

## REVIEW OF THE COURT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

### Introduction

1. A Working Group consisting of representatives from the University's Council, Court, Senate, Students' Union, Communications and Governance offices was established on behalf of Council, the University's governing body, to undertake a review of Court and its membership. The Group considered how Court can support the University's strategic objectives and whether we can do more to support Court members to champion and act as ambassadors for the University. The Group made a range of recommendations, including that Court members should be consulted on the format and role of Court and on any expectations and contributions from both Court members and the University that would define and underpin the relationship of the University with its Court.
2. Following the Working Group's recommendations, an online questionnaire was circulated to 202 members of Court in the autumn term 2014-15. 69 responses were received, representing about 34% of Court members who had been contacted for their views. The majority of respondents had been members of Court for two to five years (39.1%), followed closely by 37.7% who had been members of Court for five years or more. Newer members of Court also responded to the questionnaire (23.2%), but felt constrained at times to offer detailed feedback as they had not yet been able to take part in the meetings or had only very limited involvement with the University so far.
3. More than two-thirds of respondents were male (68.1%), reflecting the larger proportion of male members on the Court.
4. 23.6% of respondents indicated that their main motivation for being a member of Court was to learn more about the University; 22.6% said that they wanted to volunteer their skills and expertise to promote the University and its strategic objectives, and 17.9% valued the opportunity to comment on the University's affairs.

### Summary of Findings

#### *Format of the event*

5. More than half of respondents (55.1%) had attended the Annual meeting of Court on 13 June 2014; of these 38 respondents, 37 attended both the Annual Review meeting and the Vice-Chancellor's summer reception.
6. Although 37 respondents attended, 47 provided comment on the effectiveness of the event. Of these 76.5% rated the event as 'effective, 'largely effective' (40%) or 'very effective' (23%). Fewer than 1% (3 respondents) felt that the combined event was not effective, with the role of Court and the Annual Review becoming confusing.
7. Opinions were divided, however, on whether the University should make changes to the formal meeting part of Court. A small majority of 50.8% of respondents indicated that changes should be made, in particular by providing more opportunity for discussion and debate, including of strategic issues and objectives (40.3%), and by offering a greater focus on students and their experience (33.9%). There was a wide range of views expressed in the free text comments, some suggesting that adjustments to the format or tone of the meeting to enable more input and engagement from Court would be welcomed.

### *Membership of Court*

8. More than 8 out of 10 respondents (82.1%) agreed that the membership of Court should represent a distinguished group, encompassing a range of stakeholders willing to promote the strategic objectives of the University. However, respondents also commented that it was important to retain a broad forum of members, representing a wide cross-section of the community and encouraging the involvement of a wider community in the University's affairs, including as a means of opening the door to any contributions in an unexpected way.
9. An analysis of the free text comments suggests a very few were in favour of cutting the number of members of Court. There was more support for making better use of the existing membership, and a suggestion for a 'working members' subset of Court appropriately diverse and qualified, who could support the University in targeted ways and/or could work as ambassadors for the University.
10. In general, there was strong support for a clearer articulation of the basis for Court membership and the University's expectations of Court members. A number of respondents commented that the University had not previously provided the support, information and specific encouragement of Court members to promote the University in any tangible ways and/or to assist with the delivery of the University's strategic objectives throughout the year. Nearly all respondents (97%) indicated that they would find it useful if there was a clear description of the role and value of Court and its members.

### *The Role of Court*

11. A revised Statement on the Role of Court was discussed and the following agreed, subject to periodic revision and updating:
12. *The University Court is a stakeholder group which encourages people in the local and wider region to take an active interest in and promote the University and to comment on its affairs. Members of Court are invited to an annual meeting which is part of a broader annual celebration of the University and its achievements and which allows Court members to meet and network with each other, staff of the University and its friends.*

*The meeting of Court is chaired by the Chancellor or her nominee and provides an opportunity for Court members to meet with senior officers of the University. The meeting includes reports from the Vice-Chancellor and the Director of Finance, followed by the opportunity for Court members to ask questions.*

*Its membership comprises the Chancellor, senior members of the University and the Students' Union, current and previous external members of Council. In addition, members of the community are appointed to Court by Council on an individual basis. This category of membership includes:*

- *Deputy Lieutenants of Essex*
- *Members Of Parliament*
- *Principals/ Headteachers*
- *Previous external members of Council*
- *Individual members*
- *Those with whom the University has business links*
- *Previous officers of the Students' Union*
- *Alumni of the University*
- *Others ambassadors or stakeholders*

*Memberships are reviewed every three years, and Court members are expected to attend two annual meetings in each three-year term.*

*The role of Court members is to take an active interest in the life of the University and to champion and act as ambassadors for the University. Those active in business, the public sector or in the charities sector are asked to play a role in supporting students or in otherwise promoting links with business and the community. In order to enable Court members to undertake these roles effectively, the University will ensure members are kept well informed regarding the University's activities and strategic priorities, through the annual meeting, bespoke events and through other media. The University will work with members with business and other connections to realise potential mutual benefits involving students and academic staff.*

13. Respondents to the survey identified a range of contributions they had made to the University, including promoting and raising awareness about the University; however, it seemed that this was not always as a result of their membership of Court but rather through other links with the University, such as being a member of a University committee; involvement with the University's Employability and Careers Centre or academic departments; and through procurement.

#### *Further suggestions*

14. There were a range of other suggestions made by respondents for the future format and role of Court which have informed our recommendations and which we will consider further on an incremental basis, including:
  - a) At the meeting
    - Increasing the contribution and engagement of Court members at the annual meeting
    - Providing a detailed briefing on the achievements of the University, alongside any opportunities and challenges
    - Providing an exposition by one or two Faculties each year on their achievements, opportunities and ambitions
    - Reporting on how the Chancellor has represented the University
    - Ensuring greater representation of Professional Services staff at Court meetings
    - Making the VC's report available to members of Court about a week before the meeting
  - b) Utilising feedback
    - Setting up a mechanism for passing feedback from Court to Council and Senate and their sub-committees as appropriate;
    - Promoting an online discussion
  - c) Engaging members of Court and the wider community
    - More could be done to engage with the community e.g. through an annual event in order to encourage greater involvement and interest in the University among local people

- Setting up a network of ex-members of University staff (or Court members) who would be willing to volunteer their knowledge, skills and expertise, including by mentoring students

d) Membership

- A wide and diverse membership was seen as best supporting the University
- Members of Court could be expected to attend the meeting and contribute something to the life of the University

## Recommendations

- i. To maintain a broad membership of Court with the expectation that at least two annual meetings of Court be attended during each three-year term of appointment
- ii. To increase the diversity of the membership of Court, including by monitoring the equality and diversity of Court members and broadening the membership to include a greater proportion of the University's students and alumni, and representatives from business and industry as appropriate
- iii. To produce a clearer articulation of the role and value of Court and a set of mutual expectations for Court members and the University which prospective members of Court would be invited to accept upon appointment (see para 12 above)
- iv. To give further consideration to providing more support for Court members able to make an active contribution to the University
- v. To encourage the active engagement of Court members with the University through a range of 'specific asks' throughout the year and to facilitate appropriate networks for Court members wishing to volunteer their skills and expertise to the University's benefit
- vi. To give consideration to the involvement of Professional Services and academic staff at the meetings of Court as appropriate
- vii. To formalise the revised Annual Meeting format adopted in June 2014, combining the VC's annual reception and celebration of University successes with a meeting to which members of Court and other stakeholders and ambassadors are invited, underpinned by an updating to the Ordinances
- viii. To propose any amendments to Ordinances 20 and 21 with regard to the composition and size of the membership and the format of the meeting as appropriate, in line with any of the recommendations above.

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 April 2015  
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