ELECTIONS OF STAFF TO SERVE ON SENATE

Background
Over the years Senate has made various resolutions concerning the election process of staff to serve on Senate. In the most recent elections for five academic members who are not professors, it was pointed out that some of these resolutions are now somewhat dated (indeed a critical one dates back to 1979). It would be desirable for Senate to review the rules that it would wish to put in place to govern the elections of staff to serve on Senate, in particular to consider the categories of staff it would like to enfranchise both to vote in and stand for election and to set out the agreed rules in an easily accessible document.

At its meeting on 21 November 2017, Senate received a paper inviting it to consider and review the rules which govern the election process. Given the late hour at which this item was taken, Senate agreed that it would not be sensible to proceed to discuss the proposals at the meeting. Instead, Senate resolved that members of Senate who wished to discuss the proposal would be invited to a meeting with the Registrar prior to a report on these matters by the Registrar coming back to Senate early in 2018.

This meeting took place on 8 January 2018 and was attended by five members of Senate:

Dr Phil Ansell  
Professor Chris Day (Vice-Chancellor and President)  
Dr Joan Harvey  
Dr Nick Megoran  
Professor Chris Seal

NB. Professor Patrick Olivier was unable to attend due to a prior engagement, but submitted written comments which were taken into account at the meeting.

The Current Election Process

Currently the rules can be summarised as follows.

1. Academic staff with a teaching and research, or teaching and scholarship, or a research and innovation contract who are paid at point 32 (the minimum for a lecturer) or higher on the pay scale (excluding hourly paid staff) are eligible to vote and, unless a professor, stand for the non-professorial constituency.
2. Only professors (including professors of practice) are eligible stand for the professorial constituency but all academic staff who are paid at point 32 or above are eligible to vote.
3. Members of Senate elected to the non-professorial constituency are not required to vacate that office during an existing term of election on appointment to a personal professorship or established Chair.
4. Fixed term staff must have held a contract of one year or more at the time the appointment on Senate would commence to be eligible for election.
5. Candidates are asked to provide a brief (not more than 150 words) factual statement about themselves. The statement should include information such as the date and nature of the University appointment, qualifications, experience and membership of relevant bodies.
6. The vote is conducted by single transferable vote and managed via the Students’ Union on-line voting system, which conforms with Electoral Reform Society guidelines.

The meeting of Senate members was asked to consider the above rules and criteria and determine whether it wished to recommend any changes to Senate. The following issues were considered.
1. The restriction of academic staff who are paid at point 32 or higher on the pay scale excludes academic staff on lower points for example teaching assistants and some research assistants, associates and teaching fellows if below the point 32 bar. Membership of Academic Board is open to staff on grade F and above. Teaching Assistants are on grade E. There is a preference for all academic staff – including those on Grade E – to be included in the Senate electorate and, in doing so, for preserving parity of esteem between staff who are on teaching and research and teaching and scholarship contracts.

2. There is some uncertainty as to exactly what is understood by ‘academic staff’. The Statutes define academic staff as “the professors, readers, senior lecturers, lecturers, research staff, and other staff of the University as determined by the council from time to time after consultation with the senate.” Elsewhere, the Research, Teaching and Enterprise Family: Outline document used by Human Resources, defines roles that are wholly or mainly focused on research and teaching, and includes Grade E staff (teaching assistants). The preference of members of Senate who attended the meeting on 8 January is more aligned with the latter definition. Advice from Human Resources is that only staff on regular contracts, either open-ended or fixed-term, are included in this job family. Contingent staff, which includes hourly-paid staff, are not included.

3. With regard to the need to have held a contract of at least one year to be eligible for election to Senate, it was argued that this threshold might be arbitrary and even unfair.

4. The election circular does draw attention to the policy on the Diversity Profile of Members of University Committees but the electoral mechanisms do not address explicitly equality issues. For example, there are fewer women with the professorial title than on other academic grades. It is desirable to seek to diversify the profile of the membership. To this end, it is proposed that awareness-raising workshops, aimed at promoting Senate membership amongst groups of under-represented staff, could be held prior to any election.

5. Given the decision to adopt the titles Associate and Assistant Professor in Singapore and Malaysia in 2017, Senate should confirm that only full professors are eligible to stand in the professorial category.

6. There is no definition of what is a ‘factual statement’ of up to 150 words and it would be better to say a statement, or ‘personal statement’. The word limit of the statement could be increased to 250 words. The name, full title and academic School of the candidate should be pulled automatically from the nomination form onto the ballot paper. The 250 word statement should then include details of roles that the individual had undertaken whilst at the University, what they would want to contribute to as a Senator, and issues that they were interested in.

7. Current practice is to invite nominations, whereby those interested can either ask others to nominate them or nominate themselves. The name of the person making the nomination does not appear on the ballot paper or candidate’s statement. Members of Senate present at the meeting on 8 January suggested that an alternative would be to simply invite academic staff to stand for election without requiring nominations.

8. The voting platform used for Senate elections conforms with Electoral Reform Society guidelines, so it is felt that there is no case for change to this. The process for elections is conducted by the Governance Office and the returning officer is the Registrar. There should, however, be an independent scrutineer appointed to oversee the process and its outcomes. The results should be published: this will enhance transparency.

Recommendations

1. All academic staff on full-time or part-time contracts should be entitled to vote in Senate elections.

2. To be eligible to stand for election, academic staff should hold a contract that outlives the term of being a member of Senate.

3. An awareness-raising workshop, aimed at promoting Senate membership amongst groups of under-represented staff, should be held prior to any election.
4. To confirm that Associate and Assistant Professors are not eligible to stand for election in the professorial category.
5. Develop clearer guidance on the candidate statement, in keeping with 6. above.
6. Invite academic staff to stand without reference to nominations.
7. Appoint an independent scrutineer to oversee the voting process.
8. Publish the result after each election.

The group also discussed two further issues relating to Senate membership without coming to any firm conclusion, both potentially relate to the three co-opted places that are not currently filled. Our Senate has three distinctive features compared to other Russell Group universities: the total potential membership of 37 (which includes the three co-opted places) is small; we are unusual in not having any heads of Schools/Institutes or Deans on in an ex-officio capacity; the proportion of elected members is high. The lack of participation by Heads of Academic Units is a potential weakness given their critical roles in our academic governance especially overseeing the implementation of policies. Similarly some dissatisfaction has been expressed as part of the feedback on the development of the Vision and Strategy that there is no direct opportunity for any member of professional staff to serve on Senate. Potentially the co-opted membership is a mechanism to address one or both of these issues, at least partially. We will reflect on these matters and come back to Senate.

John Hogan
Registrar
10th January 2018