

ASA Submission – “Fit for Purpose”

The ASA Executive Committee would like to take the opportunity to express some of our concerns and the concerns of our members regarding the *Fit for Purpose* report on the university’s governance and management structure. The ASA welcomes the timely decision of the Council to initiate a review of the Governance and Management of the University. We have consulted our members on the key recommendations in the report through a questionnaire. The ASA submission is based on the results of the questionnaire returned by our members, details of which can be found in the Appendix. We wish to start with some comments on the overall philosophy of the proposal in the Report, then more detailed discussions on the proposals as it affects Council, Senate, Deans and Heads of Departments. We will also make some general comments on the need for checks and balances in the system, and offer some comments on a grievance procedure for staff.

I. Management Philosophy

It is proposed in the report that all the “managers”: Deputy VC, PVCs, Deans and Heads of Departments be appointed. This is clearly an executive-led management structure, which has been demonstrated to be successful in business organizations and in the disciplined/armed forces, where the responsibility and accountability of the “managers” can be clearly identified. However, this type of management structure does not provide sufficient freedom nor encouragement for staff to venture into new and uncertain situations. This freedom, better known as academic freedom, is of paramount importance to academics in their efforts to develop innovative research. An executive-led management structure is therefore not necessarily the best approach to managing the activities of an academic institution. It is also necessary to make a distinction between business concerns and academic institutions. While the outcomes of decisions for a business organization can be realized and assessed within a short period of time, the consequences of management decisions in higher education are more difficult to assess and require a much longer period of time before useful feedback becomes available.

The governance structure in an academic institution must encourage participation and criticism at all levels, so that the views of all stakeholders can be taken on board. Wrong decisions are very difficult to rectify, and remedial actions are expensive and can only be made several years after the problems and incorrect decisions have been identified. Unfortunately, the proposed management structure places two layers of appointed middle management, the appointed Deans and the appointed Heads of Departments, between the Vice-Chancellor and frontline staff. This will therefore make it difficult to obtain feedback on how well policies are being implemented by these two layers of middle management.

A further drawback of the proposed management structure is that power is concentrated in the hands of a few people, and the decision making process will no longer be transparent. Under such a system, it will be difficult to foster staff loyalty and trust, and it will not encourage active staff participation. As no checks and balances are proposed in the report, the future direction of the University will depend solely on those who are appointed to manage it. This may lead to a dangerous autocratic management structure and will place the future of the University on a very slippery slope.

II. Council

It is proposed in the report that Council members be appointed on the understanding that they will act as “trustees”, rather than as representatives of any group. While the proposal is conceptually attractive, appointing Council members by the Chancellor, the Council and the Court, as suggested in the Report, goes against the spirit of the proposal, since appointed Council members are more likely to sympathize with the interests of the Group that appointed them. Further, if these Groups are allowed to appoint Council Members, it follows that other Groups, such as the Staff Associations and Student Union, should also be allowed to appoint their representatives.

From the results of the questionnaire, our members see monitoring the performance of the management of the University as the major role of the Council. Staff see the long term strategic development of the University as being the next major role of the Council. Very low priority was placed on involving the Council in the day-to-day operations of the University, such as managing the campus’s physical environment, and ensuring effective health and safety systems.

The proposal put forward in the *Fit for Purpose* document is for a reduction in the membership of Council, from 54 to 21. Our view is that the proportion of the relevant stakeholders in the Council is more important than the actual number. From the results of the questionnaire, there is a clear preference for Council to be appointed by the Court. This result may be distorted, however, as some members may not be aware of the fact that the majority of the Court is made up by Council and Senate members. Nonetheless, it is clear from the survey that the wish is for Council members to be as independent as possible. From the results of the questionnaire, there is a clear preference for a higher percentage of university members to lay members than is suggested in the report; the majority of members (57.81%) would prefer the proportion of university members on the Council to be at least 45%. This can be interpreted as a need to give an adequate voice to university members, as opposed to members appointed from outside the university community. The importance that staff place on ASA representation on the Council is also clearly shown by the very high score on the questionnaire.

III. Senate

In light of the proposed reduction in the numbers of members of Senate, careful consideration needs to be given to ensure that major parties within the university who are directly concerned with teaching and research matters are well represented, in line with the report’s wish that the Senate “*should continually strive to have the membership reflect the overall diverse fabric of the University*” and “*should also strive to be broadly inclusive of large constituent groups that are affected by Senate policies*” (Appendix C, quotation 62). It is therefore essential that Faculties, Departments and Independent Centres should be adequately represented on Senate. Otherwise, the Senate could find itself making policy decisions without full participation of those who have the necessary experience to ensure the policies are properly formulated and implemented.

As Senate is responsible for the academic development in the University, it is important to maintain a high percentage of elected members. Representatives from Heads of Teaching Departments, chair professors, non-professorial teachers and Independent Centres should

also be included. However, the results of our questionnaire suggest that priority is not high for officials such as the Librarian and the Director of HKU-SPACE to be Senate members. The rating for the Director of HKU-SPACE is the lowest amongst the officials suggested in the present report, which may indicate that staff believe that the Director of HKU-SPACE has very little input into the teaching and research decisions of the University.

IV. Deans

The report on *Fit for Purpose* suggests that all Deans should in future be appointed rather than elected, that they should be full-time administrators, and that they should have the power to appoint Heads of Department in the Faculty. Our main concern here is the concentration of power in the hands of a few appointed staff, and that this concentration of power further insulates the Vice-Chancellor from frontline teachers. The views of our members on the proposed method of appointing Deans are clear: a majority of them opted for elected Deans. In interpreting this result it is important, however, to delve a little deeper into the reasons why members made this choice. The main advantage of elected Deans is that Faculty members can have the flexibility of not supporting a Dean whom they think is not acting in their best interest nor in the best interest of the Faculty. Staff may be concerned that this flexibility will be lost, and it is, therefore, important that this concern of staff should be addressed. Proper checks and balances in the management structure will be an essential step forward in assuring staff.

From the results of the questionnaire, liaising with other Faculties is the most important single task for the Deans, scoring an amazing 95.31%. Monitoring the performance of Heads, fund-raising in the community and co-ordinating research activities are the next tasks in order of importance.

V. Heads of Teaching Departments

Staff do not seem to be in favour of Deans appointing Heads of Departments; the support for Heads of Teaching Departments being appointed by the Dean is very low, scoring only 14.84%; this reflects the desire of members to have some input into the management of their Department's research and teaching activities. The scores for "Appointed by VC upon nomination by Department" and "Elected by Department" are close, with the final choice depending very much on whether the Dean is appointed or elected.

VI. Checks and Balances

Checks and balances are important in any management systems, and it is very surprising that nothing has been mentioned in the report on this most important topic. While the ASA has made some suggestions for checks and balances in the questionnaire, this issue will need to be re-visited after the management structure is settled.

The VC's Advisory Group proposed in the report is designed more as a management body, rather than a check and balance mechanism. We feel that by suitably expanding the membership of this group, not only the decisions made by this Group can be made more transparent, but also that this Group will be in a better position to provide some form of

checks and balances. The results of the questionnaire suggest that support for representatives of staff and ASA joining this Group is high.

A large majority of members (93.75%) would like the VC to present an annual report to Council and staff. As the VC has already started to strengthen communications between the University and staff, this result may well be a reflection of the VC's efforts up to now.

At the Faculty level, a Dean's Advisory Group or, as suggested by some members, a Faculty Executive Committee should be set up. This should consist of Heads of Departments, representatives from chair professors and non-professorial teachers, with about half of Group being elected. Also, a great majority of members would like the Dean to present an annual report to both the VC and the Faculty with a score of 89.06% and 92.97% respectively. Members would also like to appraise the performance of Deans and Heads annually.

VII. Grievances

From the results of the questionnaire, it is clear that the majority of staff would like to see a fair and independent grievance procedure. An ad-hoc group consisting of members from outside the Faculty in which the complaint is made is one way of avoiding, as far as possible, any conflict of interest that may arise. However, details of such a grievance procedure would still need to be worked out.

ASA
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