

THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF ACADEMIC BOARDS AND SENATES IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

A paper originally formulated at the National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates held at the University of New South Wales (2005) and revised at subsequent conferences in Adelaide (2012) and Sydney (2013).

Acknowledgements and authorship:

This paper is a revised version of a 2005 paper by Professor Anthony Dooley, then Chair of the Academic Board of the University of NSW. Following discussion at the 2012 and 2013 conferences it was revised by Associate Professor Paul Wormell (University of Western Sydney) and Associate Professor Peter McCallum (University of Sydney) to take account of the Higher Education Standards Framework, the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency and the revised Australian Qualifications Framework, and feedback from the conference participants.

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Preamble: Every Australian University now has a body, known variously as Academic Board, Academic Senate, Senate, or Academic Council. This body, referred to in this document as “the Board”, is the peak academic body within the University. It is distinct from the University’s principal governing body, which is known variously as the Council, the Senate, or the Board of Trustees. The latter body is referred to as “the Council” in this document.

The purpose of the present document is to formulate a statement of purpose and functions for Boards for Australian universities and to delineate the relationship between the Board, the Council, and the University Executive. The document recognises the different legislative and institutional contexts in which academic boards operate, and the list of characteristics of an effective academic board is indicative rather than prescriptive, having different weights and applicability in different institutions. Its purpose is not to set standards for compliance but to articulate a broad statement of purpose and function which individual institutions will adapt to create effective governance accommodated to their mission and circumstances.

Mission of the Board: The Board is the principal policy-making and advisory body on all academic matters relating to and affecting a university’s teaching, research and educational programs. It is responsible for assuring academic standards and quality, and, in fulfilling this function, ensures academic freedom, academic integrity and high standards in research, assessment and admissions. It carries out these functions in partnership with, but independently of, the Vice-Chancellor’s executive management team, referred to below as the

“University Executive”. It is separate from and accountable to the Council and works with the Vice-Chancellor, the University Executive and the Council in pursuit of the shared goals of the university to pursue truth and the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

The Board model of academic governance is founded upon consultation, collegiality and broad-based representation. This model has its origins in the historical tradition of a university as a community of scholars and remains of crucial importance in modern knowledge-based organisations in which ideas need to be continuously scrutinised and re-evaluated by experts, and in which governance is measured according to the extent to which it fosters education and free inquiry.

The Board is composed primarily of academics, who are representative of the academic diversity in the university. It also includes students as junior colleagues in the academic enterprise and provides an important venue for student involvement in academic decision-making. The Board will frequently also include professional staff as key partners in its mission.

Free and open debate fosters moral authority within the academic community, and the Board provides a forum to promote debate and information flow on a wide range of issues affecting research and higher education. Boards provide cross-functional and collegial mechanisms to address and resolve complex problems that cut across academic and administrative policy.

Through its representational structure, the Board upholds the voice and the interests of the academic community in a tripartite governance structure in Australian universities comprising the Academic Board, the Council and the Executive Management led by the Vice-Chancellor (see Figure 1).

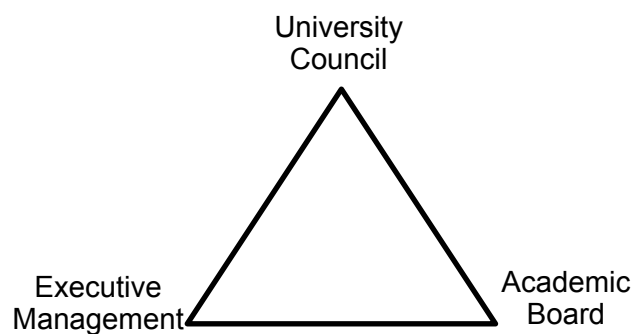


Figure 1: The tripartite governance model of Australian Universities (after Shattock (2012), Fig. 2)

Chair of the Board: University Academic Boards are presided over by an individual, variously entitled Chair, President or Presiding Member. In this document, that person is referred to as Chair of the Board. While many University Acts or Statutes allow the Vice

Chancellor or designated Deputy/Pro-Vice-Chancellor to be Chair of the Board, most universities in practice have an elected Chair and one or two elected or appointed Deputy Chairs. It is desirable, and almost universal, that the Chair is an ex-officio member of the university Council. Frequent and full communication between the Chair, Deputy Chairs, Vice-Chancellor and Council is essential for the effective implementation of the university's mission.

Characteristics of a well-functioning Board: In an institution where the Board is contributing well to fulfilling the aims of its university, one would expect to find many or all of the following characteristics, which are grouped under a series of headings.

This is not intended to be a checklist, or a list of standards. Depending on their institutional contexts, which may change with time, Boards will reflect these characteristics in different combinations and with different weightings. In a shared academic governance model, where a university organises its Board's purpose and functions differently, this list of characteristics may assist the university and Board in assessing the effectiveness of their overall academic governance arrangements by ensuring that they are managed across the institution in an appropriately collegial manner.

Governance:

The Board is properly constituted and has a clearly defined role, terms of reference and delegations that support the university's mission and values; are consistent with the university's enabling legislation; are approved by the university Council; and address relevant legislative and regulatory instruments such as the Higher Education Standards Framework.

There is a well-defined statement which clarifies roles and delegations of the Board, the Council and the University Executive. This statement establishes a shared governance role; distinguishes between the Board's role in academic governance and the function of management; guarantees independence of the Board; ensures that it has a regular reporting relationship to the Council; and ensures good, evidence-based advice to the Council, the Vice Chancellor and the University Executive on academic matters. The Board contributes to setting the institutional agenda rather than merely responding to agendas established elsewhere. As part of its role in safeguarding academic standards, the Board's delegations include the power to request reports from or refer matters to Faculties, Schools, Departments and Boards of Studies.

The Board has a balanced membership that allows expert, collegial and well-informed consideration of academic business; this includes senior officers and academic leaders of the university, and elected staff and student members who can provide a wide range of perspectives, voices and expertise.

The Board has a majority of elected members who do not hold formal management positions within the university, and is capable of making academic decisions, within its terms of reference, that are independent of both the Council and University Executive, while pursuing the university's goals and respecting and supporting the distinctive roles and responsibilities of the Vice-Chancellor and other senior academic leaders. Where legislation permits, the Board has an independent Chair and Deputy

Chair who are elected by the Board. The Board plays a key role as a forum for students to be involved in the development and evaluation of academic processes.

The Board understands that it has a responsibility to make expert, well-informed, evidence-based decisions that serve the pursuit of truth wherever it may lead, of high academic standards and the best interests of the university as a whole. Acquitting this responsibility ensures that its decisions carry authority, are respected and are implemented.

The work of the Board is aligned with the institutional mission, values and strategic plans. The Board plays a significant role in debating, developing and implementing institutional strategy in a range of academic areas including educational and information technology, international development and community engagement.

Notwithstanding its alignment with institutional goals, the Board sets its own agenda, within its terms of reference, and is free to debate important academic matters with appropriate input from all levels of the university community.

The Board has a key role in the formulation, approval and, in some cases, implementation of academic policy relating to teaching and learning, assessment, research, admission standards and other academic matters.

While Boards typically do not have budgetary responsibility, they play a role in assessing the impact of budgetary decisions on academic matters and in reporting this to appropriate members of the University Executive.

The Board has an established and effective standing committee structure, typically with memberships beyond the Board itself, to ensure distributed participation throughout the university. The standing committees have clearly defined roles, terms of reference, accountabilities and delegations and reporting lines. Much of the Board's work will be conducted through these standing committees. The Board has effective relationships with its standing committees to achieve change in a timely manner and the relationship between these standing committees and the Council and University Executive is clearly defined. In some cases, key academic leaders such as Deputy and Pro-Vice-Chancellors play a role in these committees and serve as a key point of interaction between the Board and the University Executive.

The Board has in place processes for induction and training of new members, succession planning, and optimising the sharing of institutional knowledge.

The Board has staffing and other resources that allow it and its standing committees to operate and meet their terms of reference and accountabilities. The resources include realistic workload allowances for Chairs and Deputy Chairs, and access to facilities and information that are needed to fulfil the Board's responsibilities, including secretarial, record-keeping and communication support for the Board and its committees.

The Board keeps accurate and publicly available records of Board and standing-committee meetings.

The Board undertakes regular internal and external reviews, and benchmarking with other providers, and modifies its processes in response to this feedback.

Maintenance of Academic Standards:

The Board and its standing committees carry responsibility for quality in all academic activities, including learning and teaching, research and community engagement. The Board has a key role in the development and long-term preservation of balanced, clear, shared definitions of academic standards and integrity, and works collaboratively with other senior officers and units within the university to ensure academic quality across all activities.

The Board has an accountable and transparent framework for implementation and review of policy; for the development and review of academic quality assurance measures; for facilitating compliance with its policies and procedures; and for ensuring action is taken when it finds non-compliance. Processes must ensure the integrity of academic programs and research, and be effective, timely, comprehensive and rigorous. Members of the Board and its standing committees should have an understanding of the role of policy and the processes of compliance.

The Board has delegated authority for approval, accreditation¹ and review of new and existing academic programs, including those offered by commercial entities owned or partially owned by the university and those offered in partnership with other institutions. As part of this function the Board has authority to determine compliance of academic programs with the Australian Qualifications Framework, as well as individual institutional qualifications standards, and authority to require such compliance where programs do not comply. The Board has ultimate academic oversight of all programs, onshore and offshore, and its processes play a key role in ensuring comparability of standards, both internally and externally, and in the maintenance of standards in academic partnerships.

The Board has an important role in the assessment and evaluation of learning and teaching and in ensuring the quality of, and improvement in, teaching and learning practice. The Board ensures transparency of the performance of particular academic areas or courses and makes sure this information informs policy implementation, revision and development. In fulfilling this role, the Board may use national, institutional or its own academic performance indicators; student feedback; course evaluations; and external evaluation of courses and subjects. These indicators may relate to academic standards; assessment modes; student satisfaction; academic progress; admissions policy; progression rates; articulation; plagiarism; blended and online learning; and English entry standards.

The Board has an important role in debating and establishing research policy, and in encouraging and supporting research. It has a standing committee devoted to research, which deals with a range of issues from research integrity; support for researchers in grant applications; and research student issues, including supervision quality and mentoring.

¹ Accreditation here means acquitting the responsibilities of universities as self-accrediting institutions to ensure the learning outcomes of qualifications meet internal and external expectations at a high standard. Professional accreditation bodies will also play a role in ensuring learning outcomes meet the needs of specific professions.

The Board has a role in broad benchmarking with other universities and may conduct regular reviews of Departments, Schools, Faculties or disciplines within the university.

The Board plays a role in establishing performance criteria for probation and promotion. Board members have active involvement in senior academic appointments and promotions.

The Board plays a key role in establishing the conditions of, and in the awarding of, scholarships and prizes.

Communication within the Institution:

The Board brings a whole of institution perspective on academic matters and through effective communication, maximises efficiency and quality and removes unnecessary duplication. The Board promulgates essential academic information, and ensures wide input into academic governance. The Board has a key role in identifying and promoting academic priorities for the institution.

The Board has high-level strategies and mechanisms for communication. Key communication strategies of the Board can be usefully classified as vertical – between the Council, Board and academic community, and horizontal – between the Board, Faculties, Schools, other academic units and support units. The former initiates actions both to inform the Council and Vice-Chancellor and to respond to their questions. The latter is crucial in ensuring that the academic community has extensive input into strategy and policy development and other Board matters. The Board actively fosters productive relationships between the Board and the university's senior executive management committees, relevant organisational units and the academic community. The Chair of the Board plays a key role in both the vertical and the horizontal communications.

In addition to promulgating meeting papers, the Board has in place strategies to ensure transparent communication, such as regular reports; summaries of agendas and minutes; a functional website; and a guide to academic policies. The Board holds professional meetings, where the processes are transparent, ethical and moral; the discussion participatory and robust; the debate vigorous, productive and informed by the full range of available expertise and experience. Board members have the opportunity to question the Vice-Chancellor and senior management on matters of importance.

There is a clear definition of the role of elected members of the Board and how they should communicate with their electorates on behalf of the Board.

The Board ensures that its committee structure supports communication within the institution and plays a key role in coordination and oversight of its committees. Appropriate cross-membership of committees is vital to ensure communication. It should demonstrate effective engagement in the implementation of relevant Board decisions by executive, departmental, and faculty-level committees.

The university's staff induction processes educate staff about the Board's role within the university.

Relationships with External Stakeholders:

The Board has oversight of academic policies that regulate academic relations with stakeholders such as professional training placement policies; credit transfer and articulation arrangements; schools programs; and open foundation programs. The Board has appropriate structures and quality assurance processes to foster and ensure high standards in community-engaged learning activities.

Academic Boards have involvement with the secondary-education sector as a consequence of their involvement in admission standards. Board Chairs may provide formal advice to external bodies such as Boards of Studies and curriculum and examination committees for the Higher School Certificate.

The Board provides substantial input for external audits by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency and is informed of the reports of professional accrediting bodies.

The Board plays a role in monitoring its university's admission and recruitment policies to ensure standards, equity and diversity.

Reference:

Shattock, M. (2012) 'University governance: An issue for our time', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, DOI:10.1080/13603108.2011.645082