Guidance on papers and reports for Council and its Sub Committees

Authors should put themselves in the position of Council members and draft accordingly. Lay members have to rely on what they are told so the quality and openness of information is critical. Council papers should be drafted with the specific needs of Council in mind, including executive summaries, clear recommendations and, where applicable, links to web-based sources of information.

Authors and presenters of reports to Council should follow these guidelines to provide more streamlined reports that will improve the quality of discussion and decision-making in the governance of the University:

- provide an executive summary and a cover sheet;
- retain a sharp focus and avoid extraneous detail;
- avoid jargon;
- avoid acronyms wherever possible and, if necessary, provide an explanation the first time an acronym is used in a paper;
- tables should not be split across two pages;
- address the needs of non-specialist members, especially in technical areas such as finance and accounting;
- set out the various different options and risks that were considered before bringing forward a recommendation;
- indicate the person with responsibility and authority for the paper, the author, and include email addresses;
- include correct headings (University of Kent/committee or board title/date of meeting), page numbers and date.

1. Purpose of papers

You should be clear about the purpose of the paper. Is it:

- to provide information?
- to report on a completed course of action?
- to make recommendations on policy or a course of action?
- to put forward preliminary ideas and proposals for discussion.

2. Executive Summary

All papers should have an executive summary. The executive summary is the first, possibly the only, thing others will read and the last thing you should write. It is a brief review of the document provided for busy people to understand at a glance how much to read and what actions will probably be needed. It is not intended to be a substitute for the original document and should be somewhere between 5% and 10% of the length of the original document.

The executive summary should make sense even if the reader has not read the original paper, should be written in a language appropriate for the target audience and should use short, concise paragraphs. It should provide a clear understanding of what the paper is about, for instance an outline of the problem to be addressed and the proposed solution. It should include clear cross-referencing to the key points in the substantive paper. If the problem is clearly expressed the readers are more likely to understand the proposed solution.

3. The Content
Keep in mind the target audience and the tone, content and level of detail required. You should bear in mind that your paper will be one among many papers on the agenda. Reports and papers should have a clear structure and be as concise as possible. You should strive to be: accurate; logical; relevant; clear and concise. The structure should be appropriate. Use headings, bullet points and graphics, if it makes the document easier for the reader to speed read and understand. Headings should help the reader to navigate your document and understand its structure. Bullets can be used to make long lists of information more digestible. Many readers will find a well-placed graphic illustrating the precise nature of the problem very helpful.

The following is suggested as a guide for structure.

Beginning: an introduction setting out the purpose of the paper and, if relevant, a brief outline of the consultative route it has followed.

Papers for major projects should include a short section on the Finance and Resources Committee and Council’s previous consideration of the project, for instance, whether there has been consideration at a strategy day, its inclusion in the capital plan, whether the Finance and Resources Committees has previously agreed a preliminary budget for design work.

Middle: All papers should have a clear exposition of the matters for report or the problem or issues to be addressed. If you are recommending a course of action should have a clear exposition of the problem and suggest options for solutions. You should avoid swamping the reader with too much detail but if it is likely to be helpful it may be placed in an appendix.

Papers recommending a course of action or expenditure should consider answering the following questions:

- How does the proposed action fit with University priorities and objectives (e.g. as expressed in the University Plan and associated strategies)?
- What are the costs/benefits of different options?
- How do the recommendations address the needs and views of those affected? What consultation has been undertaken?
- What is the impact, if any, on other areas of the University’s business?
- What are the key risks associated with the proposed action and how is it proposed that they are to be managed?
- Who has the authority to action the recommendations, e.g. Privy Council, Council, Finance and Resources Committee, Senate, Vice-Chancellor, Executive Group etc?

If your Paper proposes either a new University policy or an amendment to an existing policy you should consider answering the following questions:

- How does the policy fit with University priorities and objectives (e.g. as expressed in the University Plan and associated strategies)?
- Are there any the costs/benefits of different options?
- What are the needs and views of those the policy seeks to affect? What consultation has been undertaken?
- What is the impact, if any, on other existing policies?
- What is the impact, if any, on groups protected from discrimination by the Equality Act 2010? Has the required equality impact assessment (EQIA) been undertaken and fully documented?
• What are the key risks associated with the policy and how is it proposed that they be managed?
• How/when should the policy’s effectiveness and contribution to University objectives be reviewed? What evaluation systems and performance targets are needed?
• On whose authority are the changes to be made, e.g. Privy Council, Council, Finance and Resources Committee, Senate, Vice-Chancellor, Executive Group etc

Providing answers to the above questions will help to produce a more focused discussion and ease the decision-making process.

End: The conclusion, including next steps in the form of recommendations for action and likely resource implications, and the key risks and mitigation associated with the recommendations.

4. Format of Papers

Main headings should be centred and bold, with no underlining or italics

UNIVERSITY OF KENT

Council/Finance and Resources Committee (as appropriate): Date of meeting

Title of the Paper

Font: Arial, 11pt

Page numbers bottom right, 1 of n

Footer: title of the Paper

5. Cover-sheets

Papers for Council must be prefaced by a one-page cover-sheet that provides an instant overview of the content. The cover-sheet should comprise a brief summary of the paper in 1-2 paragraphs (possibly the Executive Summary), the recommended actions and, where relevant, the risks and resource implications. When drafting the summary you should draw out the key points and main issues/risks as sharply as possible in order to focus and guide the discussion at the meeting. The reader must be able to grasp the gist of the paper from the cover-sheet.

The model template for a cover-sheet is available on the Governance web site: https://www.kent.ac.uk/governance/council/presentation-of-papers/Council-cover-sheet.doc

6. Submission of Papers

Council, through the Council Effectiveness Review indicated that no papers should be tabled and there should not be any 2nd circulations. This means that all papers must be submitted to the Council Secretariat 2 weeks before the date of the meeting with a completed cover sheet. Submission may be by email to councilsec@kent.ac.uk

7. Oral presentation of reports at meetings

If you are required to attend a Council meeting, please bear in mind that your will only have between two and five minutes to present your paper. You should keep any framing/introductory comments to a minimum to allow as much as time as possible for discussion. You should outline the key issues to help the meeting make informed, risk-aware decisions and assume that the members have read the paper in advance.