

Governance Structure at Queen's and the Case for Reform

Background

At Queen's, three bodies are concerned with academic matters, reputation, well-being and fiscal health of the university. While there is inevitably some degree of overlap between these bodies, their responsibilities may be divided as follows: the Board of Trustees has exclusive fiscal authority over the university, the Senate is charged through the Queen's Charter with "academical" supervision over students, and University Council's role in governance relates to appointment or election of six Trustees to the Board and appointment/reappointment of the Chancellor. The Council may also provide advice to the Board of Trustees, Senate and Administration. This tri-cameral system of governance is unique among Canadian institutions. A fourth body, the Queen's University Alumni Association, representing our alumni and numbering over 130,000 also has a strong interest in the well-being of the university, but has no governance role.

In discussions on University Council reform, a key concern is how the Council in its current form adds value to the university in ways that are not met elsewhere. Its primary role is **governance** and its responsibilities have been articulated above. At the time that the Council was established, the university was in dire financial straits and it was anticipated that the Council would assist in fundraising. In fact, a financial contribution was required of every member of University Council. Furthermore, at the end of the 19th century, advice to the relatively young university from its relatively few graduates was encouraged, as it sought to establish its place in post-secondary education. Almost 140 years later, the post-secondary landscape has changed dramatically and continues to do so at an increasing rate, so it is time to revisit our structures to see how well they serve us.

No Longer the Ivory Tower:

The Queen's of the twenty-first century is an extraordinarily complex organization. Its leadership and administrative structure, and more recently, components of its governance structure, are dramatically different from just ten years ago. Many of the functions that could be overseen by University Council in the late 19th century are now more properly devolved to appropriate administrative units. Funding for Ontario's universities is very different than just twenty years ago, when 74% of our operating budget was derived from provincial grants. Today, less than fifty per cent of our funding originates from the province. Student tuition which is in great part controlled by the provincial government, and to a smaller extent indirect costs derived from our research activities, provide the largest contribution to our operating budget. The majority of research funding comes from government sources and increasingly from industry. Our capital grants, often sourced from both the provincial and federal governments, most often have a requirement for significant philanthropic support. Each of the bodies providing funding has different accountability and expenditure-tracking mechanisms. Academic programs are subject to provincial quality-assurance processes and system oversight and professional programs have further accreditation requirement that often have an international accord dimension. In addition, the speed of communication via the internet and the widespread use of social media have fundamentally changed the way we communicate with students, parents and the media.

While universities are often perceived as the “ivory tower”, they haven’t been so for quite a while. We live in an enormously competitive environment that is international in scope. We compete with our sister institutions for the best students, the best faculty, and for research, philanthropic and government support. Many issues have a complexity to them that requires specialized knowledge. Deans, VPs and Department Heads seek advice from experts through advisory councils or through individual contacts. Much of the Principal’s energies are devoted to activities away from campus. These involve meetings with key government officials and other institutional leaders regarding policy and/or funding matters, meeting with alumni and friends individually, or in larger groups, or travelling to develop international networks to increase our global footprint and reputation. The Principal is increasingly connected to alumni via social media and networking services such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.

A Future for University Council:

In this environment, what then is to become of University Council? **Governance** is the primary function for Council and arguably it is in this role that it has the greatest impact on the university through the nomination of chancellors and appointment of trustees. In its current format, Council is too large and insufficiently agile in its **advisory** capacity to provide input in a timely fashion on many issues. It is not surprising that many members feel underappreciated, frustrated and dissatisfied. The university devotes considerable resources to support University Council and we do not believe that the allocation of resources to Council is warranted for the results that we currently achieve. We also need to ask whether the current processes for selecting Councillors give us the most useful mix of members.

Recent conversations with Professor Scott Carson, an expert in governance from The Monieson Center in the Queen’s School of Business, have brought the issues into sharper focus. In recent years, in the corporate and not-for-profit sectors alike, boards are reinventing themselves to function more effectively and to be more accountable. This involves seeking out highly-qualified and trained board members, and reducing the size of boards. Committee restructuring is also a component of reform. At Queen’s, the Board of Trustees is in the process of downsizing and once this process is complete, will have a membership of 25, less than 2/3 of its size before the reform was initiated. As a result of this downsizing, the qualifications of board members and composition of the board are of increased importance.

The changes that were made to the Queen’s charter provide an ideal opportunity to consider how University Council can become more effective, for the members and for the university. We would note that the University Senate recently adopted a new articulation of its functions, is in the process of considering the committee structure and will be moving to revisit membership at a later date. Some years ago, the Queen’s University Alumni Association initiated reform itself to better serve its membership and the university.

In talking with Professor Carson and in light of the discussions undertaken by the Ad Hoc Working Group on University Council Reform, there appear to be three potential models to consider. A brief description of each is given in the table below. All of the discussions of the ad-hoc committee have very much focussed on variations on Model 2.

Professor Carson also provided advice on the process for effecting change. He sees an insistence that University Council resolve the issues entirely by the conclusion of the May 2012 meeting as counterproductive. These changes should however be implemented for 2013. He also advised that Councillors, either individually or in small groups, be engaged regarding the general directions that reform should take before the May meeting.

The table below shows the three major courses of action identified by the Working Group. A number of pros and cons and other issues associated with each course of action are shown and any further comments that councillors might have are invited. Please click the following link to provide your early feedback univsec@queensu.ca.

Model 1 (Status Quo)	Model 2 (Reduced Size)	Model 3 (Abolish)
<p>Maintain the status quo but Council becomes only elected members – Board members and Senators are no longer members of University Council.</p> <p><u>Pros:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires the least effort to effect – could be accomplished with straightforward changes to by-laws <p><u>Cons:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group is large and unwieldy – requires significant investment of time from University administration for co-ordination. • Does not address effectiveness of Council • Selection procedure for Board Members may not be well-suited to current structure 	<p>Reduce the size of Council and concentrate on core functions avoiding any duplication of functions that are carried out by other bodies including Senate, Board, QUAA and the University Administration.</p> <p><u>Pros:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smaller size would be more nimble and effective in decision making • Greater ability to focus on key functions of University Council and add value to the University • Fewer University human and financial resources required <p><u>Cons:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant change to a historical body • Challenges of reducing body of elected Councillors from over 100 to a more moderate number <p>The ultimate size and structure of such a body would be decided after deliberation. A complete re-writing of the University Council by-laws is now possible given the recent changes to the charter. Size, composition and manner of appointment or election of councillors, University Council Trustees and the Chancellor are in the hands of the Council.</p>	<p>Abolish University Council and move its functions to other bodies.</p> <p><u>Pros:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would give the university a bicameral governance system like many of its peers • Would significantly reduce draw on the University’s financial and human resources <p><u>Cons:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would likely require further changes to the Charter • Would lead to loss of a body that has existed since 1874