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Issues and Challenges of Minutes Writing: A University Assistant Registrar's Perspective

Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of minutes writing, the conventional structure of minutes and some implications for an Assistant Registrar as a secretary. It concludes that writing minutes can be tedious but worth doing with the needed and appropriate skill.

Introduction

Meetings are an essential part of the routine for an office or institution. As universities run on boards and committees, minutes become even more critical, as major decisions emanating from these boards and committees help regulate affairs of Universities including that of the University of Education, Winneba. While some of these meetings may be of semi formal nature, all meetings need a record of the decisions taken and motions moved and voted upon. Examples of meetings held in the University of Education, Winneba are: Meetings of University Council and its sub committees such as Finance committee, Development committee, Academic Board and standing committees such as Academic Planning Committee, Executive Committee, as well as Faculty Board Meetings. At such meetings, writing accurate minutes are an issue of importance. This paper discusses the importance of minutes writing, some implications for an Assistant Registrar as a secretary and what secretaries should avoid.

Definition of Minutes

Collins English Dictionary (2007) defines minutes as a record of proceedings of a meeting. Sekyi-Baidoo (2003) elaborates on this definition and describes minutes as an account of the various issues raised and discussed at a meeting and decisions taken on such issues. In other words, minutes are records of discussions at a meeting or record of the business transacted at a meeting to direct affairs of an organisation. Such decisions and discussions become bench marks for future direction of an organisation or an institution. It is in the light of this that minutes are of importance to any organisation.

Importance of Minutes

Minutes are important due to the following reasons:

1. As a Record of Decisions

Since the decisions are important for the sustenance of the organisation, minutes writing can never be compromised. It must therefore be an accurate record of the decisions of proceedings to serve as a point of reference for discussions.

2. As a Reflection of Consensus

More often than not, decisions are arrived at after open and thorough discussions. Thus, minutes are virtually not individual decisions, rather, they are a reflection of consensus arrived at by members present. Each person may have their own perspective and this becomes the official version.

3. As a Guide to Officials

When decisions are made, they are supervised and executed by officials of the organisation. Minutes are therefore the guide to the officials in their day-to-day assignments or responsibilities to the organisation. By this, minutes serve as a guide to administrators/officials to enable them to stay within the confines of the decisions and directives of the organisation.

4. For Evaluation

According to Sekyi-Baidoo (2003), when "matters arising" are conducted as part of a meeting as is the norm, they are in a way placing the organisation's activities side by side the decisions taken at the

previous meeting. Hence, it can be argued that, minutes form the springboard for the chairman to evaluate the task assigned to ascertain whether it had been achieved as expected.

5. Attendance

Minutes also deal with records on the attendance of members. This record can be helpful in two main ways. First, it encourages members to be regular and punctual since they know that any absence will be recorded. Secondly, it serves a record that the required quorum has been met to prevent members' decision from being challenged.

The following quote therefore gives credence to the discussion on the importance of minutes: "minutes are useful so as to:

- confirm any decisions made
 - record any agreed actions taken
 - record who has been allocated any tasks or responsibility
 - provide details of the meeting to anyone unable to attend
 - serve as a record of the meeting's procedure and outcome"
- http://www.agreedate.com/minutes_1.aspx

Essentials of Good Minutes Writing

The Minutes of a meeting is considered a legal document and can be tendered in a court of competent jurisdiction. The reason being that if the decision is not in the document, it suggests it did not happen. For the minutes to reflect what transpired at the meeting, Hall (1976:55) mentions that minutes must be:

- (a) **Authentic:** A precise account of the proceedings of the meeting, and nothing more.
- (b) **Complete:** Minutes do not have to be a stenographic or verbatim record of every word spoken in the meeting. By the same token, minutes should not be so scanty as to fail to reflect the decisions taken during the meeting. It must rather be in sufficient detail to enable a person who was not present at the meeting to understand fully what business was transacted.
- (c) **Concise:** To the point as possible, but completeness must not be sacrificed for the sake of conciseness.
- (d) **Free from ambiguity:** That is, (i) dates, numbers, amounts, quantities, etc., must be clearly stated. (ii) Documents must be clearly identified. E.g. by number. (iii) Officials and persons concerned in making decisions, giving or receiving instructions, etc., must be named or otherwise described, so as to indicate with certainty who is intended.
- (e) **Past tense:** Minutes, being a record of what was decided, must be written in the past tense.

Preparations for a Meeting

The outcome of a meeting depends a lot on the preparations made for the meeting. As a secretary to a committee or a board, one has an onerous task to perform before, during and after the meeting. This is to ensure that all the necessary arrangements with regards to the venue and the members expected to attend are in place. The secretary must prepare the invitation well ahead of time. Those who are expected to act on decisions taken at the previous meeting must be written to before the next meeting.

Before a meeting, according to Effah & Daniel (2009), the secretary must:

- Hold final consultation with the chairman on the agenda.
- Prepare and circulate agenda indicating date, time and venue.
- Arrange for coffee/tea services if needed.

Vassallo (2001) also suggests that the secretary to a board or a committee should discuss and communicate with subject-matter experts to get the best briefing they can before the meeting. This is to

ensure that the secretary understands the items on the agenda and establishes clear expectations of what the discussion on that item will yield.

As secretary to a committee or board, one is expected to be at the venue well ahead of time to ensure the place is in order even where, it is certain that subordinate staff have been delegated to put the place in order. This in a way, would help the Assistant Registrar to get organised before the start of the meeting. In some cases, members may forget to bring along the minutes and other accompanying documents sent. As a secretary, the Assistant Registrar must ensure that there are extra copies of all the documents for distribution to those who might need them

During meeting day, Effah & Daniel (2009) put forward that, the secretary must:

- Report well ahead of time to ensure there is a place for every member.
- Have extra copies of the agenda, minutes and stationery such as pen/pencils for any member who may need them
- Take a seat next to the chairman (preferably, on the right) so as to be able to confer with him/her.
- Have readily available a copy of the enabling instruments eg. University act, statutes, students Handbook or if it is a special committee tasked with a responsibility, terms of reference for consultation.
- Prompt the chairman when there is a quorum
- Have the minutes book ready for signature, after it has been confirmed.

Vassallo (2001) further suggests that during a meeting, a secretary should:

- feel free to ask a clarifying question whenever he/she is unclear on a point
- favour writing over speaking (i.e. limiting spoken contributions to the meeting because they inhibit writing.)

After the meeting, the secretary according to Effah & Daniel (2009), must:

- Clear meeting place of all confidential materials
- Proceed to draft minutes as soon as practicable
- Notify all parties from whom action is expected
- Review draft minutes with the chairman
- Begin preparation for next meeting

Vassallo (2001), Effah & Daniel (2009) agree that after the meeting, the secretary must get started immediately with writing the minutes.

Structure of Minutes

Minutes cannot be arranged haphazardly, these call for a kind of structure or format. The structure of writing minutes may differ from organisation to organisation. By convention, the structure used for most institutions including University of Education, Winneba, is as follows:

- Title/Heading: This usually include:
 - (i) *Name of the body, e.g. institution, which held the meeting*
 - (ii) *Kind of meeting e.g. Academic Board Meeting*
 - (iii) *Place of the meeting*
 - (iv) *Day and date of the meeting.*
- Names of those present (Attendance List), including (where applicable) those “*in attendance*” i.e. *those who are not members of the committee or board but are there by invitation, or ex-officio, as well as members absent.*
- Confirmation of previous minutes (in practice, with the consent of the meeting, they are *often “taken as read,” particularly if copies of the minutes have been circulated to members prior to the meeting*). After the minutes are read (or taken as read), corrections made on grammatical slips and typographical errors and where there are no corrections or addendum, a motion is put to

the meeting, recommending their adoption as a true record of proceedings of the preceding meeting to which they refer.

- Matters Arising. Usually, it reports on assignments given to members as a result of decisions taken. It could also come about due to items deferred at previous meeting.
- New Business. They constitute the new issues on the agenda.
- Any Other Business. Here discussions that do not form part of the agenda are raised at this point. They are normally a message, information or important items raised by members.
- Closing/Adjournment. This covers areas such as concluding remarks by the chairperson, motions moved for closing and seconded, prayers and closing time.
- Endorsement. This covers the name and signature of the person who took the minutes (secretary) and the chairman

Things to avoid as a secretary

1. Inflaming Passion

In writing minutes, irrespective of the house style of the organisation or institution, statements likely to invoke emotive and inflame passions should be avoided as much as possible. For instance: *The Board rejected the committee's work.* In a more acceptable presentation, it could be said that: *The board did not approve of the committee's work.*

2. Name Mentioning

Names of members making contributions should not be mentioned; it is of course not very helpful. Name mentioning according to Effah & Daniel (2009) exposes contributors to possible ridicule, hatred or even physical attack. It creates villains and heroes where there is no place for either. Mentioning names further inhibit contribution. It is therefore advisable and safe not to mention names. For example, minutes of a meeting held has the following: *"Prof. Asempta indicated that the issue of internship for the Business Administration students should be referred to the Faculty Board"* Similarly, *"Prof. Asempta indicated that the Procurement Unit claimed the supply of the computers had delayed because they did not know the required specifications."*

In the preceding case for instance, the secretary could have simply written that *"a member indicated that the issue of internship students should be referred to the Faculty Board."* This does not expose any contributor at the meeting.

There is however, an exception to the rule. A member's name is mentioned, when for example, that member has been assigned a responsibility and also when that member is reporting on an issue.

3. Absence of Matters Arising as part of the Agenda

Furthermore, it is worth stating that, for a very first meeting of Academic Board for the beginning of an academic year for example, the agenda for the meeting will normally not have any "matters arising", as that will be the first meeting. It must however, be noted that this is an exception.

- Many a time, "matters arising" out of a previous meeting are overlooked and never treated as part of the minutes, creating the impression that businesses conducted at the previous departmental meetings were dealt with as if it was adhoc in nature. For instance, Minutes of a particular Departmental meeting [name withheld] held on October 8, 2010 and April 3, 2011 had its structure without matters arising. Rather it had (i) title/heading (ii) names of those present (iii) opening (iv) Business of the day (v) A.O.B and (vi) closing. Interestingly however, on the **October 8, 2010** meeting, it was captured in the minutes that members had complained of inadequate seats for members. It was therefore expected that in the **April 3, 2011** meeting which was next after the October 8, 2010 meeting, the issue complained of in the previous minutes would have featured prominently as "matters arising". This would have placed the department's activities side by side the decisions taken at the previous meeting. Having "matters arising" as

part of the agenda helps to evaluate whoever was put in charge to see if the decision had been carried through. The absence of “*matters arising*” on the agenda of the current meeting therefore suggests an important vacuum in the minutes of the previous meeting.

Salient Issues to be noted by a Secretary/Assistant Registrar (AR)

1. The Registry is the hub around which the University revolves. Since the Registrar and his assistants serve as secretaries to the governing council with all its sub committees, there is therefore the need for the Assistant Registrar (AR) in the Faculties/Divisions and Units to be up to the task especially so with covering proceedings at meetings as a secretary.

2. In recording the minutes, it is important to note that as a secretary, not everything said, has to be noted. The salient part of writing the minutes is to record the discussion and decisions arrived at. It needs to be mentioned that, the Assistant Registrar/Secretary must ensure and note the general course that the discussion took and the motions that were passed, as well as those who passed them.

3. As a secretary, the major task is to prepare the minutes immediately after the close of meeting when the decisions taken are supposed to be fresh in the mind or possibly, contacting those who made important suggestions, before they also forget about their contributions at the meeting. This avoids slips or misrepresentation of the decisions taken. Vassallo (2001) buttresses the above by suggesting that, the secretary should contact attendees after the meeting to clarify points that they had made. Vassallo however, cautioned that “*if they embellish, improve upon, or even retract what they actually said at the meeting, then do not include their post-meeting comments*” p 223-224.

4. An efficient secretary ensures that letters are sent to those who are expected to act on decisions taken at the meeting and anyone else affected by any decisions taken at the meeting. As a secretary, one must take interest in, for example, letters of reminders to those from whom actions on projects are expected, as a result of decisions taken; or an investigation into an activity for which members want further insight. It is against this background that an Assistant Registrar/Secretary is expected to be on top of his/her work.

Challenges and way forward

1. Summarising Confusing and Inexact Debate

Anyhow, an AR as a representative of the Registrar serving as a secretary at a meeting, must understand that, minutes are meant to be an accurate record of proceedings at a meeting. For example taking minutes is a skilled job because, the secretary has to follow what can be confusing and inaccurate debates and summarise accurately what was said. Vassallo (2001) buttresses the above and puts forward that “*Planning for, taking, and writing meeting minutes offer correspondents a unique opportunity to practice distinguishing fact from opinion, to sift through the extraneous and capture the essential, and to structure their ideas logically*” Hence, prior to adjourning a meeting for instance, the AR must confirm all the information taken at the meeting. They must ask any questions for clarification on something that may have been said. Here, it is important to note that the job of the secretary **is not to interpret** what is said, but the secretary’s job is to accurately record what was said and the decisions taken.

2. Keeping the Meeting Pace

Again, it is often argued that as a secretary, you do not participate actively in the meeting. The reason being that the accuracy of the minute is critically important, and it can be very difficult for someone who is an active participant to write acceptable and comprehensive minutes. It must however, be noted that, the secretary must be an active participant drawing the chairman’s attention to any deviations from meeting procedure and providing facts and figures and other enabling instruments such as the statute and the university act (in the case of a University) to facilitate discussions on issues brought before the meeting. The secretary must be in keeping with the meeting pace to be able to make the necessary contributions.

Conclusion

In the light of the above, it can be concluded that; one significant purpose of recording minutes is to keep a record of all the decisions made and the resolutions passed during the meeting. It is again a very crucial part of a meeting, be it formal or semi- formal that attendees keep track of all the businesses resolved and all that had to be resolved. Even though, writing minutes may seem a tedious and time consuming exercise, it is a worthwhile activity which can be done with ease, provided the Assistant Registrar/Secretary knows how to go about it efficiently and effectively. When done right it is often rewarding and worthwhile especially when put to the test at a meeting that is reviewing the minutes or when needed as evidence of what transpired at a meeting or a court of competent jurisdiction.

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