



# The University of Western Australia

## Academic Staff Association

### Record of the Committee of Management Meeting

Held on Thursday 25 October 2018 at 12pm in W1, Winthrop Tower

**Present:** N Kirkham President  
S Tarrant Secretary  
A McKinley Treasurer  
  
S Bunt W Taylor

**In Attendance:** J Manvell V Burbank

**Apologies:** R da Silva Rosa D Judge S Dobbs B Montgomery J O'Shea

Formal business of the meeting was conducted 12pm-12.15pm

**Arrived at 12.15pm:** D Freshwater, Vice-Chancellor, S Biggs, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Joseph Quick, Acting COS

Guests were welcomed by the President and presented with copies of "Power & Persuasion", a history of UWAASA. The President continued with the following:-

*Vice Chancellor, Professor Biggs, I want to welcome you both to our committee meeting for the UWA ASA. We haven't had a Vice Chancellor attend this meeting since Professor Paul Johnson, in 2016, so we are grateful that you made some time to come today. We had hoped that you would be able to attend for an hour and had intended to structure the meeting as an informal Q&A, but given that your time is short I hope you don't mind if I start with some introductory words and then invite my colleagues to amplify any comments I make, or raise any other matter for your attention. There will be some time for your comments at the end.*

*The UWA ASA committee recognise that there may, perhaps, be a measure of disquiet in the executive about the activities of our organisation, so I want to begin by explaining a little about our history and what we see as our role and purpose here at UWA. There has been an Association of Academics at UWA since 1913, so we are the guardians of a long tradition of academic staff representation on this campus. Under the previous leadership of Ray da Silva Rosa, the Academic Staff Association adopted its motto "the voice for academics on campus", and that is how we understand our role and purpose—to provide the voice for academics on campus, to ensure that academic concerns, academic interests and academic views are represented in the decision making processes that affect academic staff. And, let's face it, very few decisions in the University don't in the end affect academic staff.*

*The UWA ASA is an organisation that is fundamentally committed to the promotion of academic involvement in the decision-making on academic matters, but also to democratic process. We are committed to maintaining and strengthening the democratic decision making processes that exist in the University. But, if you will indulge my speculations, I think this is, perhaps, the point where*



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*disquiet about our role may seep in. Universities, by their very nature, are at once deeply democratic and intensely hierarchical institutions. This one is no exception; there is a continued tension in the university between the hierarchical structure and the democratic processes. This is not a bad tension, but one that poses a continuing challenge for all members of the University. A well-functioning University is one that can, in some sense, hold the space for this tension. Now, I am not suggesting that this is some kind of binary where the executive is on the side of hierarchy and the Academic Staff Association is on the side of democracy, merely that all of the organisational bodies that make up the University (Senate, Guild, Convocation, the executive, Academic Board and so on) have a role to play in maintaining the healthy tension that is at the heart of a healthy and well-functioning University. To my mind, that means that we have to work together where possible and, where our interests are at odds, we have to be willing to accept that there will inevitably be disagreement and dispute. Where that disagreement and dispute is civil and respectful the clash of idea and views can only strengthen the outcome for all of us.*

*This brings me to an important final point about the nature of the UWA ASA. The Academic staff members of our organisation (and I think I could confidently say all academic staff at UWA) are profoundly committed to the success and flourishing of this University: to providing quality education to our students, to engaging in research that enriches our community in the broadest sense. We care deeply about this place. We are also committed to the success of the University sector across the world and, more fundamentally, to the flourishing of the Academic endeavour. The academy is the place where ideas can be contested, where new knowledge can be found and, dare I say it, where wisdom can be sought. In summary, we are committed to this place and we value this vocation.*

*So, the upshot of that is that, broadly speaking, we are on the same team—we all want this University to flourish—and we would like you to consider ways in which we could work together to improve the relationship between the UWA ASA and the executive and to achieve these ends. That is not to say that we will not hold or promote views that differ from yours, or that we will not continue to work to strengthen democratic decision making processes at the UWA. But having your views contested, having your decisions subjected to critical scrutiny, these are not bad things. In fact, it is essential to getting those decisions right. Subjecting proposals for change to robust risk assessment will, in the end, only result in better decisions. Certainly, it might make the decision-making processes a little less quick, but perhaps what we sacrifice in speed we might make up for in accuracy. The UWA ASA sees our role as to provide input and feedback on the decision making of the University on behalf of our members and to represent their views in those forums where democratic processes support it.*

*With that in mind I would like to briefly touch on some of the most important concerns that have been expressed by our members about the current state of the University. We held our AGM and asked members to raise those issues that they felt to be most pressing.*

*Probably, the most important issue was the ongoing effect of renewal on the organisation of Schools. Members across the four Faculties feel that the SDC model has resulted in a significant loss of institutional and local knowledge, and that it has led to a reduction in so-called 'service delivery'. Perhaps most importantly, members feel that the loss of the school managers has been, in some cases, disastrous for the proper functioning of the schools. The impact of this dysfunction impedes the ability of academics to focus on those things that they are employed to do, and that contribute to the success of the university.*



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*Not unrelated to this, was a general sense that staff morale at the University is at an all-time low. There were very few Schools where there was a sense that morale had improved since so-called “renewal”, and those that did report improved morale emphasised that the improvement, while being correlated with the implementation of the SDC model was not the result of it, but rather a positive and overdue change in leadership that occurred as part of the restructure.*

*I understand that this lack of morale was reflected in the Your Say Survey results. There was a widespread sense of dissatisfaction with the way that those results were communicated—the results were disaggregated by Faculty or School and presented in a generalised fashion rather than circulated in an open and accessible way. Academics tend to want to assess and critique statistical information in detail, and many felt that access to the results had been restricted unnecessarily. With this in mind, as Simon would know, we have made several attempts to access the raw data but our request has been rejected on each occasion. We made the decision not to put in a FOI application, largely because we didn’t wish for the relationship between UWA ASA and the executive to move from constructive disagreement and critique to outright combativeness. This is in none of our interests.*

*Related to this is another issue that is raised again and again the fundamental basis of which is trust. Many academics are reluctantly cynical about the consultation processes in the University. They feel that we are asked to contribute our views, but that our views are submitted into what feels like a vacuum. At the conclusion of the consultation we are only given access to an aggregated or thematically summarised version of the responses, never to the actual responses themselves. The recent consultation on changes to the University public holidays is characteristic.*

*There are deep and real concerns among Academic staff about student engagement at this University. This is not a case of Academics being unwilling to adopt new technologies or adapt to the new social context in which we operate. In fact, many Academics are grateful for some of the recent decisions by the executive, which have awakened the University to the need to adapt and change in response to a rapidly changing external environment. That said, good educational outcomes are based on relationships and in-person engagement. Academics are concerned that the reconfiguration of education as a commodity for sale continues to compromise our ability to produce graduates who are properly equipped to succeed in a world where those interpersonal skills are more necessary than ever. I will not labour this point as I imagine my colleagues will want to weigh in.*

*To touch on a couple of final issues: Academics are worried about the quality of our marketing, about the continued reputational damage to the institution, and concerned to properly understand why students are no longer choosing UWA as their first preference.*

*I will end there but, before I do, I want to reemphasise our commitment to the success of this university and our willingness to work with the executive to foster trust, to improve morale and to provide one conduit for the representation of academic views and concerns in the decision making processes of the University. Now I invite my colleagues to pick up any of the themes I have touched on or to raise new ones as a start to our discussion. Thanks.*

**B Taylor:** Even before LCS became compulsory, the School of Design was concerned about the level of student disengagement, and new staff were especially alarmed by low attendance rates. However, they feel unable to address this issue. Considering observations by new academic staff may provide a better perspective to this.



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**S Bunt:** While I do not like to think in business metaphors, academics are the sole producers of “output” in terms of research and teaching. However staff feel squeezed between the demands of management and students. For example in the new medical course staff are directed what and how to teach by management and, increasingly, by student demands. The staff member is judged by student feedback but has little freedom to react or improve the course. This was exemplified by the recent proposal to make downloading of lectures compulsory and the default, proposed to Academic board by the DVCE and President of the Guild without any academic involvement. Staff are very sympathetic to students who have trouble attending classes due to other commitments but there have been various strategies used to maintain academic standards such as only releasing content the week before a lab or tutorial that requires the prior learning, releasing in the weeks before exams to encourage attendance in term etc. These strategies can now only be used in very special circumstances.

**S Tarrant:** Each academic has a unique and direct experience of teaching at, and the character of, UWA. A closer relationship between UWAASA and the Executive would provide immediate input as to how the university is running and responding to change.

**A McKinley:** Being a long-standing member of UWAASA, I can reflect back fifteen years, when the UWAASA President would meet regularly with the Vice-Chancellor. What has always been apparent is that “one size doesn’t fit all”. There are different requirements for different faculties. Also, it would appear currently that there is a mistrust of the academic staff by the professional staff.

**N Kirkham:** UWAASA has a broad membership across all faculties and schools, and thus a strong understanding of the differences between disciplines. Sharing of experiences fosters a sense of community and builds morale.

**D Freshwater:** I apologise that we are limited to 30 minutes today but we are conducting an interview panel. As you have stated, we are working to a common goal. Vision 2030 is a values-led, not ranking –led approach to develop critical thinking and ethical skills in our students.

Some issues you mentioned: –

- i. We are working with Heads of Schools to improve the SDC model, although the school manager position will not be recreated.
- ii. We are working on student engagement on campus as this is critical to the future Vision.
- iii. You also mentioned disquiet within the Executive about UWAASA. Where do you perceive this disquiet because I am not aware of it?

**N Kirkham:** Feedback is that there is concern about the way that UWAASA does things. Specifically there was an issue about a newsletter, which was seen as problematic.

**D Freshwater:** The person involved in that instance was not a member of the Executive. In order to satisfy any disquiet, I need to understand how UWAASA works so that we can understand how to work together. We share the same ideals and want the same outcomes. There are societal issues at play re portrayal in the media, but all universities are in this position.

**S Tarrant:** An example of a structural response was the request for unidentified raw data from the “Have Your Say” survey. This definitely led to disquiet amongst the membership. We would like the V-C to attend more meetings as these 30 minutes are too short – face to face dialogue is necessary.



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**S Bunt:** Are you able to attend another meeting again soon. Academic Board is an item that we have yet to discuss.

**D Freshwater:** I would like to develop conversations but am very limited with time at the moment as we progress the Vision statement. Academic Board is a much bigger issue. My stance is that the academic board could be better engaged, and achieve better attendance of academics, in the interest of progressing the strategy at UWA. To this end I have been actively encouraging such a debate for over 12 months, and have met a small number of times myself with the Professoriate, jointly hosting the meeting with the CAB.

**12.45pm: N Kirkham** thanked the Vice-Chancellor and guests for their time as they left.