

Background

In 2018 an Effectiveness Review was undertaken of both the Court and Senate at Heriot-Watt. The review was conducted in accordance with the Scottish Code of Good Higher Education Governance requirement that an externally facilitated review of the governing body and the body responsible for academic governance be conducted at least once every five years. The review assessed the current and future fitness of our governance, including matters of compliance, and the relationships in a changing environment between the University's key internal stakeholders and with external stakeholders. The review was undertaken by the Good Governance Institute and involved a wide variety of stakeholder discussions and documentary review, as well as observation of the operations of a wide variety of our key committees in addition to the Court and Senate.

Key outcomes

The review found that the University is fully compliant with the Scottish Code for Good Higher Education Governance 2017 and the UK-wide Higher Education Code of Governance produced by the Committee of University Chairs.

The review team was also “satisfied that the Senate provides Court with an effective level of assurance across the broad spectrum of academic governance matters.”

The review found that “The main business of the Court is executed effectively within delegated responsibilities and structures – key relationships (Chair, Principal, University Secretary and Court Members) are respectful, positive and support a collective concept of the importance of all Members of Court as equals ...” It was also found that “significant progress has been made since 2016 in growing core governance of the University...”, and that “More attention has been paid to date on core processes and procedures – less on growing Court capacity, culture and contribution.” The latter were areas of focus of review recommendations.

The report observed that the University was clearly sighted on meeting its corporate social responsibilities and to realise its long-term commitment to be a truly international University, while more should be achieved to translate this into the University's reporting processes and into shaping our institutional governance.

The review found that the University has achieved much in terms of collective intent with partners in areas of impact, and encouraged the University to do more to embed this within the University culture, ensuring that it becomes a genuine hallmark of our institution.

Based on key findings, areas highlighted for the University to focus on included: further assessment of the impact and effectiveness of the Court to provide the basis for increasing maturity of governance and integrated working/shared understanding (with the Senate and the University Executive); recognition of the need for increased resilience and sustainability in the current climate; and work to increase the efficiency and the effectiveness of our decision-making processes. The review recognised the complexity of the University's international make up and our aims and achievements in joining up all parts of our governance.

A range of recommendations were included in the report which were designed to enhance the effectiveness of both the Court and the Senate, such as enhancing communications and engagement between bodies, development opportunities for members, succession planning for enhanced capacity and diversity, and expanding time within annual schedules for strategic level discussions. These are viewed as especially important as the University embarks on delivery of Strategy 2025.

Things we are doing as a result

The timing of the review coincided with early phase work within the University to develop a new strategic plan: Strategy 2025, with the effect that some outcomes of the review were able to be answered in the context of the strategy development process which directly involved many internal and external stakeholders, among them members of the Court and the Senate. Through this process the University's mission, vision and values were also developed.

Through a variety of consultations with key bodies which include the Court and the Senate an action plan has been developed for implementation in 2018/19 added to which there are other self-identified enhancements. Examples of future new developments include:

- creating more opportunities for top group discussions aligned to Strategy 2025, including at least one combined meeting of the Court and the Senate each year;
- work by the Court and the Senate to implement our agreed values-led approach across the University and in our decision making;
- taking a fresh look at the distinctive qualities and role of the Heriot-Watt Senator;
- considering appropriate ways to infuse the skills and experience of our independent lay members of the Court in strategic areas of the University's work; and
- the introduction of a governor-executive member pairing scheme in 2018/19, to help to promote engagement and to facilitate sharing of knowledge, skills and ideas.