Review of the Effectiveness of Council - May 2012

1. Background

The governance of the University is the system responsible for its direction and control, and by which it is accountable to its stakeholders. The Council of the University is its primary governing body, through its powers designated in the University’s Charter and Statutes.

The Committee of University Chairs (CUC) issued a new Guide for Members of Higher Education Governing Bodies in the UK in March 2009, which the University, in common with other higher education institutions, is encouraged to adopt. The Guide incorporates the Governance Code of Practice, which requires the governing body to keep its effectiveness under regular review and to undertake a formal and rigorous evaluation of its own effectiveness not less than every five years. The last major review of the University’s Council was completed in 2007.

The CUC Guide encourages universities to involve persons independent of the institution in the review. The Review of Council in 2012 was undertaken by Dr David Fletcher, a higher education consultant specialising in this field, overseen by a Steering Group. The Steering Group comprised three lay (external) members of Council (one of whom chaired the Steering Group), a Senate Member of Council, the University Registrar and Secretary, advised by Dr Fletcher. Dr Fletcher has acted as a consultant to a number of universities/higher education institutions.

2. Scope of the Review

The scope of the review was to assess the operation of the Council against a number of criteria which characterise a high performing governing body. It drew on Dr Fletcher’s knowledge and experience of best practice in the sector to identify areas where the Council could improve its performance and practice; and to give assurance to Council and other stakeholders that it is fulfilling its role optimally and contributing fully to the success of the institution.

3. Process

Dr Fletcher undertook a desk-based review of all key documentation as part of the first phase of the governance review. This included the last Effectiveness Review completed in 2007; Council’s Statement of Primary Responsibilities; the roles and responsibilities of Council members; the Statement of Council Delegations; the systems for risk management and monitoring institutional performance; the skills and experience of members of Council.
Members of Council were invited to complete an electronic survey compiled by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, based on the results of their project with CUC on developing a framework for understanding governing body effectiveness. The answers to the survey questions helped inform the questions for a series of structured individual and small group interviews between Dr Fletcher and members of the Council and Executive. The interviews explored the purpose and role of the Council and its overall effectiveness.

Dr Fletcher attended two meetings of Council, one as an observer and one to present his final report. He also discussed the review at a working dinner of Council.

The Steering Group met with Dr Fletcher on two occasions to discuss his initial findings and draft report, and welcomed the draft report.

4. Findings

From the review of governance documentation Dr Fletcher concluded that the University had in place a comprehensive framework and structure of governance which conformed to sector best practice. Some of his findings are summarised below.

Membership

The size of Council conformed to CUC guidelines in the Code of Governance. There was a good spread of skills and experience in the lay membership with particular strengths in education, law, corporate finance and services, accountancy and general business. Council might benefit from strengthening professional areas such as property and estates, Human Resources, ICT, health and the voluntary sector.

Diversity continued to be a challenge for Council in terms of the age, ethnicity and gender. It was recommended that Nominations Committee consider its advertising strategy and consider the use of executive search to broaden the pool of candidates.

Council should also consider the number of non-lay members on Council to avoid issues of quoracy at meetings.

Council was perceived as being exceptionally well chaired. Members had a great respect for and confidence in the Chair.
Briefings and the Provision of Information

The twelve month process to approve the University’s Strategic Plan was extremely comprehensive. Council was fully involved in the process and made a strong input into the development of the strategy. During this period, discussions on the strategic plan and key performance indicators had replaced regular briefings on strategic topics. It was recommended that these were re-introduced to help Council understand and address future challenges.

Performance review and risk management were seen as being comprehensively carried out; the approach to Key Performance Indicators was noted as sector leading.

A number of lay members felt that they knew less about the academic business of the University; Dr Fletcher commented that the University was by no means unique in this respect. He recommended a structured programme of visits to faculties, including presentations from the Deans, to help strengthen academic assurance. He also recommended that the Chair of Council encourage staff members to increase their contribution to discussions at Council meetings.

Members of Council understood the role of its sub-committees where much of the detailed work was carried out. Finance and Estates Committee was a key committee where detailed monitoring of the University’s financial position was undertaken. There was, however, scope to improve the presentation of financial information to Council through a report, at each meeting, from the Chief Finance Officer.

Members had felt there was scope to improve the communication of Council’s decisions within the University and consideration should be given to what information should be made publicly available on the web.

5. Recommendations

Council’s views were sought on all of Dr Fletcher’s recommendations, which were designed to improve the operation and effectiveness of Council. Council’s comments helped to inform the development of an action plan, which Council approved at its meeting on 3 July 2012, the implementation of which will be monitored by Council during 2012/13.

University Registrar and Secretary
Secretary to Council