

1. Executive Summary

Governance arrangements at Heriot-Watt have supported the University throughout its development, growth and success. The challenge now for the University is to consider those arrangements and see how best to build on them to face a new set of challenges with changed expectations and circumstances both at home and abroad, increased financial pressures from reduced Government support and new opportunities through technological change and the development of the University's strategy beyond 2025.

The fundamental governance arrangements at the University are sound, and we noted several good practices (e.g. an explicit agenda tracker, a structured approach to induction, comprehensive publicly available governance information, etc.). However, the University is transitioning from a model of governance focused on detailed scrutiny and monitoring to one focused more on strategic issues and adding value. The Executive makes significant efforts to be open and provide the Court with a wealth of information. However, the change to a more strategically engaged governance model can be supported by several process-type issues, particularly with a view that there is more to be done to help more strategic discussions in Court (shorter papers, starred papers, etc.). There is an impressive Court with a clear commitment to the University and a desire to make the University the best it can be. Part of the challenge is to enable all members of its very talented Court to contribute more to the development and promotion of the University.

We also noted the importance of culture to the University – particularly its emphasis on respect, underpinned by its commitment to its four values: Inspire, Collaborate, Belong and Celebrate. Consideration of culture is likely to be an important part of developing the post-2025 strategy, and we think it will be worth considering some form of monitoring to see if behaviours across the University reflect the values that are important to the University.

Although there is a flow of information from Senate to Court, there appears to be a limited understanding amongst members of the Court of the role of the Senate and the extent to which the contribution of Court members and the Vice Chancellor are evaluated. Although the majority of Senators believe that the Senate is broadly effective, a number feel that the role could be developed away from mainly information sharing towards greater engagement in the academic decision-making processes of the University and performance measurement. Generally, ex-officio members are much more positive than nominated members about current arrangements.

We think there are opportunities to develop a greater understanding of the respective roles of the Court, the Senate and the Executive and clarify how the Court can continue contributing to the University's strategic development.

The student voice is important to the University, and the University has taken steps to ensure that students are heard. Students value their relationship with the University. Nevertheless, further opportunities exist to enable a more comprehensive student voice, and members feel there is more to be done to embed equality, diversity and inclusion in the work of the Court.

The Advance HE team is grateful for the support and input of everyone at the University who contributed to the review, the steering group members, and the support of the governance team, particularly Sue Collier and Lisa Herlihy.

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2. Recommendations

The review makes recommendations with associated suggestions on implementation. These recommendations are intended as an initial prompt for the University to consider and to assist it in developing an action plan for implementation; these are presented in the relevant sections of the report and collated below for ease of reference.

2.1 Recommendations

We recommend that:

- + R1: The Court, Senate, and Executive take steps to develop a shared understanding of the role and responsibilities of the Court and Senate in constructively challenging the Executive. This should then be embedded into governance processes to encourage robust debate.
- + R2: The University continues to explore innovative ways of developing diversity and specifically examines the possibility of using a Board Apprenticeship scheme.
- + R3: Consideration is given to adopting a more systematic approach to member development interviews, creating some form of “buddy” system for new members, and bespoke training for new staff, student and TU members.
- + R4: Discussions are held with student representatives to establish the most effective way to support them in developing their contribution to Court and Senate debates. Senate should consider providing a regular space on the Senate Agenda for students to raise issues that are important to them.
- + R5: As part of its approach to external communications, the Court members should be provided with key messages suitable for external audiences.
- + R6: The University should consider producing a short digest after each Court and Senate meeting and distributing these widely.
- + R7: When the new strategy is developed, the University reviews and updates its committee structure, roles and responsibilities.
- + R8: Guidance is given to authors of papers that sets out the desired approach to producing agenda and papers to support discussion at the Court and the Senate.
- + R9: The Secretariat report on compliance with report paper deadlines
- + R10: Consideration should be given to how the Court develops a better understanding of the role and operation of the Senate and makes better use of the Senate-appointed members in developing lay members’ understanding of academic quality matters.
- + R11: A meeting feedback approach is developed.