Academic governance beyond learning and teaching

Academic Governance

Senate’s responsibilities, as articulated in its rules and delegations, extend well beyond those academic matters that relate to learning and teaching. In particular, its responsibilities include advising the VC and University Council on all academic matters and related activities on measures to safeguard academic freedom, on academic standards, and on academic priorities. It also carries specific powers to approve (and monitor the application of) policy in all academic matters and to request and take action on reports on academic matters requested of Faculties, Departments and Operating Units.
Comparison with other Universities

- Senate sub-committee structures - as a proxy for coverage of responsibilities.
- Terms of reference, membership, responsibilities, delegations.
- Managing the operations of Senate and its sub-committee activities.

Some missing pieces of the pie

Based upon feedback from the last workshop, and on an analysis of other institutions, our Senate lacks structures to effectively discharge its responsibilities and authority in the following areas:

Research
Internationalisation
Community / Corporate engagement
Genuine Student Engagement
Governance Training and Mentoring
Some of our Committees are Missing!

- Senate executive.
- Research policy and strategy.
- Research integrity, accountability and compliance.
- Academic administration.
- Student experience.
- Internationalisation and Community Engagement.
- Faculty boards - but we are running hard to catch up here!

I’m not saying that there aren’t committees / administrative structures somewhere whose job is to consider / manage these matters. What I am saying is that none of these are operated under the authority of Senate, and in some cases these are discharging Senate’s delegated powers without authorisation.

This is a substantial (almost constitutional) issue, given that the University By-Law states that “Academic Senate is the principal academic decision making body of the University”.

Expert sub-committees ensure that Senate can mobilise the expertise to identify issues, is appropriately advised of risks, is briefed on policy positions, and can make an informed judgements in a timely fashion.

“But Senate doesn’t know anything about issue X” – well it is the responsibility of expert sub-committees to ensure that X becomes something that Senate is familiar with!

But what about the cost of more committees?

It is not adequate to say “this committee is all about reporting and it takes time away from other things – so we shouldn’t have it”. The raw number of committees is a crude measure – the real question is does this committee provide the specific expert analysis and oversight that Senate needs in the most efficient way possible.
Optimising Committee Activities

- It's all about how we organise the business!
- Fewer meetings - but plan these more carefully to use the available time wisely.
- Much less (or no!) routine and ritualised reporting.
- Prioritising and starring business.
- Protocols for handling business between meetings.

In the electronic era there are much better ways to keep everyone informed. But all too often I attend 2 or 3 different committees all of which hear the same reports. Routine and ritualised reporting does not really help us in identifying key risks or prioritising our business – it may need to be done but it doesn’t need to take up committee time on a routine basis.

Clear operational matters and management minutiae from the agendas of governance committees.

Chairs need to be better at identifying key issues and calling for specific information to be provided to illuminate those issues.

Committees need to get better at holding those operating and managing academic processes to account.

Committees need regular review and refresh, otherwise they get stuck in ritualised reiteration of the same themes.

We've reduced the number of meetings Senate will be holding next year (to 7 plus a planning meeting), and if we can make its sub-committees more effective I'd like to go further – target 6 meetings a year (down from 9 or 10 in previous years).

What sets academic governance committees apart?

- Clearly constituted under the authority of Academic Senate.
- Broadly representative of academic stakeholders.
- Membership chosen for its expertise.
- Primarily concerned with academic matters in regard to policy, strategy, quality and integrity.
- Common and well articulated structural and organisational principles should apply to all committees of Senate.

Cross reporting isn't enough. Nor is the membership of the Chair of Senate – this might be necessary, unfortunately, but it isn’t sufficient. The presence of the Chair of Senate presence is not a matter of subject expertise – it ensures that the business of these meetings is seen to follow the principles established by Senate.

Academic Senate needs to hold such committees to account – regardless of the authorisations it grants, it continues to be responsible for the proper discharge of its delegated authorities.

These committees, and I would argue their Chairs, need to maintain their academic independence and protect the academic freedoms of members (and the wider University). While they might provide advice to executive management they must always remain independent of it.

That being said, those engaged in management processes (such as the Associate Deans) are also important, expert academic stakeholders – their membership is vital.

Broad representation is fundamentally – academic governance committees carry a responsibility to promote “buy-in” by the broader academic community. Committee size shouldn't be the primary concern, it is up to the Chair to ensure the effective organisation and operation of a larger committee. Pragmatically, much of the detailed business gets done by much smaller working parties.
Example - a common model for a Research Committee

No two research committees of Academic Boards are quite the same, but we can discern some relatively common principles, in areas such as:

• Membership.
• Authority to act.
• Business undertaken / terms of reference.
• Relationship to Senate and its management group.

Research committees often have as many as 20–25 members.

Often chaired by DVC-R, but many Universities have independent chairs selected by the Academic board. The important question is, does the chair have the expertise and time to organise the business of the committee, at and between meetings, and can he or she make an effective contribution to driving the business of Senate through membership of its Executive Committee.

Expert members of Senate are vital – they ensure a conduit of expertise and understanding between Senate and its sub-committee. They help to ensure that Senate maintains the appropriate level of scrutiny over the activities of its sub-committees.

Common Membership Principles

• DVC-R and other members of senior research management team.
• Chair of Academic Senate (as umpire?)
• A few expert (typically elected) members of Senate.
• Associate Deans Research.
• Senior researchers - often one from each Faculty.
• Heads of major research centres.
• Early career researchers and student members.
Common ToRs

• Overseeing the development (and approval) of academic policy, in areas such as research integrity and quality, ethical practice, academic freedom, research activity, data handling, outside studies, promotion and probation and so forth.
• Monitoring changes in government regulation, and advising Senate, the VC and Council on these matters.
• Receiving and acting on reports on the conduct of key academic research processes governed in accordance with academic policy (in areas such as research ethics and integrity for example).
• Receiving and acting upon reports from Faculties and research centres regarding the conduct of their research programs.
• Engaging with and advising Senate on the development of the University’s research strategy. Providing advice to Senate in regard to the alignment of academic policy and process with that strategy.

Governance issues

vs.

Management issues
Example: UWS Research and Research Training Committee

Statement of purpose:

2.1 is the principal advisory Committee to Academic Senate for research and research training;

2.2 provides strategic advice to Academic Senate on research, research training and research related matters to ensure high academic and ethical standards and support the strategic direction of the University;

2.3 provides strategic advice to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Development) on the implementation of the University Research Plan to enable strategies that support innovative, flexible and inclusive research practice;

2.4 reviews proposed amendments to policies and procedures that relate to research training to ensure compliance with the Higher Education Standards;

2.5 reviews proposed amendments to policies and procedures that relate to research at UWS;

2.6 exercises the responsibilities located in relevant policies and procedures of the University in relation to research and research training related matters; and

2.7 promotes the development of productive collaborative research within the University between UWS Research Institutes and Schools, and external entities.

Where the Rubber hits the Road!

Specific proposals to address identified challenges
Academic Governance beyond L&T

- Transfer the Quality Enhancement Committee, making it a governance committee reporting to Academic Senate.
- Establish a formal Research Committee aligned to the principles outlined in this presentation.
- Complete the Senate review of the HDRC in line with those same principles. Transfer any operational management responsibilities and merge PESC into HDRC.
- Instruct HDRC to advise Senate on the advantage / practicality of a single governance committee for Research and Research Training.
- Establish a working party to consider the transition of HDR examination to Faculties.
- Task the Chair of Senate, DVC-I and DVC-CE&A with developing recommendations to ensure that Senate is appropriately advised on internationalisation and corporate engagement matters.

The first proposal is an easy win, since this has already been approved by the executive (but has not yet been announced formally to Senate). Its terms of reference will need to be aligned with the principles discussed here.

This committee is responsible for the execution of reviews of departments, faculties and operating units primarily focused on academic matters.

Managing and Planning the Business of Senate

- Introduce an Executive Committee of Senate, to organise and prioritise its agenda, monitor and support its sub-committee processes, and approve routine academic governance matters.
- Revise the policy review and approval process, to ensure early and well-briefed engagement with Senate while delegating greater responsibility to sub-committees.
- Complete the development of a comprehensive academic risk register. Make risk assessment and prioritisation an explicit responsibility of all sub-committees - and provide risk training.
- Establish a working party to identify the responsibilities of Senate that can be authorised to Faculty Boards and develop a timeline for that transfer.

Medium term goal
- all “routine” business of Senate to be handled by its Executive.
- reduce number of meetings of Senate to 6 per year + a special meeting for collective planning.
- ensure closer collaborations between sub-committees

Executive Committee structure
Committee Processes

- Establish a formal set of principles to govern all sub-committees of Senate, along the lines discussed, from which all ToRs are derived.
- Develop a common business and secretarial support model for all academic governance committees (supported by governance services).
- Establish a much more robust process of reflective self assessment and review to apply to all academic governance committees.
- Develop an online training course and face-to-face seminars for members of governance committees. (Compulsory?)
- Introduce more rigour into the annual planning process, make its execution a responsibility of the Senate executive committee.
- Establish a timetable of member led business and make time in committee meetings for that business.

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- all “routine” business of Senate to be handled by its Executive.
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Executive Committee structure

Student Engagement

- Develop a PACE unit, or module, focussed on supporting and rewarding student academic governors.
- Adopt the title “Student Fellow” for student members of Senate, its sub-committees and SAB.
- Formally recognise the contribution of student fellows on their transcripts and in letters of reference from Senate.
- Pair each student fellow with a mentor from the committee on which they serve.
- Establish a VC’s award for student governance contributions.
- Establish a formal timetable of student led business.
- Establish a budget to compensate students who engage in commissioned governance work.
Communication and Consultation

- Establish a series of Vice-Chancellor and Chair of Academic Senate staff / student academic governance forums.
- Develop common guidelines to encompass all academic governance consultation processes.
- Develop a formal communication plan for Senate and its sub-committees. Redesign the Senate website to focus on hot topics.
- Introduce a searchable database of Senate and Faculty Board resolutions. Adopt a social networking platform for governance Q&A.
- Provide support for the communication needs of student and staff representatives - to facilitate better two-way communication with their constituencies.

Miscellany

- Establish a working party to develop a mechanism for ensuring that Heads of Department are better represented in the academic governance process.
- Pursue the review of the ex-officio / elected / professional staff balance on Senate. This process to conclude in first quarter 2015.
- Organise for Faculty elected members to meet between meetings and bring forward matters to populate a “business without notice” section of the agenda.
- Add Faculty elected members of Senate to the membership of Faculty Boards (observer status?).
Questions for Discussion.

- Do the measures proposed adequately address concerns raised?
- Is there anything we’ve missed?
- Factors than need further investigation?
- What are the practicalities and resource implications?

Session II - Scenarios
**Example Scenario - contract cheating.**

Universities have launched internal investigations into the widespread cheating exposed last week involving up to a thousand students across the state. Fairfax Media revealed last week MyMaster, an underground essay writing business being run out of Sydney, had reaped more than $160,000 from students studying in Australia this year alone.

SMH November 18, 2014

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Advice to council – action taken to address these kinds of issues:

1) New frameworks for Managing Misconduct,
2) Restructured disciplinary committee processes.
3) Improved management of final exams.
4) Modifying assessment design to “design out” cheating.
5) Use of online detection tools.
6) Monitoring of contract sites like freelancer.com
7) Preventing advertising on campus.
8) Staff code of conduct.

**Questions**

- What mechanisms can be or have been put in place to ensure the academic governing body is aware of this issue?
- Does that mechanism currently exist? If so, how effective is it?
- What are the genuine academic governance issues that arise in this case?
- What are the identified academic risks?
- What information needs to be sought to inform a discussion, decision or policy position?
- What action can the academic governing body take, and how could it seek to mitigate the identified risks?