

**GUIDELINES ON THE ROLE OF COMMITTEE SECRETARY**

**1 Main functions of the Committee Secretary**

A Committee Secretary should normally be identified as having responsibility (although often not exclusive responsibility) in the following areas.

**(a) Initiation of business**

Identifying those policy areas which the committee ought to be considering, and when, through awareness of:

- (i) the historical pattern of the committee's regular schedule of business, and any modifications to this made necessary by recent developments;
- (ii) items specifically referred to the committee by colleagues;
- (iii) discussions by related College bodies;
- (iv) current developments nationally (or where appropriate locally or internationally) in the area of the committee's scope, together with related trends in other universities where relevant.

*In relation to the above, it is essential for the Secretary to work closely with the Chair, with the member of the Senior Management Team who has management responsibility for the area, and with any relevant specialist administrators.*

**(b) Provision of information**

- (i) Identifying and assembling, in consultation with appropriate colleagues and/or external bodies, all the information necessary for informed and timely decision-making, or where appropriate ensuring that this is done by others;
- (ii) classifying papers due to be presented to the committee according to the College's current policies on compliance with information legislation<sup>1</sup> (subject to consultation with the Chair in difficult cases);
- (ii) informing relevant colleagues of the outcomes of committee discussions.

**(c) Flow of business between committees**

- (i) Developing a clear view in advance of the intended or possible outcomes of consideration of particular business by her/his own committee;
- (ii) Having a well-informed view of the way in which this interacts - both in substantive policy terms and logistically - with consideration of the same or related business by other bodies;
- (iii) Monitoring and facilitating the passage of the business through any relevant higher and lower committees, by writing prompt reports to following committees and ensuring that information and reports from discussions at preceding committees are available (where possible in writing as part of the main agenda).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gold.ac.uk/foi/ctes.php>

*The Secretary should ensure that there is appropriate consultation with the relevant Committee Chairs and members of the Senior Management Team on the way in which particular items of committee business should be handled in general terms. However, it should be the normal assumption that, within this framework, it is the Secretary rather than the Chair who takes day-to-day responsibility for detailed coordination and logistical planning.*

**(d) Statutes, Ordinances and Regulations**

- (i) Identifying any consequential changes to the institution's Statutes, Ordinances and Regulations expected to arise from proposals under consideration, and the timetable which this entails for the making and implementation of decisions;
- (ii) Ensuring that, as policy development approaches the appropriate point, the necessary changes to the wording of Statutes, Ordinances and Regulations are incorporated into decision texts, and are checked with the Secretariat well before any drafts are due to be circulated to the committee.

In some cases it will be more appropriate for another individual to be responsible for drafting formal amendments of this type. However it is the Secretary's responsibility to ensure that such an individual is clearly identified.

**2 Relationship of the Committee Secretary role to policy development responsibilities**

In many cases a Committee Secretaryship is best vested in the senior specialist administrator whose policy responsibilities most closely align with the terms of reference of the committee. This is often the most effective way of ensuring that all the requirements set out above are met.

There may be exceptions to this - notably with higher-level committees which are less specialised, or in the case of professional fields where someone employed at a senior level may have limited committee servicing experience.<sup>2</sup> Where there is a separation between the Secretaryship and the substantive policy responsibility, there is often a greater inherent risk of error: very careful liaison with the appropriate specialist administrator(s) will be necessary, as well as with the Chair and the member of SMT with management responsibility. Where the Secretary is not an expert in the substantive business of the Committee, it is not likely to be sensible for her/him to assume responsibility for all of the functions listed above. However it is important that it is clear to all concerned how each of the responsibilities will be discharged, and that the Secretary actively seeks to ensure that this is achieved.

**3 Induction**

Someone with no previous committee servicing experience should not normally be assigned a Committee Secretaryship. Where this is unavoidable an experienced Committee Secretary should act as a mentor for at least three to four meetings. As some aspects of committee servicing - in particular minute-writing - are extremely difficult to teach without presence at the meeting of both parties, the mentor should attend the first and at least one other meeting with the new Secretary.

Existing Committee Secretary training will need to continue, and be compulsory for all Secretaries of committees when either on taking up their first ever role of Committee Secretary, or on arriving at Goldsmiths following committee servicing experience elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> A special case arises with Audit Committee, where HEFCE guidance effectively precludes servicing by a specialist in Finance.

#### **4 Combining the roles of Member and Secretary**

The application of the principle in the first paragraph of (2) above will often lead to an individual having the roles of both Member and Secretary. At times the Committee and the Secretary will need to maintain a separation between the two functions. The following points should be noted in particular: <sup>3</sup>

- (a) A Secretary to a Committee must be careful not to allow the views which he/she holds as a member to prevent her/him from taking a balanced view when gathering and managing information for consideration by the Committee.

Should a particularly sensitive issue arise in this regard, he/she should consider ensuring that another administrator is directly involved in the analysis and/or presentation of the material concerned.

- (b) A Secretary to a Committee must draw the attention of the Committee to any conflict of interest, actual or potential, on any particular matter between her/his administrative or managerial responsibilities within the institution, or membership of the Committee, and the responsibilities of the Secretaryship.
- (c) In some types of meeting, a Secretary who is also a Member may feel the need for assistance from a junior colleague, in order to ensure that the proceedings are properly recorded. Ideally this should be seen as an opportunity to provide experience for members of staff whose career development plans include the acquisition of committee servicing skills, including becoming a Committee Secretary themselves in future.
- (d) As from 2005-06, Departmental Administrators are *ex officio* members of their Departmental Boards, according to the Standard Composition. The Standard Composition also indicates that a Departmental Administrator should normally also be Secretary of the Departmental Board.

#### **5 Relationship between the Chair and Secretary of a Committee**

In the role of Secretary to a Committee, an individual is primarily responsible to the Chair, rather than to her/his line manager, or to the member of SMT with management responsibility for the functional area.

Any significant conflicts which the Secretary cannot resolve by dialogue with the individuals involved should be referred to the College Secretary (or to the Warden if the College Secretary is a party in the conflict). In a properly-managed institution this kind of measure is necessary only on extremely rare occasions. Line-managers of Committee Secretaries have a responsibility not to place demands on them likely to create conflicts of loyalty in relation to their responsibilities to the Chair.

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<sup>3</sup> These notes draw to some extent on the role definition agreed by Council in December 2003 for the College Secretary, who is not allowed to be a member of Council, but has a dual role as Secretary and member of the Senior Management Team.