UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

Guidance for Writing Reports

Purpose and introduction

1. The purpose of this document is to:
   a. provide guidance on the preparation and presentation of reports intended for submission to University committees, Senate and Council
   b. offer further suggestions for producing effective written reports.

2. The guidance takes a best practice approach to report writing for committees and encourages the use of a standard style and format – layout, font, numbering conventions, use of headings etc – for such reports.

3. It is accepted that the standard style and format described in these guidelines will not necessarily be suitable in every detail for every type of report that is due to be submitted to a committee. For example, some of the standard headings may not be applicable or relevant to certain subjects, and if followed too rigidly in such cases they may impair the flow of the report. Authors will need to adopt a commonsense approach in deciding whether to adapt or omit certain aspects of the recommended style and format in order to achieve ‘best fit’ with their specific report.

4. For the above reasons, committee secretaries are not expected to try to enforce compliance with all aspects of this guidance, or to refuse to accept any report which varies from the standard style and format. The only exception to this is that reports of more than four sides of A4 in length (excluding appendices) must be accompanied by a one-side cover sheet, as explained in paragraph 15 below.

Definition

5. For the purpose of this guidance the term ‘committee reports’ refers to systematic, organized documents which are prepared for consideration by a University committee, and are designed to address a specific subject or problem. Such reports commonly include the following features:
   a. a description of a sequence of events or facts
   b. an evaluation of the significance of these events or facts
   c. a discussion of whether these events or facts require actions or decisions to be taken
   d. an assessment of the consequences of taking, or not taking, such actions or decisions
   e. conclusions
   f. recommendations.

The importance of layout and style

6. Basic aspects of a committee report’s layout and style can have a significant impact not just on its general ‘readability’, but also its ultimate value and effectiveness. The efficiency of committees can suffer through a lack of clarity over the purpose or significance of a particular
report, and valuable time may be wasted as a consequence of a decision being deferred whilst a report is taken away to be rewritten and clarified.

7. Some of the most common problems with committee reports include cases where:

a. the purpose of the report has not been explained clearly – why is it being presented and what is it trying to achieve?

b. the report has not said what the recipients are supposed to do with it – do they simply have to note its contents, or are they expected to approve a recommendation contained in the report?

c. the full implications of recommendations contained in the report have not been expressed clearly – what do they actually commit the University to do? Will any additional expenditure (or savings) be involved? If so when, and how much? Do the proposals carry any risks, or any implications for different equality groups?

d. any previous discussions associated with the report have not been disclosed – has an earlier version of the report, or at least the same topic, already been discussed by another committee? If so, what was the outcome?

e. the draft report has not been proof read properly, and irritating mistakes have appeared in the final version.

8. This guidance specifies the house style for committee reports produced within the University, to help eliminate these common problems, improve consistency and achieve a minimum standard.

Basic features of the house style for committee reports

9. The University’s house style for committee reports has the following basic features:

a. Margins: 2.0 cm for top and bottom and 2.5 cm for left and right sides

b. Font: Calibri. Font size for the committee name and report title is 14, in bold, with the rest of the report in font size 11. Section headings should be in bold, not underlined

c. Paragraphs: all paragraphs should be numbered. If a paragraph requires sub-sections avoid bullet points and instead use a., b., c. etc. for the first level and i., ii., iii. etc. for the second level

d. Spacing: lines and paragraphs should be spaced at 12 pt, to open the text out and make it easier to read.

Basic features of an effective report

10. To be effective a report presented for consideration by a committee must contain the relevant facts, analysis and evidence which support the final conclusions and recommendations. Bear in mind the following:

a. the committee must be given the information that it needs in order to be able to do what it is being asked to do

b. information that is not required for the main body of the report but which may help the committee to further understand it is best placed in an appendix
c. the report should be broken down into logical sections, each with its own section heading, arranged in the order used in this guidance

d. use short, simple words with short sentences organised into short paragraphs. Plain English guidelines recommend that the most effective sentences contain on average 15 - 20 words

e. charts and diagrams should only be included if they are necessary for the reader to understand the report or make a key contribution to enforcing a particular point

f. in the interests of economy the University expects that all reports and their appendices will be produced in a format which is suitable for printing in black and white. Colour should not be used unless it is essential

g. committee members will not have time to read long reports, so include vital information only and use the minimum amount of space. A cover sheet is required for all reports of more than four sides in length, excluding appendices

h. stick to plain English and avoid jargon or gobbledygook.

Use of headings

11. The italicized headings after paragraph 17 below are the standard headings for use in reports to committees. They represent the University’s standard structure for such reports and they are arranged in the order in which they should appear.

12. It is possible that some of these standard headings may not be applicable in certain reports. This may occur, for example, where the content and purpose of the report is so straightforward that it requires only a simple, very short report. Authors will need to judge the relevance of the headings carefully in each case. Where necessary, it is best to omit any redundant heading(s) rather than enter them as ‘not applicable’.

13. Equally, authors may use additional headings of their own if this adds to the clarity and effectiveness of the report in question.

14. A template for the standard structure of a committee report is given in the Appendix.

Report cover sheets

15. All reports of more than four sides of A4 in length (excluding appendices) must be accompanied by a one-side cover sheet. The purpose of the cover sheet is to enable the reader of a longer report to see quickly what the main report is about, what the committee is required to do with it, and whether there are any important timing issues attached to any decisions required of the committee.

16. A template for the one-side cover sheet is given in the Appendix.

Standard headings for committee reports

17. The standard headings to be used in committee reports are shown in italics and explained in the sections below.

Purpose of this report

18. This section should provide a concise statement of what the report is setting out to achieve.
Background

19. This section should provide a short and succinct summary of what the report is about and why, or from where, the report has arisen. It should also confirm whether any of the matters addressed in the report have been the subject of previous discussions or decisions within the University.

Key issues

20. This section forms the core of the report and its purpose is to explain in more detail the key issues that the committee is being asked to consider. It should set out the evidence and arguments for and against any proposed action(s) that the committee is being asked to take. It should also explain any relationship between the subject of the report and the University's strategic objectives or external policy/regulatory drivers. Sub-headings may be useful in this section.

Resource implications

21. This section should summarise the resource implications that flow from any recommendations that the committee is being asked to approve. It is important that all projected costs or savings are stated explicitly. It must be made clear whether the required resource is already accounted for and available (fully or only in part) in the relevant financial plan, and whether an additional allocation will be required.

Risk factors

22. This section should indicate whether any matters addressed in the report carry a significantly increased level of risk for the University – and if so, the steps that will be taken to mitigate the risk - or if they will help to reduce a risk identified on a previous occasion.

Equality implications

23. This section should indicate whether due regard has been taken of any potential equal opportunity implications arising from matters addressed in the report. Some proposals, particularly those relating to policies, procedures, or delivery of services may require an equality impact assessment to be carried out. This section should include brief details of the outcome of such assessments, and confirm whether any mitigating actions will need to be taken as a result. Further guidance on this area is available on the Equalities website.

Timing implications

24. There may have been an important reason why it was necessary for the report to be presented to this particular meeting. In addition, there may be specific timing implications attached to proposals in the report, such as where a failure to make a decision could result in a critical deadline being missed or an important opportunity being lost. Any such factors and their consequences should be drawn to the committee's attention in this section.
Conclusions

25. This section should briefly recap the key issues explored in the report and, where appropriate, the conclusions that arise from it.

Recommendations

26. This section should identify any recommendations which flow from the conclusions reached in the report. In most cases, unless the committee is simply being asked to note the report, this will usually involve a recommendation for a certain course of action to be taken by or on behalf of the University.

27. Recommendations should be described in way that is clear and unambiguous, and they should also indicate to the committee where responsibility for implementing the recommendations will be located.

Actions required of the committee

28. This is the final section of the report and it is also the most important. The committee should never be left to ‘guess’ what to do with the report. It should always state clearly what the committee is being asked to do, for example:
   
   a. is it to comment on something in the report?
   
   b. is it to approve a recommendation in the report?
   
   c. is it to recommend something in the report for approval by a higher body?
   
   e. is it simply to note the report?

29. If more than one decision or action is required these should be listed out separately so that the committee fully understands what is involved.

30. And finally, all reports should end with the author’s name and date.

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UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

STANDARD TEMPLATE FOR REPORTS TO COMMITTEES

This template shows the standard layout that should be used for the preparation of reports for submission to University committees, Senate and Council.

The template is in two parts:

**Part A** is the template for the layout of the one-side cover sheet that must accompany all committee reports that are more than four sides of A4 in length (excluding appendices).

**Part B** is the template for the layout of the committee report itself.

Any queries regarding the use of these templates should be addressed to Neil Cox (nac1) or Vicky Harrison (vjh10) in the Governance Office.
PART A:
TEMPLATE FOR REPORT COVER SHEET:
REQUIRED FOR ALL REPORTS LONGER THAN 4 SIDES OF A4 (EXCLUDING APPENDICES)

THIS REPORT COVER SHEET MUST NOT EXCEED ONE SIDE OF A4

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

NAME OF COMMITTEE

Date of meeting

Title of Report

Purpose of attached report:

Summarise what the report is about and identify the key issue(s) arising from it.

Decisions or actions required of the committee:

Explain what specific decisions or actions are required of the Committee arising from the report.

Timing implications:

Identify any key deadlines arising from the report, and why it was necessary for it be considered at this meeting. If appropriate, explain why it is important for the Committee to make a decision at this meeting, and what will happen if a decision is deferred.

Name of author
Job title/position of author
Date of completion of paper
E-mail and telephone contact details
PART B
TEMPLATE FOR MAIN REPORT

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

NAME OF COMMITTEE

Date of meeting

Title of report

The headings below are the standard section headings which should be used, as appropriate, in reports to University committees, Senate and Council. They are arranged in the order in which they should appear in the report, with general reminders as to what each section should contain. For more detailed advice please refer to the main document “Guidance for Writing Reports”.

Not all of the standard headings will be relevant to every type of report. In such cases it is best to omit the redundant heading(s), rather than enter them as ‘not applicable’.

Authors may use additional headings of their own choosing if this adds to the clarity and effectiveness of the report.

Purpose of this report

1. Provide a concise statement of what the report is setting out to achieve.

Background

2. Briefly explain the background to the report and why it has been written.

Key issues

3. Explain in more detail the key issues raised by the report, and outline the evidence for and against any proposed actions.

Resource implications

4. Summarise any resource implications (costs or savings) that flow from recommendations in the report.

Risk factors

5. Identify any risks to the University that flow from the matters addressed in the report, and explain how these risks can be mitigated.

Equality implications

6. Confirm whether due regard has been taken of any equal opportunity issues arising from matters addressed in the report. Will any mitigating actions be required as a result?

Timing implications

7. Explain why it was necessary for the report to be considered at this meeting. If the committee is being asked to decide something at the meeting, explain what will happen if the decision is deferred.
Conclusions

8. Provide a brief recap of the key issues explored in the report and the conclusions that arise from it.

Recommendations

9. Clearly set out the recommendations and proposed actions arising from the conclusions reached by the report.

Actions required of the committee

10. Clearly set out what the committee is being asked to do with the report. Usually it will link back to the recommendations and it will involve approving or noting something.

Report Author: [Input name and position/job title]

Date of report: [Input date]