**REPORT ON THE MEETING OF INSTITUTIONAL FORUMS’ CHAIRPERSONS WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

24 March 2015 at the CHE, Pretoria. 09h30 to 16h30

**REPORT BY SUDAN HANSRAJ (representative of the UKZN Institutional Forum (henceforth IF)).**

The above meeting was convened by the DHET for the purposes to examining the roles of IFs at institutions nationally. The invitation sent to UKZN gave the time as 10h00 to 13h00 so travel arrangements were made accordingly resulting that the representative was not able to remain till the conclusion of the meet.

The programme took the form of a presentation by a DHET official. He made the point that while IFs are mandated to advise Council, Councils are not obligated to follow through on that advice and he also believed that reasons were not necessary.

This was followed by two presentations of persons pursuing doctoral studies on the subject of IFs. One was international and the researcher stated her positive amazement at such a forward thinking corporate governance structure at a university. She said that UK and US universities did not have such an equivalent.

A local researcher recounted a litany of challenges encountered in making IFs function optimally. These were subsequently discussed and are amongst those listed below. She also spoke to the Ann Harper report and recommended that guidelines be drawn up indicating how the IF relates to the other stakeholders of the institution. While the HE ACT requires the IF to engage with broad policy issues, it was found in the research, that IFs favoured a compliance approach.

The meeting then broke up into 4 groups and analysed some aspect of IFs. The IF rep of UKZN was in the group tackling challenges experienced by IF as well as possible solutions. Groups were to report back to the meeting and these aspects were to be discussed. The IF rep of UKZN left the meeting at 13h15 to catch a flight back home.

**MAJOR ISSUES DISCUSSED**

1. **Representation on Council**

Should the IF have a seat on Council? There were 2 broad views.

NO. The Chair of IF would be complicit in that he/ she would be part of the decision making of Council and would be bound by those decisions; whereas the role of the IF is merely to advise Council and that decision making should be left solely in the hands of the Council.

YES. The IF Chair needs to have a hand on the pulse of issues at the institution so that the IF can be appraised of major policy shifts and incoming factors that might not be in the interest of the institution that IF could offer informed and considered advice to Council.

**Comment:** It appears that at some institutions the IF has a seat on Council with full voting rights while at others (such as UKZN) the IF has no seat. It was felt that IFs should be privy to Council deliberations and should be accorded a seat at Council however with NO VOTING RIGHTS. In other words, the IF continues to play an advisory role while decision making is left to Council.

1. **Staff Apathy towards the IF**

The meeting flagged the growing apathy amongst staff towards institutional affairs in that the broader staff failed to supply agenda items to the IF and that only a few persons contributed regularly. The meeting noted that a rumour that the DHET was planning to discontinue IFs could possibly be responsible as people may have been working in a mode that it was only a matter of time so why bother with applying our minds to issues that are not going to go anywhere anyway. The DHET official countered this and stated that no such move was afoot.

IF meetings often tend to spend a large amount of time discussing quorum and initiating new members to the role of the IF since the membership is dynamic – each member being elected. All members should become familiar with the IF charter before accepting nomination to the IF thus placing them in a better position to provide insightful contributions in line with the IF mandate.

Members resolved to engage in more publicity of the IF with a view to attracting more interest in institutional matters. In some institutions the VC requests permission to attend IF – this raises the profile of the IF internally.

The view that the IF was a ‘toothless body’ or a ‘talk shop’ was also dispelled.

1. **Chairperson**

It was noted that some institutions made it mandatory for an individual from management to chair the IF and that this was counter-productive to open and free dialogue as issues of power-dynamics enter the picture. It was also pointed out that in some institutions the most vociferous contributors are made Chairs and this neutralised their ability to share effectively. The ACT (founding of the IF) does not stipulate who should chair except to prevent a student chair. It was explained that a chair from management was often seen as palatable since that individual had greater access to resources. The meeting appeared to take the view that Management members should in general not chair so as not to stifle open communication of ideas within the forum.

The meeting was advised that where Management members chaired the IF, they had a domineering approach simply because they had access to extra institutional data and were already active by virtue of their jobs with University policy matters.

One institution mentioned that they had a rotating chair in the sense that a new chair was appointed for each meeting. This was done at the end of the meeting to be effective at the next meeting. The new chair would solicit agenda items and decide how to construct the agenda.

1. **Resources**

Some pointed to a lack of resources. However, it was noted that this was not an issue as the IF required only a limited budget and in the main, resources were needed to substantiate the advice the IF was giving to Council in the form of research. In other words, there was the view that in some cases, advice could only be provided through some careful investigation in the form of research (case studies, interviews, literature searches, etc). The IF does not as an entity have such resources at its disposal and therefore often gives unqualified advice.

1. **Involvement of Students**

It was recognised that students form an important constituency at the University however their voices on the IF were almost silent. There was a need for more engagement by students and members cited the Rhodes Monument issue at UCT as a case where students were highly involved. It was recognised that students had the challenge that often they were new to the IF and were not necessarily up to speed with the role and processes of the IF. Some induction was proposed for new IF members.

1. **Information flow**

In exercising its mandate to advise Council, it was not at all clear how this advice is meant to reach Council. Does Council consider the minutes of the IF? Should the chairperson address a writ to the Chair of Council after each IF meeting? Should Council members who serve on the IF supply a report to Council? These aspects should be addressed in the interest of functionality.

It was expressed by some that the IF should have a panel of experts that can analyse policy and advise Council effectively.

A communication protocol should be established. It needs to be known what can be publicised and what not. For example, deliberations of the senior appointments committee (of which IF is a voting member) are currently the sole preserve of the individual IF member elected. However, how can the rest of the IF make contributions given that such proceedings happened under strict confidentiality clauses?

The above represent some issues that arose at the meeting.

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