

Academic Registry

GUIDANCE ON COMMITTEE SERVICING

Introduction to the Clerking Role

Good clerking is about more than just turning up and taking the Minutes. As Clerk, there is much which can be done to streamline the committee process and ensure that meetings are productive. The duties of a Clerk include:

Management of the Committee

- Understanding the role and remit of the Committee, and the roles of Members
- Arranging briefing meetings with the Convenor
- Contributing on matters of fact or in situations where issues need to be considered
- Advising on effective methods of procedure
- Ensuring that Actions are taken forward and reporting back
- Drafting papers on behalf of the Committee
- Co-ordinating and communicating information timeously for consideration of the Committee
- Disseminating information amongst the wider University community
- Acting as liaison point for internal and external bodies
- Taking action on routine matters between meetings

Administration of the Committee Meetings

- Collecting Topics
- Preparing Agenda
- Recording Absences
- Taking Minutes
- Recording Actions

1. The Approach to Committee Servicing

1.1 The approach to committee servicing.

These notes provide a comprehensive guide on aspects a committee clerk should consider when organising their work. The notes are written with the needs of a new committee clerk in mind. Do remember that different committees require different approaches. Deciding on the level of input will require judgement based on the nature and importance of the committee's role within the University and the resource (primarily your time) available for this work. Consider your approach in conjunction with the Convenor and your line-manager. A low level of service is not synonymous with a poor level of service but rather a more limited range of tasks to be undertaken.

1.2 House style.

The University does not have a standard house-style for its committee papers. Different committees have different functions and may require differing styles of agenda, briefing notes, action notes, minutes and onward reports. It should be noted that references to people should not refer to 'he' or 'she' but should be non-sexist in style. **A number of templates will be developed to ensure some overall consistency in format.**

1.3 Starting out.

When you start to work with a committee you should get to know how that committee works and to understand from your Convenor what is expected for the future. In particular:

- get to know and understand the remit of the committee, the purpose for which it was established and the limits of its authority
- get to know your Convenor and what his/her approach is to the committee.
- understand what is the decision-making role of the committee – if any – and how it relates to officers who have executive or managerial authority in the area concerned
- there are some basic routines that apply to all our committee work. These are set out below.

2. **Membership and Circulation Lists**

You need to keep three sorts of lists up to date:

2.1 **The constitution of the committee.**

This indicates the basis for membership. Examples include "Faculty representative for a three-year term of office", "The Secretary or his Deputy, "elected representatives of the Senate". It should make quite clear whether an individual who comes to meetings is a member or in attendance.

2.2 **The membership/in attendance list for the current year.**

Except where membership is *ex officio*, there should be an agreed term of office even if renewable. (The *ex officio* member attends by virtue of the office they hold rather than in an individual capacity. If Professor X is Dean and is a member *ex officio* of a committee, when s/he resigns, s/he will be replaced on the committee by the new Dean. Some committees may be made up largely of *ex officio* members.)

2.3 **The circulation list.**

This should not just be an ephemeral set of sticky labels. It will need to be a document that describes the basis of circulation as well as listing the recipients. It may need to include a list of people who get papers for information. (This latter group needs to be rigorously reviewed from time to time and might be pruned to give some only agenda and minutes with facility to ask for papers.) When preparing this list, get the correct forms of address and clarify whether any papers or envelopes need routinely to be marked "confidential". It is good practice to maintain an email distribution list as well in case there are urgent matters to be communicated. Pick a list title that makes sense to the recipient.

2.4 **Roles**

You will need to understand the role of members. There are various roles, including the following examples. Are they active participants in action to be taken? Are they experienced members of the University community chosen to provide their expertise in the policy-making discussions of a committee? Do they have to report back to any constituents or consult with them beforehand? You will need to understand your role as well, and that of the Convener.

- to what extent are you simply scribe and collector of papers from others?
- to what extent are you expected to be expert in the issues considered by the committee, taking forward action by drafting papers for the committee, adjudicating on issues relating to the committee and taking action on routine matters between meetings?
- do you and the Convener share such an executive role?
- how do your responsibilities relate to those of officers of the University whose duties overlap with those of the committee?

3. **The Role of the Chair**

3.1 He or she should be well informed and impartial, and should also ensure that the meeting starts on time, that the agenda is followed (or that deviations from it are agreed by members), and that the meeting finishes on time, especially where a finishing time has been specified.

3.2 The role of the Chair also includes the following:

- facilitating discussion
- ensuring everyone has a say where appropriate (i.e. that no one is excluded or marginalised)
- steering the committee towards a decision
- providing background detail
- keeping the peace
- working for consensus
- ensuring decisions are reached
- ensuring responsibility for action is allocated appropriately and recorded

4. Agendas

4.1 Collecting topics.

Keep a pending file of items to be included on future agendas, check the agenda for the same meeting last year and the minutes plus action points from the previous meeting. For some committees it will be appropriate to send a reminder with deadlines to members – or to those committee secretaries who routinely prepare reports for your committee – telling them that you are assembling the agenda and want their input.

4.2 Format.

Think about the format of the agenda. Structure it to help the committee concentrate on the most significant matters. For example, the agenda might fall into three parts: minutes and matters arising; items for discussion; items for formal approval or information. Make sure that any decision-making section is ordered logically. Don't get bogged down with too many "matters arising from the minutes" – if something is significant, make it a substantive agenda item in its own right. Ask the Convener if s/he wants a "Convener's Business" item.

4.3 Confidentiality.

It is easy to be over-conservative in labelling items as confidential. There are probably three levels of confidentiality. The most confidential is "private". The expectation here is that the recipient should not share the information with anyone else. It is unlikely that committee papers will be labelled private. Next is "strictly confidential". If committee papers are labelled in this way, the expectation is that the recipient will only share the information with those known to have received it. Finally comes "confidential", where the individual might well be expected to use their discretion about who to discuss the matter with, but the matter is definitely not expected to become public property.

Some committees have a category of reserved business. This is used for items that are to be considered by staff members and not student members of a committee because they relate to individual members of the University. Note that "reserved" is not synonymous with "confidential". Student members should be expected to deal perfectly well with confidential items. For example, names of nominees for Honorary Degrees go to Senate as a confidential paper, but on the unreserved section of the agenda. Names of students lodging academic appeals go to Senate as confidential papers on the reserved section.

4.4 Consultation.

Decide who you need to discuss the draft agenda with and how. Do you need to meet to discuss it or can you manage by correspondence/email? Are there particular individuals who you should consult: the Convener, your line manager, officers who also work on the business in this area? These discussions allow you to structure the agenda, solicit additional agenda items, and reject or postpone inappropriate items. They may substitute for a pre-meeting briefing session.

Leave time to get additional papers that may be suggested in these discussions. However you manage this consultation process, you need to be clear who decides what goes on agendas and whether papers proffered to you can be circulated. Can you decide, or must you consult with your Convener? Sometimes you can suggest an alternative way of dealing with a proposed item.

5 Schedules

5.1 Dates of meetings.

Try to plan in advance. Committees with an annual cycle need to be scheduled well in advance. The schedule for Court, Senate and its sub-committees is developed in the summer term of the previous academic year. Review any fixed schedule from time to time: don't arrange to meet more often than is necessary. If meetings are arranged on an *ad hoc* basis, ensure that you reach a decision at the end of the meeting about the next one: either bring diaries and fix a date or agree the basis for scheduling the next date. Do you need a fixed finishing time – it can help the meeting to run more smoothly and ensure that all business is dealt with?

5.2 **Room bookings.**

Book rooms and tea/coffee/water/biscuits as appropriate. Be sure you have arranged for the furniture to be laid out correctly, with enough chairs for members and those in attendance. Are any special facilities needed for particular items at a meeting, e.g. overhead projector or flip charts?

5.3 **Preparation time.**

Create for yourself a schedule for agenda drafting, soliciting/preparing papers, circulation, briefing and report drafting. Set clear deadlines for when paper-writers need to get them to you and leave yourself enough time to chase them.

5.4 **Circulation dates.**

How far in advance are papers circulated? Seven calendar days is a good objective. You need to remember that some members will not be able to look at papers during normal office hours. You might want to establish a schedule which is understood by all members, e.g. agenda and available papers sent round seven days before, second circulation three days before, all other papers tabled.

5.5 **Circulations between meetings.**

Are there any routines for circulating material for information between meetings? Make sure the recipients know why it has been sent to them and use email wherever practicable.

5.6 **Use of Web.**

It is anticipated that web sites will be used for posting information on committees and for mounting papers. If your committee is planning to use web-mounted documents, be quite clear why this is being done. Is it as a substitute for the circulation of paper or a supplement that gives members an electronic archive? It is certainly more cost-effective across the institution as a whole, and ecologically less unsound, to photocopy a large batch of papers in one location than to ask thirty committee members to laser-print individual sets. In any case, for a large committee not all members would need or want all the papers. Creating a web-based archive accessible to committee members is certainly a useful service, but it is also an additional task, which will include managing controls over access.

5.7 **Use of e-mail.**

If you plan to use email to circulate papers, ask yourself why you are doing this. Is it just because things are running late? Do check that all users can read your attachments. Do they use the same version of software as you? Try not to attach too many separate files to one email. It is irritating to the recipient who has to open and print each one individually. If in doubt, ask the intended recipients.

5.8 **Archiving**

Ensure that copies of all papers are sent to the University archive.

6. **The Papers**

6.1 **Some pointers.**

The basics are agenda, minutes (unless previously circulated), papers on specific issues. Think about ways of making the business absolutely clear to members. Would it help to do a paper summarising action taken since the previous meeting? Particularly for the more formal committees, would it help to have cover sheets for papers?

6.2 **Essentials.**

Make sure that papers show author, date, whether for action information, whether confidential, what action is required and who will present them.

6.3 Files.

Keep a separate file set for central file and maybe a spare set for yourself.

7. Briefings

7.1 Briefing meetings.

A face-to-face meeting with the Convener can be very valuable, especially if there has been little discussion at agenda-setting stage. It is essential if the meeting is formal and there is a long, wide-ranging agenda. Briefing meetings may be for Convener and clerk only or, if the meeting is formal and complex, include the senior officers who will be participating in the meeting. If the Convener is an external lay person, bear in mind that s/he is unlikely to have a detailed knowledge of the University and its machinery.

7.2 Convener's notes.

Should the briefing meeting be supplemented by written Convener's notes? These are useful for formal meetings. Conveners probably do their own annotation of papers for the less formal meetings. Convener's notes can take a variety of forms. You can provide your Convener with a specially annotated agenda (colour or shaded text) flagging up what is to be done with each item. You can provide a more extensive set of separate notes, possibly with a separate sheet for each section or item of the agenda. These notes can be longer for the inexperienced Convener or the Convener who can't make time to be briefed in any other way. However, there are two key points for any notes: who is to speak to the agenda item and what the committee is being asked to do with it.

8. At the Meeting

8.1 Preparation.

Arrive early to check seating etc. Take with you essential items such as notebook, pens, files, briefing notes, papers for tabling and reference documents. Many clerks use a bound hardback notebook for their work: it is harder to lose one of these than notes taken on separate sheets of paper. For some committees, for example ones with external members, you will want to take a spare set of committee papers for the person who forgot/didn't receive them. But don't overdo the multiple copying. Looking back at the previous minutes should give an indication of what else may be required. For example:

- papers from the previous meeting
- an attendance book or signing list
- background correspondence
- rules and regulations
- a copy of the committee remit or terms of reference and membership
- a minute book or copy of the minutes for signing/approval

8.2 Who is there?

Agree with the Convener a way of identifying those present. If members do not know each other, open the meeting with a quick round of self-introduction. If the meeting is large, ask speakers to identify themselves. Maybe pass round an attendance book or sheet for writing (not signing) names. If you are new to a well-established committee, maybe ask someone to do you a map of who is sitting where. Do the same yourself for a new Convener. A helpful device can be to list the committee membership on the agenda, if this can be done in a compact and unobtrusive manner.

8.3 What to record?

Note in particular conclusions, action points and who is to take action. Prompt your Convener to sum up discussion if matters are unclear. If in doubt, if lost over jargon or acronyms, if important matters on agenda or papers are missed out – speak up. Think about what really matters and make sure you record any decisions. Identifying the decisions reached can sometimes be difficult. Be alert to comments, especially from the Convener, which are accepted/agreed by the committee. A good Convener will help

make decisions clear, but sometimes things can be glossed over. Don't be afraid to consult the Convener afterwards if you are unsure of the decision reached.

8.4 **How to record it.**

Note taking is a personal thing. The more you know about a topic, the shorter your notes can be. Where you are less clear, you may find yourself taking extensive notes, but finding afterwards that you only need to draw on a fraction of them. It is rare to have to record exactly what was said by particular speakers. However, if they have raised a useful drafting point, ask them to repeat it. If they have spoken from a pre-written paper that was not circulated to members, ask them afterwards if you can have a copy.

9. **Action Points**

9.1 **Format of action lists.**

Very shortly after the meeting, draw up a list of actions to be taken, by whom and by when. Communicate these to those concerned within 48 hours if you can. This can be done by memos/emails to individuals; by circulating an action-list to all who were at the meeting; or by building them into the minutes. The last of these requires you to circulate the minutes very promptly indeed.

9.2 **Why have action lists?**

You may be quite clear what action is required. However, members and those who were not at the meeting may be less sure, may need correction, or may need prompting.

10. **Reports**

10.1 Many committees report onwards to senior committees. Check who to report to, deadlines for doing so and the agreed format for that report.

10.2 When writing reports, think carefully about who is going to read them. How will they understand the business? How much background briefing will they need in the report? Try to avoid having too many appendices to which cross-reference is made. Keep each item in the report as brief as is consistent with the reader gaining the necessary understanding of the subject matter.

10.3 Minimise the duplication of work for reports and minutes. Reports can be written before the minutes and then translated across the minutes. It may be possible in some instances for minutes to act as both as report and minute.

10.4 There will be some items which are fine for the minutes but not needed for the reports. Examples include lists of those present and points of view expressed at the meeting.

11. **Minutes**

11.1 Bear in mind that the style of the minute may vary from committee to committee, however one of the University's styles should be used as appropriate.

11.2 Prepare a draft, send to your Convener for amendments/additions, and circulate as soon as possible.

11.3 Think about the format. Use the report for the minute where possible. Some minutes will simply require a record of the decision. (Example "After [extensive] discussion, it was agreed that ..."). Some minutes will require a summary of issues raised in discussion rather than a summary of the discussion itself. (Example "In discussion, the following points were raised:..."). Some issues will require a full record of reasons for a decision. (Examples include discussion on budgetary matters, matters requiring consensus building, issues for tribunals.)

11.4 The minutes of a working party are likely to be very succinct, using simple language. For a working party, the report will be the major written outcome. The minutes of something like the University Court are likely to be more extensive, with the reasons for decisions or details of discussions recorded as necessary. Even then, comments are rarely assigned to individuals.

11.5 Standard items include:

- Name of committee
- Minutes of the meeting held on [date]
- List of those present, indicating if individuals attend as alternates/representatives
- List of those in attendance - and if a person attended only for a specific item, make this clear
- List of apologies: those who have told you they were unable to attend.

11.6 Other good practice ideas include:

- Standard numbering system
- Consistency and simplicity in headings and hierarchy within them
- Clarity in action points
- Having a header or footer on each page showing the name of the committee and date of meeting

11.7 Do minutes need to be indexed? Court and Senate are at present.

These Guidelines are based upon those written by Jean Grier, University of Edinburgh.

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