

From Professor Gabriel Horn FRS

19 April 2002

Dear Registry

University Governance

1. The University of Cambridge is the most distinguished university in Europe and, in my view, is amongst the five most distinguished universities in the world. The changes that are proposed for the governance of the University will be crucial in determining whether the University enhances its position, or slips out of this league. Standing still is not an option since, in the competitive atmosphere that prevails in institutions of higher education and research, to stand still is tantamount to slipping backwards. Were that to happen, it would be a misfortune both for the University and the nation.

Consultation Paper paragraph 5. The Vice-Chancellorship and the Pro-Vice-Chancellors.

2. The University has achieved pre-eminence with an unusual kind of governance. The Vice-Chancellor does not have significant executive powers, and does not determine the educational and research activities of the University. In other words, the University has never been a 'top-down' institution with the Vice-Chancellor, himself or herself or through a system of Deans, directing its educational or research activities. Instead, Cambridge is a 'grass-roots,' or 'bottom-up' university with the driving force for promoting excellence and for intellectual change coming from the academic staff themselves. This organisation contrasts with that of most other universities. The Consultation Paper ('the Paper') implies that Cambridge should adopt such an organisation. After all, if another great university such as Harvard is organised as a 'top-down' university why should Cambridge not follow suit? In my view the question is incorrectly framed. Harvard is far richer than Cambridge. The real question is: 'If Harvard's resources were the same as those of Cambridge, would Harvard be as good as Cambridge?'

3. There is no doubt that in recent years there have been some colossal failings in the organisation of the University. Most of these failings have been managerial in nature. The

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CAPSA catastrophe is one example, and there have been other. Serious as these failings are, they did not impinge on the creativeness of most of the academic staff or on the excellence of their teaching: in the last RAE and in the Teaching Quality Assessment Exercise, Cambridge was ranked first of all institutions of higher education in England. Nevertheless, all is not well with Cambridge and some of the changes proposed in the paper are intended to remedy the failings.

4. The Paper proposes that up to five **Pro-Vice-Chancellors** should be appointed (Paper, paragraphs 5.4-5.6. I believe these appointments would be helpful to the Vice-Chancellor and the University in general. However, I have reservations about some of the views expressed in the Paper about the **Vice-Chancellorship**. In particular, should the Vice-Chancellor be ‘..responsible for the overall direction and management of the University... and be given the necessary authority to discharge these responsibilities directly or by delegation’ (Paper, paragraph 5.2)?

5. Is the University an organisation in which such leadership is appropriate? To manage is to make efficient use of resources, skilfully and tactfully to conduct the affairs of an organisation. To direct is authoritatively to control. I have no difficulty with the Vice-Chancellor having controlling powers over the administrative arms of the University. But I have considerable difficulty with the idea of a Vice-Chancellor or his/her delegates having such powers over its educational and research activities. These are the reasons for the University’s existence. The administrative framework is secondary to, and exists to support, these activities. Their success depends on the commitment and creativeness of the academic staff. These qualities will flourish only if they are encouraged, not if they are directed. There are many external pressures to which an executive Vice-Chancellor might yield and which might harm these activities. One of these pressures is for staff to form links with commerce and for the work they do to have a commercial slant. I fully agree with the need to exploit the work of the academic staff in the interests of the University and the nation where it is appropriate to do so. I feel even more strongly that it would be in no-ones interest to direct the work of academic staff solely for its potential value to commerce. Academics whose work is driven by sheer curiosity should be encouraged to follow their bent. In the sciences there is often an unexpected commercial spin-off of such work. If curiosity-driven scientific research is not encouraged twenty or so years in the future industry will be starved of innovation. But this is not the only or even the most important reason for encouraging the advancement of learning and research, conducted for its own sake. With few exceptions, universities are the only institutions whose mission is to carry out such work. If universities fail in this mission they will have failed their responsibilities to civilisation. A Vice-Chancellor with powers of direction, keen to respond to pressures from the government or perhaps from benefactors and insensitive to these considerations, could inflict serious damage on these activities.

6. Cambridge is a federal university. Teaching and research are conducted in the University and in the Colleges. Colleges also allow for smaller groupings of students and academics some of who might otherwise feel isolated from colleagues. The Colleges also allow interdisciplinary interaction, and this function, together with the function of providing supervisions, is of enormous benefit to education and research. Colleges also admit students. Necessarily, the relationship between Colleges and the central University is a delicate one, the more so since considerable power has been given by HEFCE to the University by directing to it the College fee. The way the fee is then distributed is in the hands of the University, and so, should the Vice-Chancellor have powers of direction, in his or her hands. Should the Vice-Chancellor decide to retain much of the fee; should he or she decide, in

response to some voices in the country, that admissions should be in the hands of the University; and should the Vice-Chancellor be successful in implementing these changes, most Colleges would cease to operate and simply become rather grand lodging houses. The impact of such changes on the primary activities of the University would be catastrophic, and Cambridge would slide into mediocrity.

7. Of course, with an empowered, but perceptive Vice-Chancellor this Doomsday scenario is unlikely to come about. But however carefully conducted is the process of selection, an error may be made. The cost of an error is too great to run the risk. I believe that the Vice-Chancellor should to promote the interests of the University and so to manage its affairs that these interests are enhanced. I do not believe the Vice-Chancellor should be given the power to direct the affairs of the University.

Paragraph 7. The composition of Council.

8. I agree with the proposals that the Vice-Chancellor should not Chair the meetings of Council. No justification is given in the Paper for proposing that ‘..one of the external members should be appointed by Council to be its Chair’ (Paper, paragraph 7.4). This position will be both influential and delicate. And, as in the case of the Vice-Chancellorship the appointment of an individual who conducts the complex affairs of Council without a deep understanding of the mission of the University and of the colleges could have seriously harmful consequences. There are many Heads of Houses who could serve as Chair, who do understand this mission and who could conduct the affairs of Council with skill and dedication. I suggest the Chair is selected from a Head of House.

Paragraph 8. ...the Chairs of the Councils of the Schools

9. Having served on the Council of the School of Biological Sciences for some 15 years and as its Chairman for two, I have particular interest in the position and responsibilities of the Chair. In the sciences, the Council works closely with the Faculty Boards and hence close to the departments. These lie at the centre of the academic functions of the University, close that is to the academic and support staff. In my view individuals occupying the position of Chair are able to act effectively even though they lack the potentially coercive powers of Deans in some other universities. Obviously, an individual who is an indifferent leader will not be an effective Chair; but they cannot bring about the damage that an indifferent, but empowered Dean is able to bring about. It will be important carefully to scrutinise any proposal to define the responsibilities of the Chairs (Paper, paragraph 8.3 (i)).

10. I fully agree with the proposals to give administrative and other support to individuals who take on the responsibilities of the Chair (Paper, paragraphs 8.3 (iv) and (v)).

I am grateful for having had an opportunity to respond to the Paper.

Yours sincerely

March 17th, 2002

Dear Mr Registry,

University Governance – Part I of Response

I have read the consultation paper on University Governance with considerable interest and include comments on the greater part of it in the second part of this letter (below). In this first part, however, I wish to indicate my considerable displeasure with one particular aspect of the paper.

I was surprised to read that it is proposed to remove the Chancellor from the Council. I was totally taken aback, however, to see that the paper completely fails to refer to this proposal let alone offer any explanation for it. I can only conclude, therefore, that the paper's authors hope that no-one will notice this sleight of hand. I find this a considerable affront on three grounds.

1. The present Chancellor, who will be the subject of this proposed change, is not only a Royal Highness but is also the husband of our Queen (who, I might also remind you, is celebrating her Golden Jubilee this year);
2. It is an affront to the *office* of Chancellor that the paper should not see fit to refer to what it intends to do to the office nor why;
3. It is an insult to the Senate the members of which *elect* the Chancellor.

The paper's authors seem to be using the aftermath of the CAPSA fiasco to hide this proposal. This is a despicable ploy and I hope that it attracts all the disapprobation that it so thoroughly deserves.

Yours sincerely

Dr J.C. Horton
(Churchill – Ph.D., 1987)

March 17th, 2002

Dear Mr Registrar,

University Governance – Part II of Response

I write in response to the Notice of February 4th on University Governance that was published in the *Reporter* on February 6th.

As a member of the University, I followed the details of the CAPSA affair with considerable interest. What most impressed me about it, though, was the open way in which the University eventually investigated it. Very few universities, I suggest, would have been honest enough to take such a course.

The present consultation paper seems to owe its timing and much of its content to the CAPSA mishap. It seems to me that the paper's underlying purpose is to ensure no such investigation ever happens again. This laudable aim is not to be achieved, though, by ensuring no problems like CAPSA ever recur. Rather, the end is to be reached by suppressing those very elements in the University's present structure that forced the events surrounding the CAPSA episode to be analysed in such depth.

We read that CAPSA highlighted "a perceived lack of openness and transparency, and therefore of accountability" (paragraph 3.1). I suggest that the emphasis in this phrase should be on "perceived". Surely, therefore, the solution is to show how open the University *is* (favourable comparisons with other institutions might even be made). The proposed changes will make the University *less* open. For instance, the number of members of the Regent House elected to the Council is to be reduced (even though the Regent House itself is to be enlarged). The number of signatures required to force a vote is to be increased five-fold. The paper justifies this through the enlargement of the Regent House. However, I suggest that the number of signatures should only be enough to discourage items that are vexatious (and vexatious only) from being raised. If ten is enough to do this, then there is no reason to change it.

Three "external" members of the Council are to be appointed by a body that is itself to be appointed by the Council. This sounds no more than a feeble attempt to hide the fact that, in practice, these three members will be co-opted by the Council. The description "external members" is strange. We read (paragraph 7.2) that these are "people external to the University". However, paragraph 7.5 states that these "external" members might already be members of the University. Which is it? How can a member of the University be external to the University? To confuse the issue further, we discover that on election to the Council, a non-member of the University will become a member. Is such a person still "external"? There seems to be a lot of muddled thinking here. I suspect that it reflects a Freudian slip over what a member of the University actually is.

There is much to be said for commanding leadership and Prof. Grant has recently argued eloquently for it in “The Higher”. However, this must surely occur in a democratic setting. Prof. Grant noted how the leading American universities are run. The American people, however, are in general very enthusiastic about “checks and balances”: American universities set great store by the influence their alumni exert on them. Examination of the present consultation paper, however, shows no reference to Cambridge’s graduates at all. Yet the paper would offer places on the Council to those with no prior connection with the University (paragraph 7)!

That a pro-vice-chancellor of the University can suggest in a national publication that the University’s democracy may not only be a “weakness” but a “fatal weakness” is disturbing. I fear that an attempt is being made to dismantle the University’s present democratic system of governance and to replace it with rule by a Council where nearly half the members are appointed instead of almost all being elected. In the long run, this can only be damaging to the University and to its reputation both in this country and abroad. I believe that the consultation paper should be thoroughly reconsidered and revised.

Yours sincerely

Dr J.C. Horton
(Churchill – Ph.D., 1987)

From Dr R. Jennings

To whom it may concern

1. To establish my credentials, I've worked for the University since 1988 and been Director of Industrial Liaison since 1994. I was Director of the Wolfson Industrial Liaison Office, a General Board institution, from 1994 until it joined with the Research Grants and Contracts Section to become the new Research Services Division. My status has changed from that of a Head of Department to now being part of the UAS. My old office was chronically under-resourced and the change has been very positive in that respect although I can no longer complain about the University administration !

I think we have given the academics a rotten service in some respects but on the other hand they are unsophisticated customers who do not demand, or have been prepared historically, to invest in a better support service. This is slowly changing and it's a massive pity it took a Capsa to make this very obvious point - thank goodness in some respects that it did happen or these ideas would not be being discussed.

(Some money may have been wasted on Capsa but I regret the crude glossing over of the fact that many individuals worked very very hard to the extent in some cases of being very damaged in the process - that was indeed a huge waste of a valuable asset.)

One of the problems with my old office was that while I had a management group of outstanding individuals, it was difficult sometimes to get them to address issues that were University wide rather than local to them. (eg "Of course the University needs to manage its finances properly, but no I don't want indirect costs to be increased as that may turn away my own potential sponsors")

2. I have served on many company boards as a non-exec director and sat on many University committees. This give me an unusual mixture of experience so I would like to make few comments on the proposals.

I have sat on good and bad boards and on good and bad committees - whether a board or a committee runs well depends to a very large extent on the quality of the individuals and how well they are chaired. Clarity on their function, remit, knowledge of the consequences of their decisions, and about the process and procedures for implementing their decisions are crucial to their success regardless of whether they are a board or a committee.

3. While I believe change is necessary and there is much merit in the proposals, unless the issues in 2 are addressed, little progress will be made - in my personal experience much of the recent difficulties have resulted not so much because of the inherent complexity of the system but from incautious appointments (exacerbated by our dreadful pay structure) to certain key posts and a lack of clarity about the role and levels of responsibilities of those posts. There was a major loss of information about process and procedures caused to some extent by changes in personnel and exacerbated by the early retirement scheme.

4. The fact that so much knowledge walked out of the door shows clearly the need to change and put in place scaleable structures, jobs with clearer remits and systems that are less vulnerable to the loss of key individuals. It used to be easier to get things done - partly because we were smaller but also because it was much easier to find out from key, well informed individuals how things could or should be done even using the current idiosyncratic structure.

5. On the specific proposals, I would claim no expertise on university governance and I am not an academic staff member, but following the well trodden path of academic freedom, exercise my right to make comments on things I know little about!

6. The role of the VC certainly needs better definition but the VC also is in a position even under the current regime to define better his or her function - overload can result from poor time management and an inability to say no and to delegate. The VC is portrayed as the victim of circumstances which does not do the current incumbent much credit!

7. The VC should not chair Council and the latter should have external members but I can't comment on the exact composition except to say keep it as small as possible and ensure the members are of high quality and properly qualified or trained to do their job.

8. PVCs are essential and while I would argue should probably be academics, they could be from elsewhere depending on their remit and role. We need the best people not necessarily the best academic for the job. In general we expect far too much of people and as result devalue the roles they perform or encourage people not fully to apply themselves to the task in hand and reinforce the inspired amateur approach.

9. Why is the VC's period in post defined at all? Why not appoint as you would in industry, with reviews etc and an ability to change the incumbent if necessary?

10. The roles of the Council and General Board as drawn still seem a real muddle as described in Section 6 and seem to me to be based as much on sentiment as on necessary function. This division of responsibility has caused much of the problems in the past and to say a complex system needs a complex management structure is going backwards not forwards. Companies don't have two boards. I suggest getting rid of the General Board and having executive committees of Council in defined areas.

11. Enhancing the role of Chairs of Councils of Schools seems a good way of delegating responsibility, coping with Cambridge's complexity and what is needed, rather than keeping the GB as an additional layer.

12. The Regent House - we should abolish the term "Assistant Staff" - we're all employees. It should be expanded with due thought - the established/unestablished terminology coupled with the three year appointments etc are a real barrier to recruitment and hardly give the impression of equal opportunities.

13. The Ballot - it's a quaint system and a shame that the Latin has been lost thereby destroying its novelty value. Given that it will be retained, something bigger than the primary anthropological group seems a good idea ie 10 or so people are easily reached and influenced - companies reckon double that number is where organisational structures start to be needed so you could argue that 25 would be enough. 50 seems adequate to ensure real concerns are aired rather than expressions of annoyance from a small disaffected group with specific axes to grind.

If I can contribute further to the debate in any way, I would be happy to do so.

Richard Jennings

12 February 2002

From Sir John Kingman, FRS

Dear Tim,

I am replying to the Vice-Chancellor's general invitation to comment on the consultation paper on the governance of the University. As a very recent returner to Cambridge, I am diffident about contributing to the debate, but sometimes an outsider can see different aspects of the situation, and I have experienced similar issues in another research university.

There are many features of the consultation paper that I applaud. The sharper job description for the VC, the seven year term (a minimum period in my experience), the changed composition of Council, and the changes to Regent House procedure are all steps in the right direction. There are however aspects of the proposals that cause me concerns, and I elaborate below. However, the fact that more space is given to these should not be interpreted as a negative response to the general thrust of the paper.

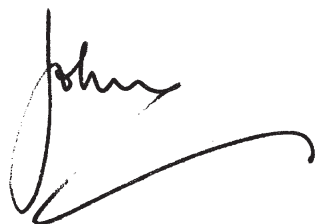
1. It is right to regard the Chairs of the Councils of the Schools (and the clinical equivalent) as the same as deans of what other universities would call faculties, but the effect of recognising this and increasing the number of Pro-Vice-Chancellors is to give the VC too broad a span of reporting. At least 14 officers (5 PVCs, 6 "deans", Registry, Treasurer and Secretary General) will be reporting direct to the VC, who will have to spend all his time keeping the team moving together.
2. A second worry is that functional PVCs will blur the reporting lines of key officers. Will the Personnel Officer report to the Registry or to the PVC(personnel)? Will the Director of Estates report to the Registry, a PVC or to the VC directly? One of Cambridge's problems, I think, is to believe that governance and administration are distinct activities that can be separated, whereas they are integral aspects of effective management and leadership.

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The Unified Administrative Service must be integrated into the management structure, with clear and unique reporting lines.

3. A sign of woolly thinking is that the vestigial offices of Treasurer and Secretary General remain, and this nettle really must be grasped. This is not a criticism of the present occupants, but of a structure which leaves unclear the responsibilities in two areas as crucial as financial and academic management.
4. The paper is unclear about which functions the VC will delegate to PVCs, and which he will undertake himself. I find the designation of one PVC to take responsibility for internal University affairs ominous, encouraging the VC to spend his (or her) time representing the University outside. A good VC acts visibly as leader of the academic community, and must keep outside commitments under control so as to keep in touch with that community.
5. This leads me to a general point. We are accustomed to describing Cambridge as an academic democracy, but it lacks a dimension which newer universities value. A provincial VC has to appear regularly before a senate of perhaps 100 representative academics, whom he has to carry with him if he is to implement his academic strategy. This is quite different from a Senate House discussion, because a senate has powers of decision and a VC must retain its support. I am not suggesting that we import this mechanism into the Cambridge constitution, but I do think that its absence puts an onus on our VC to find other ways of making himself accessible and answerable to his academic peers. He should normally chair discussions, and should always chair boards of electors to professorships.
6. The proposal to enlarge the Regent House looks good at first sight, but may have unintended consequences. It would be good to see statistics showing the way the balance of membership would change in subject terms. My guess is that it would shift away from undergraduate subjects towards those of mainly postgraduate interest, and would reduce the proportion of members from the humanities. Would this be a good thing?
7. The paper's arguments are weak in rejecting the Oxford example of combining the Council and the General Board. My guess is that a few years of comparison will show that Oxford has made the right decision, and will be better able to integrate planning and policy making by having a single responsible body.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.