



ONE Introduction

The council of a university or technikon is established as the highest governing body of the institution in terms of Section 27 of the Higher Education Act of 1997. The Act also determines the composition of council and certain fundamental duties. These provisions are made in the expectation that a council will always act in the best interests of the institution it serves. Further to the Act, most councils have drawn up their own institutional statutes which usually expand on the roles and functions of council, specify the additional members and their manner of election as provided for in the Act, and determine the meeting procedures to be followed by council. In the event that an institution has not promulgated its own institutional statute, it is governed by the provisions of the Standard Institutional Statute of March 2002 which makes provision for meetings and meeting procedures. (The relevant sections of the Standard Institutional Statute can be found in Appendix 1.)

Despite these formal provisions, the reality is that many members of councils are relatively unfamiliar with meeting procedures, and, given the range of interests and perspectives represented on the councils of higher education institutions, it is only too easy for time to be wasted in fruitless or aimless discussion. The challenges facing most councils relate to achieving a balance in stakeholder representation, accommodating a large number of representatives, and focusing discussion to enable the council to arrive at constructive decisions.

A brief definition, as a first step, assists in understanding the importance of a meeting as a problem-solving, goal-setting and collective decision-making forum.

| What is a Meeting?

According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Pearsall, 2001) a meeting is:

An assembly of people for a particular purpose, especially for formal discussion.

It goes without saying that a meeting can only take place when more than one person is present and the dictionary definition places emphasis on meeting for a particular purpose. Another definition cited in the Technikon Free State 'Concise Guide to Effective Meetings' describes a meeting as:

A team activity where a select group of people gathers to pursue a specific objective in an effort to solve or investigate a problem.

Donald Hocking (1999) defines a meeting as:

A gathering of two or more people at the same place, each being aware that the purpose of such meeting may include the receiving of information and/or the making of a collective decision.

From the above definitions it is clear that a meeting should have a purpose and/or an objective and should involve more than one person. By the end of the meeting it should be possible for participants to arrive at decisions and resolutions. To achieve this outcome, the key role-players in a meeting should possess:

- a knowledge of meeting procedures, and
- an ability to conceptualise and clearly articulate ideas in a public forum.

The regular, formal meetings of council need to be well structured and planned. In this sense, a council meeting should not be confused with a brainstorming session which has a loose and open format. Such a strategy may be used effectively by a council from time to time but, for this purpose, a special meeting should be called, or the formal meeting extended.

This guidebook offers some basic pointers for making meetings more effective and ensuring that the time committed by members is profitably spent. It draws on the experiences of the chairpersons of

various councils, on contributions from registrars, on observations drawn from workshops with councils¹, and on a review of relevant literature.

NOTES

1. Workshops have been held with various councils of higher education institutions around the country as part of the Department of Education (DoE) / Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) Governance Project.