

24 July 2015

1. INTRODUCTION

Kia ora,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on phase 2 of the consultation process and make comment on the proposed Victoria Council Constitution and Statute.

In response to the proposed Council Constitution, VUWSA has collaborated with other student representative groups to produce this submission. This submission builds on our first submission and is the outcome of discussions with student representative groups, as well as the greater student body. These student representative groups have co-signed this submission below.

We would like to emphasise that our most substantive recommendation is the preservation of elected student members on Council. This is crucial to ensure student members have the mandate to articulate the student voice and connect the Council with the wider student body. Not doing so poses a major risk of further disenfranchising the student body for the university.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed changes. We hope to continue this open dialogue about how to best strengthen the student voice at Victoria and we welcome further discussion with members of Council on our views to enable this.

Ngā mihi nui,

Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA)

Ngāi Tauria (Māori Students' Association)

Pasifika Students' Council (PSC)

VUWSA International Students' Association (V-ISA)

Victoria University Commerce Students Society (VicCom)

Victoria University Science Society

Uni Q Victoria (Representative group for queer students at Victoria)

VUWSA Women's Group

CanDo (Representative group for students with disabilities and impairments)

STUDIO (Representative group for Architecture and Design students)

Elizabeth Snow (Student Representative for Architecture and Design Faculty Board)

Morgan Watkins (Student Representative for Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty Board)

Grace Carroll (Student Representative for Humanities and Social Sciences Academic Committee)

Hannah Altman (Student Representative for Commerce Faculty Board)

Matt Horwell (Student Representative for Commerce Learning and Teaching Committee)

Daniel Ha (Student Representative for Commerce Faculty Equity Committee)
Bronte Ammundsen (Student Representative for Science Faculty Board)

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 (Composition): We commend the proposed composition of Council, in particular, the retention of two academic seats (Council Membership Statute 4.1.2(a)), two student seats (4.1.2(b)) and two alumni seats (4.1.2(d)). We Recommend this is retained.

Recommendation 2 (Retention of student seats): We commend the proposed retention of student members on Council (4.1.2(b)). We Recommend this is retained

Recommendation 3 (Quantity of student seats): We commend the proposed number of student members on Council (4.1.2(b)). We recommend this is retained.

Recommendation 4 (Selection of students on Council): We recommend that student members be elected by the student body rather than selected by the proposed appointments panel. We therefore propose an amendment to 4.1.2(b) to read “at least 2 people who are students at Victoria *at the time of their election by students*”.

Recommendation 5 (Length of term for student members): We recommend that student members hold a regular term of two years, with a one-year overlap. We therefore propose a new clause, 4.4.5, to read “student members’ appointment to the Council ends after two years. The Council’s expectation is that there is a one-year overlap with the two student members’ terms”.

Recommendation 6 (Māori): We commend the proposed increase of minimum number of Māori members on Council. We recommend that 4.1.2(b) be amended to read “at least 2 people who are of Māori descent and hold strong iwi networks”

Recommendation 7 (Gender): We commend the intention of clause 4.1.2(e) regarding the minimum number of women members. However, we recommend that the wording in clause 4.1.2(e) be amended to “at least five members must be women or persons of gender minorities”.

3. JUSTIFICATION FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 (Composition): We commend the proposed composition of Council, in particular, the retention of two academic seats (Council Membership Statute 4.1.2(a)), two student seats (4.1.2(b)) and two alumni seats (4.1.2(d)). We Recommend this is retained.

Recommendation 2 (Retention of student seats): We commend the proposed retention of student members on Council (4.1.2(b)). We Recommend this is retained.

Recommendation 3 (Quantity of student seats): We commend the proposed number of student members on Council (4.1.2(b)). We recommend this is retained.

Students, academic staff and alumni are all vital components of the university community. We commend the Council for proposing to retain student, staff and graduate members on Council. Students are a core component and funder of the university and it is important that they have a seat at the decision-making table. We appreciate the Council’s recognition of this.

Students also have the capacity to offer first hand experience and insight into the way the university functions from a unique perspective. Student representatives add value to Council through their direct experience of the current state of the University. This insight is of significant value to good governance of universities. For Victoria in particular, it will help to enable its primary strategy of providing a holistic teaching, learning and student experience that is second to none.

Retaining two student seats on Council is absolutely key to ensuring that the student perspective is heard around the Council table. As the Council itself has said repeatedly, diversity of voices within the composition of the Council is a fundamental ingredient of successful governance. Two student voices will undoubtedly achieve a far more holistic and diverse reflection of the student perspective than one student alone could accomplish.

Recommendation 4 (Selection of students on Council): We recommend that student members be elected by the student body rather than selected by the proposed appointments panel. We therefore propose an amendment to 4.1.2(b) to read “at least 2 people who are students at Victoria at the time of their election by students”.

We believe that the proposed appointments process is the proposal that demands the most urgent attention.

During the first round of consultation, a model of council selection was the least preferred option amongst students, staff and alumni. In particular, the VUWSA survey found that over 80% of students preferred either the student-elected VUWSA President or a student elected at large as the method for determining the members of Council. Elections ensure that student members are accountable, which will strengthen the University Council’s link with students.

During the second consultation period, this view was confirmed. Students we talked to felt frustrated that they weren’t listened to and found the method of a small select panel appointing council members to be deeply concerning. To highlight the changes, VUWSA blacked out the Hub and allowed students to express their views by writing on the black cloth. Quotes ranged from the simple “this sucks”, to well-articulated recognitions of the hypocrisy in refusing to determine members of Council via democratic mechanisms: “How can you uphold democracy as a high principle of freedom for our country, yet don’t support it?”. This reinforced the view that the proposal of selection completely undermines Victoria’s strategic vision of being a great global-civic university with the core mission of public engagement and service to the community.

A key risk with the proposal is that Council will further disenfranchise the wider university community. We know from the first round of consultation that the majority of students (54%) already feel disconnected from university decisions. This feeling of disconnection will only be exacerbated by shifting to an appointments process. While the proposal document cites low election turnout and few nominees seeking election as reasons for moving towards appointed

positions, we believe that this points to issues around improving student engagement with university decision-making, and not to issues with election processes in themselves. We therefore encourage the University Council to explore ways of further engaging students and being more transparent in its decisions. Electing student members in fact allows for greater student engagement, as they will be more connected not only with the student body, but with the rest of the student representation structure at Victoria. By being elected, such student members will have a greater mandate to carry the views of students and other student representatives across the University.

Many comments alluded to the proposal as being a classic example of “paternalism”. This feeling was emoted by comments such as “Smart enough for uni, not smart enough to have a voice? Thanks VUW” and “you want me to ‘know my mind’ but not my voice?”. Such disenfranchisement with the move from elections to an appointments process undermines the VUW Strategic Plan of providing a “student experience that is second to none”.

Further to this, we acknowledge the Council’s commitment to diversity in its membership. Diversity has been cited as a reason for Council’s decision to move away from an elections structure. It must be noted however that elections in fact allow for greater diversity. For example, out of the ten elected members of the current Council, four are women whereas none of the potential three co-opted positions are women.

We encourage Council to reflect on its engagement with students to date, and use this opportunity to reflect on how the current processes can be improved.

Recommendation 5 (Length of term for student members): We recommend that student members hold a regular term of two years, with a one-year overlap. We therefore propose a new clause, 4.4.5, to read “student members’ appointment to the Council ends after two years. The Council’s expectation is that there is a one-year overlap with the two student members’ terms”.

We believe that two years is the most realistic term length for student members. While students often study for around 3-4 years at university, most students who have been elected to Council are often in their third or fourth year of study. Most students move on to paid work upon graduating, and are also likely leave Wellington. This means that a four year term is unlikely to be a realistic term length for student members.

Our rationale for suggesting a two year term, as opposed to the current one-year term, is to allow for student members to be the most effective in their role. Discussions with former student members on Council tell us that often the first half of their term (i.e.: 6 months) is taken up with understanding the process and structure of the University Council.

The overlap between the two student members’ terms allows for a more effective student voice. It allows for greater continuity in student membership - as one student member leaves, the other

is able to continue their work and focus for the following year, whilst mentoring the new student member. This mentor relationship should provide the newer student member with a faster understanding of University Council processes and structure than what would have occurred under concurrent terms.

We believe that the term should be limited to two years as a key element of the value that student representatives bring to Council is their direct experience of the current university structure and experience. The University environment changes rapidly, and to maintain a high level of effectiveness, student members must hold this understanding throughout their term.

Recommendation 6 (Māori): We commend the proposed increase of minimum number of Māori members on Council. We recommend that 4.1.2(b) be amended to read “at least 2 people who are of Māori descent and hold strong iwi networks”

This is a promising step forward in the university’s ongoing commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, we believe it is crucial to ensure Māori members of Council have mana amongst the wider university Māori community. Therefore we encourage the Council to continue to explore ways to engage with Toihuawera as a whole, rather than just relying on Te Ako Matua. The recommended amendment comes after discussion with Ngāi Taura as to how the intent of the clause can better expressed.

Recommendation 7 (Gender): We commend the intention of clause 4.1.2(e) regarding the minimum number of women members. However, we recommend that the wording in clause 4.1.2(e) be amended to “at least five members must be women or persons of gender minorities”.

It is great that Victoria has made a clear and definitive commitment to gender equity in the proposed Statute. After discussion with the VUWSA Women’s Group and UniQ (a representative group for queer students) over the wording, ‘gender minorities’ was suggested to be included, to ensure the Council acknowledges people who neither identify outside of the gender binary. This wording also better reflects the intention of the clause in shifting current gendered power imbalances.