the Society has noticed a precipitous drop in applications since Brexit.

While it would be helpful to have easier access to emails, the club did not seem to be aware of the data implications of that request. Instead, the Society should examine the possibility of having an active Cambridge alumni group on Facebook, as at the moment there is only a page to advertise events. Without a forum through which alumni can identify themselves on social media, the society will be severely limited in who they can attract. Instead of showing the Facebook link to CUDAR on their website, I would suggest setting up an alumni group that could have a much greater impact.

This group would also be a brilliant way to advertise the monthly drinks meet-ups in the pub. The website currently says to contact a committee member to find out more, but actively using social media to promote these events in a group would free up committee time and show that many people actually do show-up. Nothing is worse than showing up to an event with two people, and some may be leery about going to an event they know little about.

Similarly, this group could be open to current students, which I know is a focus of the current committee. At the moment, the set-up could be a bit intimidating, as it is clearly advertised toward alumni. Again, due to the data protection restraints, it would be beneficial to be pro-active in targeting current students, to retain them when they graduate.

The recommendations are:

1. Expand beyond email and a Facebook page to create a facebook group for Cambridge alumni.
2. Add links to the Society’s Facebook profile and social media presence to the website.
3. Actively target current students through the above social media platforms. Data protection laws make other methods significantly more difficult.

Belgium

Of all the societies, the Cambridge Society of Belgium appeared to be the most overtly professional, if not the largest. At the annual Christmas Party, there were easily 30 people in attendance, which is not insignificant given the time of year. What is more, the committee and
membership appeared to genuinely like each other and it was clear that it was highly functional from both operational and social perspectives.

For the other societies, the Belgian model is definitely one to emulate. While the Oxford and Cambridge societies are operationally distinct, they are mutually invited, ensuring decent attendance at each event. This model would likely serve Denmark well. Ironically, Belgium seems to have the opposite problem – with Cambridge taking up most of the events!

The website is professionally done and the bios of the committee members are particularly welcoming. The society also maintains an excellent Facebook group where their events are well advertised in this forum. A mass emailing system is also used.

One ongoing concern is the Freshers event, which was not successful this year. The group maintains that the lack of interest emanated from Colleges’ failure to provide names, and the fact that the event had to be non-alcoholic. I do not have any specific recommendations on this point since I do not have the full details, but it should be a source of ongoing discussion.

Finally, the only point I would add is that the Society should think about expanding its reach to include the Belgian Society at the University itself. At the moment I do not see much coordination, and this could be one area of growth in an otherwise stellar effort.

I have no significant recommendations.

General Comments & Conclusion

These comments are a recap of the points that I think apply to all the societies, whether or not they are already being employed by those societies. Otherwise, specific recommendations that are country-specific are not discussed.

1. Websites should look up-to-date and professional. I would recommend that each Society has one that is more than just CUDAR’s current page.
2. Each Society should create and manage a Facebook group, and similar fora on other platforms. This is by far the best way to encourage discussion and links between Alumni. Facebook pages, while also useful, do not allow for this amount of communication.
3. Societies should not expect to be reactive when it comes to identifying new graduates or current students. Data protection laws preclude this. Rather, engaging with the University societies of the same countries is probably a good bet, as well as actively using Facebook and other social media forums. Getting an email list will no longer ‘cut it’.
4. While they are alumni groups CUDAR should also stress that, given (3), engaging current students should be a priority. Freshers events, and similar, should be seen as priority occasions for the societies.

Overall, the quality of the alumni groups significantly impressed me. All conducted themselves professionally. The major issue is, I think, shifting culture rather than specific techniques of communication. Even with a fantastic website, active Facebook groups and regular events, if the
societies do not choose to target current students, there is a risk of a significant decline in membership in the future due to the lack of available data otherwise.

Comments About the Award

I would be remiss if I also did not comment on the Award, especially given the significant changes that are being discussed as to its structure and purpose (rightly – in my view).

It was quite clear that, despite being very hospitable, many of the alumni groups did not fully understand why I was there before I arrived, and they are still sceptical about the quality of information I can provide. I would agree. It is difficult to recommend anything when you show up for 3-4 days and then leave. I could catch a group on a bad day or in the midst of a transition that is not reflective of the group as a whole. Put another way, any empirical evidence I gather will necessarily be so limited in scope as to ultimately be of a significantly limited value.

Any changes should take this into account, and focus on what the alumni groups need. If this means helping set up a Facebook group, or attending numerous freshers events, or speaking in schools to recruit applicants, then I think the time of both the student and the alumni group is better spent. While I learned a great deal, and I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of my time, I have the sneaking suspicion that I could have been more valuable to the alumni groups if my time had been used differently. Regardless, the STA is a brilliant opportunity and it should be kept in some form. Students should have the chance to meet alumni groups, and alumni groups should be able to use this abundant resource – any ongoing changes should keep this reciprocal principle and focus it for greater effect.