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Living Values Project at the University of Mauritius

1. The University of Mauritius: its objects, mission and vision.

Mauritius is a small island in the southwestern part of the Indian Ocean, some 1200 miles off the southeast coast of Africa, the nearest land mass. The island has an area of about 750 square miles with a population of 1.3 million. Originally, there were no inhabitants on the island. The island was first visited by the Dutch (who named it after their then ruler Prince Maurits Van Nassau, 1600's), and then was colonized by the French (1710), followed by the British (1815). The colonizers initially brought slaves from Africa, laborers from India, merchants from China. The population and the economy grew and Mauritius became independent in 1968. Today, Mauritius is a flourishing economy and has a rich cultural diversity where people of all races and faiths, descended from Europeans, Africans, Asians, live well together. The official languages are English and French. The country is a vibrant parliamentary democracy and has a free and fiercely critical press.

There are numerous higher educational institutions in the country, with the University of Mauritius as the premier, leading tertiary education provider. The founding principles of the University of Mauritius (Provisional Council) were set along those of traditional British universities in 1965, and following independence in 1968, the University of Mauritius Act was formally passed by the Mauritian parliament in 1971. The Objects of UoM are prescribed in section 4 of its Act, which are quoted here:

Objects of the University

The objects of the University shall be to provide facilities for and to engage in teaching and research and thereby to promote the advancement of learning and knowledge and, in particular, to provide a university education responsive to the social, administrative, scientific, agricultural and technological needs of Mauritius; to hold out, on such terms as it thinks fit and within the limits of its resources to suitably and academically qualified persons who in the opinion of the University are able and willing to benefit from the facilities it offers, the opportunity of acquiring education befitting a university of the highest standing.

As per the UoM Strategic Plan 2015-2020, the mission and vision are:

Mission:

To provide quality education to students and promote knowledge creation and dissemination through research and innovative teaching while responding to the developmental needs of the country and the global community.

Vision: To position the UoM as a leading tertiary institution in the region and a research-engaged and entrepreneurial University.

2. UoM: Institutional Values and their sub-elements

The UoM strategic plan 2015-2020 is based on the University's core values and there are policies and processes in place to ensure that the University lives by its values. The Values with their operational sub-elements, together with examples of policies for each one, are provided hereunder:

- **Good Governance**

The UoM's policy of good governance is based on the principles of Accountability, Equality, Integrity, Ethics, Transparency, Respect, Sense of Belonging and Fairness at all levels.

The University submits an annual good governance report as part of its overall Corporate Governance Report which is subject to public scrutiny by the Public Accounts Committee, a subcommittee of Parliament.

- **Intellectual Freedom**

Our staff enjoy freedom of thought and expression, and are empowered to nurture their creativity and invest in their personal development through the use of innovative technologies.

Our academic staff members regularly express their opinions freely in the press, radio and television in their fields of expertise. There is no record of staff suffering any kind of oppression for criticizing governmental policy.

- **Leadership**

Our staff take the initiative in leading the UoM towards the successful fulfilment of its mission in the spirit of dignity and mutual respect.

The merit-based selection process for Deans, Pro-VCs, and VC ensures that they are empowered to take decisions based on their own judgmental ability and leadership.

- **Quality**

Our staff have customer care and customer service at heart and a strong desire for excellence which are to be achieved through professionalism, team-working and recognition for hard work.

Teaching and Research audits are carried out at the University. There are also Faculty Quality Assurance Committees which ensure that Quality prevails.

Our system of foreign external examiners ensures that our degrees are of comparable standard to those of universities of international repute.

- **Social Responsibility**

The University believes that its sustainability cannot be ensured without accomplishing its social responsibilities. Its services are accessible to all citizens of Mauritius as its staff put their expertise at the service of society.

The University does not charge tuition-fee for undergraduate degrees. This is done purposefully to ensure that poor socio-economic background will not be an obstacle to bright students from benefitting from a university-education.

As part of its Corporate Social Responsibility, the University works in close collaboration with several Non-Governmental Organizations to help them in their activities.

The University also helps the Public Sector in various ways ranging from contribution in Road Safety to spearheading a Cancer Alliance that groups together all stakeholders in the fight against cancer.

3. UoM and the Living Values Project

In addition to the above core values as enunciated in its strategic plan, an examination of the UoM Act and Statutes show that they were based on the following guiding principles of its founding fathers: (a) to ensure that academic staff have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges; (b) to enable the University to provide education, promote learning and engage in research efficiently and economically; (c) to apply the principles of justice and fairness; (d) to provide for an independent governing Council for the University.

The public interest is safeguarded by having some members from the public sector as well as professionals drawn from other sectors being appointed by government onto the Council upon the recommendation of the respective professional bodies. The rest of the membership of the governing Council is drawn from internal members of the University.

The Act and Statutes are already fully consistent with the fundamental core values advocated by the MCO and which are central to any genuine university: Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, Integrity, Equity. Therefore, the question arises why did the University of Mauritius feel the need to renew its pledge to the core values of Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom in particular? Why did we seize the opportunity to engage in the pilot process designed to ensure adherence to these core values and moreover to promote further specific values?

The answer lies in the increasingly interwoven and interacting fabric of the society within which universities operate. No university can claim to be totally immune from external pressures and occasionally there will be attempts, (sometimes subtle, sometimes more blatant) which will challenge the university's autonomy. The UoM has experienced at least one such serious case in the past when external influence tried to undermine an internal organizational restructuring and the then Vice-Chancellor resigned in protest in January 2012. Upon pressure exercised by the academic staff through articles and interviews in the press, government appointed an external, independent Visitor to investigate and make recommendations on consolidating the University's autonomy. Following the Visitor's recommendations, the initial restructuring with the appropriate adjustments was put in place, and the Visitor in his Report, also acceded to the staff's request for the UoM to become a signatory of the MCU.

The above incident illustrates well the fact that one cannot always take Institutional Autonomy for granted; universities, especially publicly-funded ones, must remain forever watchful and mindful of succumbing to such pressures. The incident provided the initial motivation for our signing of the MCU, and now our active participation in the Living Values Project is another mark of our continuing commitment to the fundamental values of Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom.

Whilst the above external factors provided the initial impetus for our signing up to the values enshrined in the MCU, we also saw in the Living Values Project, the possibility of using it as an external catalyst which could help us consolidate the above values and furthermore promote some other specific values of importance to us.

4. The core values underpin our strategic plan

The University's core values spelled out above (*vide 2*) underpin the formulation and implementation of its strategic plan. All our policies and processes are in line with the all-encompassing precepts of good governance. Some of our policies which give effect to our core values include, amongst others, the Policy of Equality of Opportunity, the Students' charter, the Code of Practice for Council Meetings, the Procedural Agreement for Staff Unions, all of which are designed to be consistent and comply with our core values. These core values as spelt out in the strategic plan, Good Governance, Intellectual Freedom, Leadership, Quality, Social Responsibility and their key parameters are consonant with the principles of Institutional Autonomy, Academic Freedom, Integrity, Equity, Respect, and Responsibility.

5. Steering the Living Values project: the various stages

When the University of Mauritius was selected to be one of the pilot sites, following discussions with the Vice-Chancellor and the MCO ambassador Eva Egron-Polak, it was decided to constitute a team of persons comprising of representatives from each Faculty and Centre plus representatives from each of the staff and student unions through a call for expression of interest.

The UoM Council decided that the UoM Representative to the MCO would be ideally suited to chair the small committee.

At the first meeting of the Committee with the MCO ambassador in early February 2018, the Vice-Chancellor stressed on the importance of Values for a university, especially in a world where the University faces numerous challenges and its role is an evolving one.

This was followed by a presentation of our Act and the New Statutes 2013 adopted by the UoM Council pursuant to the Visitor's recommendations. The presentation highlighted the underlying philosophy as well as the specific clauses of the new Statutes 2013 which gives effect to the fundamental Values of **Institutional Autonomy, Academic Freedom, Integrity, Equity** (See attached annex re: pertinent points of the new statutes).

In the discussion with the MCO ambassador, it was pointed out that the existing Mission and Vision of the University focused explicitly on academic excellence in teaching and research and these were underpinned by our Core Values.

We examined a long list of some 15 other desirable Values and finally decided that, in addition to the four values advocated by the MCO, we would in the first instance, add **Responsibility** and **Respect** as two other Values that we would test and eventually promote.

We decided that the next step would be to carry out a university-wide survey to test the extent to which the university presently lives these values. The next few weeks saw a flurry of activity. We designed the survey form. We tested the questions on small groups and based on our feedback, we refined the questions to be put in the google survey form. Finally, the form was sent out to all 1,000 staff and 12,000 students of the University. The staff and students had about 12 days to respond. After that, the committee met and analyzed the results.

The next step involved a large focus group discussion. From the lessons we learned, we concluded that in future we should adopt a more direct and pragmatic approach. The committee decided that we should henceforth focus more on promoting our values rather than further testing of the extent to which we were adhering to them.

Throughout the process, the main difficulty we faced was the students' lack of participation in the process. We did appeal to various other groups of students, but we found, to our great dismay, that our students were more interested in either their lectures or attending their social functions than to attend our discussions on values.

The focus group discussion also revealed that most members of the University were absorbed in their own work and were quite ignorant or even oblivious of the current institutional practices and provisions that existed for them. There were a lot of misconceptions about the nature of the values in the survey form. For example, the survey and focus group discussion revealed that students and staff often did not understand the meaning of academic freedom or institutional autonomy; some staff members did not realize that they could talk freely to the press on their respective fields without having to seek permission.

5B. Lessons drawn

From the survey and the focus group discussion, there were some lessons to be learnt:

First, that timing and the appropriate opportunity were critical where students were concerned. The Committee concluded that the best approach would be to catch students' attention when they were still new to the University, that is, during the orientation days, in fresher's week.

Second, that it was important to dispense some induction to staff. It was clear that even after many years at the university, it was in most cases unlikely that staff would somehow pick up those concepts by themselves.

6. What has changed

We have not changed our values. What has changed is the manner in which we are to view the Living Values Project. It has become clear to us that this project cannot have an expiry date. For the University team, it is in fact the beginning of a process to promote our values over the years.

7. The benefits to be drawn

It is hoped that the outcome in the long run will be to produce a generation of students who have more Respect and tolerance for other points of view. A class of citizens who will be able to discuss intelligently without launching into personal attacks. We also feel that we shall be able to produce people who will document themselves properly on a topic before emitting an opinion on same.

Staff who will be willing to assume Responsibility for their actions and be accountable for same.

The process will help to embed values more fully into the behavior of leadership, faculty, staff and students. It will greatly improve our level of productivity, satisfaction and well-being at the University. Ultimately, as our students move on to assume roles of responsibility in different spheres of life, the process started here will act as a transformational agent to better our society at large and contribute to a more global citizenship.

8. Our plan

We will implement a concrete and pragmatic set of measures to increase awareness of values and sensitize staff and students to them.

On the advice of our committee members well-versed in such matters, we have decided, in the first instance, to create an impact by putting up banners and stickers of our Values in well-frequented spots on campus during the orientation week, end of July-beginning of August. These were recently approved by Senate for use during our orientation week.

Secondly, we plan to hold a series of talks on these topics to our students and staff. These will start in the first or second week of August, soon after resumption of term.

Thirdly, we intend to have workshops led by persons already in this field.

Finally, we will also hold discussions with other stakeholders to study the possibility of introducing Values into our student curriculum and as part of staff continuous professional development.

It is expected that these measures will be fruitful and will provide a rich source of inspiration and discussion in the Salamanca workshops.

Mono Bunwaree

(UoM Representative to the MCO
& UoM Council Member)

10 July 2018

Enc: Annex 1

Some pertinent points of the UoM Act and New Statutes 2013

1) Autonomy

A scrutiny of our Act and Statutes reveals that there is no mention of any parent ministry for us. Unlike some other Universities in Mauritius, our Vice Chancellor is not nominated by any minister but, is appointed by our Council after a rigorous international selection exercise. In fact, all of our appointments are done by the Council. To all intents and purposes we are an **autonomous institution**.

2) Academic Freedom

We were set up by an Act of Parliament, the University of Mauritius Act. The Act gives the University Council the power to modify its Statutes and thereby the **freedom** to shape its destiny. Senate makes Regulations and we decide on our courses, contents, and priorities.

3) Separation of powers

The Statutes draw a clear demarcation line between our Council and the management. We have a unique feature, a Council Secretary who, unlike a Company Secretary, is not part of the Senior Administration or Management, but acts as an interface between the board and management. The Council Secretary ensures a faithful recording of Council decisions and is assisted by an internal administrative manager to ensure that such decisions are conveyed to the appropriate parts of management for prompt implementation. There is rotation of the internal administrative manager after every two years.

4) Integrity: Openness and Transparency.

Any member of the university, staff and students alike, can now attend Council and Senate meetings as Observers. Moreover any member of the university can consult all council and senate papers and files in the open area. Such an open environment can cause some discomfort at times but it does have the merit of ensuring a high degree of **openness and transparency and thereby promotes integrity**. Observers are however restricted from reserved areas as per an approved code of practice. These reserved areas are limited to cases of highly sensitive or personal issues.

5) Staff and student representation in decision making bodies

The composition of the Council is as follows: The Pro-Chancellor as Chairperson, the Vice-Chancellor, the two Pro-Vice-Chancellors, the Chief of Facilities and Services, a representative of the Deans, a representative of the Academic Staff, a representative of the Support Staff, a representative of the Students plus up to a maximum of nine external members from the public and private sectors nominated by government for their expertise in their respective fields upon the recommendations of their respective professional bodies. The external members are not nominated as representatives of any sector; they are nominated on our Council for their professionalism and to serve the advancement of the UoM.

6) Democratic participation

The Statutes stipulate that there must be at least six Ordinary Meetings per year. This allows for democratic participation since Ordinary Meetings of Council include as an item AOB, Any Other Business, whereby any member can raise a relevant issue at Council level.

7) Equity

Our Act states clearly as follows: “No discrimination on account of nationality, race, caste, religion, place of origin, political opinions, color, creed, all sex shall be shown against any person in determining whether he or she is to be appointed to the academic or other staff of the University, to be registered as a student of the University, to graduate thereat or to hold any advantage or privilege thereof”