Royal Holloway
University of London

Council

Council effectiveness report

Context

The Council Effectiveness Review Project Board has been collecting information on what constitutes good governance and how effectively our own Council operates, by surveying Council members and the senior managers of the College, and by studying arrangements at comparable universities.

Responses from the benchmarking work and from the survey of Council members have helped the project board consider the degree to which Council is currently able to carry out its main responsibilities. Through the process we have identified a number of areas where changes to our governance arrangements could be expected to improve Council's performance. The benchmarking report and the results of the members' survey are appended.

Key findings

1. The primary responsibilities of Council remain:
   - (i) to determine the strategy for the College
   - (ii) to ensure that policies and processes that can achieve the desired outcomes are in place and are properly executed
   - (iii) to safeguard the good name of the College
   - (iv) to ensure the financial and academic probity and sustainability of the College.

2. There are ways in which the Secretariat could offer additional support to Council to improve its effectiveness, many of which can be implemented quickly, with support from the project board where necessary. These include:

2(i) Supporting awareness of roles and responsibilities
   - preparing and circulating clear statements about the roles and responsibilities of Council members, and of Trustee liabilities, to include in the Committees Handbook and to make readily available through the intranet, which would also allow easy update on an ongoing basis
   - preparing short and simplified statements about the various Council committees and their relation to full Council, and key personnel in Council (to include Chair, Deputy Chair, Secretary, and Committee Chairs), to include in the Committees Handbook and also to place on the intranet

2(ii) Providing induction and ongoing support for all Council members
   - creating a half-day induction programme that is offered to all new members joining Council each September, as a group, and as needed for members joining mid-year, recognising the differing knowledge and needs of staff and student members and independent members

- offering briefings for members on topics as required in a variety of accessible formats, dependent upon need and complexity; for example, anything from a short introductory one-page guide through to informal briefings
- surveying members annually about the year's business and any support requirements they may have
- ensuring that the papers sent to Council members are fit for the governance function, by producing a short guide for paper authors and having oversight of drafts before circulation; in particular this will require papers to be specifically written with a governance audience in mind and not to simply repurpose management reports.

2(iii) Making arrangements for meetings
- introducing a cover sheet to be used for all Council papers that requires authors to summarise key aspects of the paper (e.g. resources, value for money, risk, and equality and diversity issues, any previous consultation, next steps and related documents)
- ensuring papers include author contact details so that Council members who wish to query or request additional information may ask that the Secretariat do so ahead of a meeting
- continuing to circulate papers 7 days in advance of a Council meeting
- introducing a process whereby members who wish to unstar items of business make their request to the Chair of Council no later than 10am on the Monday before the Council meeting, in order that the Secretariat and/or paper authors can address queries where possible ahead of the meeting, thus potentially removing the need for unstarring (e.g. where there are simple points of clarification specific to an individual)
- the Secretariat ensuring that committees provide summary reports for Council of all decisions made on its behalf, or required from it, since Council's last full meeting, and that the minutes of committees are placed on a shared drive to which all Council members have access, no less than 7 days before a Council meeting, to allow members to consult the minutes without the need for paper circulation
- continuing with a meeting start time of 5pm to fit with the other commitments of members
- continuing to provide a hot meal after Council meetings, recognising that some members travel significant distances to attend meetings; and moving to a cycle of full dinners at the November away day and the June meeting of Council and a hot buffet at the October and March meetings.

2(iv) Aiding communication
- supporting Council in preparing an update after each meeting to share with College members through existing communication channels in order to improve awareness of Council's role, business and value
- featuring a report on Council in the weekly newsletter, once each year.

3. Survey replies indicate a concern about Council's ability to adequately monitor service delivery. The project board will consider how Council can best receive clear reports on value for money, and quality of provision, of services, through the existing monitoring and reporting work of Audit and Compliance Committee.

4. Survey replies highlight a desire amongst members to be better informed about the work of Academic Board. It is proposed that Council is provided with a roundup of the academic issues considered by Academic Board and its related committees; this will be scheduled for the March

meeting of Council when business is lighter than at other times of the year. The Principal will continue to highlight significant academic issues in his regular report to Council.

5. The project board has recommended that the present governance review is extended to cover the arrangements for Academic Board; Academic Board has agreed to this proposal.

Further issues
There are additional areas that the project board believe require further consultation before detailed proposals can be brought to Council. It is expected that this will be at Council's next meeting.

6. Achieving the skills mix and diversity required for an effective Council
- some governing bodies are being more reflective than are we when considering what a university needs, and will need, from its governance function.

7. The size of Council
- survey replies and the benchmarking exercise indicate that Royal Holloway is operating with a Council that is at the larger end of the spectrum and that can be too large for full discussion of issues to be achievable.

8. The volume of business
- Council meets less often than many comparable governing bodies, and survey replies reveal that many members feel meetings are sometimes overly full of business or that discussions have to be curtailed to avoid late running
- improving the quality of the papers sent to Council, and changing the way in which committee minutes and requests for the unstarring of items are handled, should help the flow of business
- the project board will ensure that Council's ability to handle the volume of business in the current number of meetings is reviewed again in a year's time, once these changes have taken effect
- at the same time, there will be a review of the timing and relative spacing, and the membership, of key Council committees and full Council committees, to facilitate a more effective governance function.

Recommendations
Council is asked to note the benchmarking report and the results of the effectiveness survey.

Council is invited to approve the changes to the operation of Secretariat and to meeting procedures outlined in point 2 above.

Council is asked to minute that an annual roundup of issues discussed by Academic Board and its related committees is requested for the March meeting of Council.

Council is asked to approve the extension of the current governance review project to encompass a review of the governance arrangements in operation for Academic Board.

Council is asked to approve the publication of the benchmarking report and the effectiveness survey on the College website.

Council is asked to approve sharing the benchmarking report with the universities that supplied information in its preparation.

Council is asked to note that the project board will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of our governance arrangements, and will bring further recommendations to Council at future meetings.

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