THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC BOARDS IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

Anthony H. Dooley
University of New South Wales

Universities have evolved from medieval communities of scholars, through the ivory towers of the Oxbridge of yesteryear, to today's large scale business model. The tension between their traditional character where reasoned argument holds sway and issues are debated thoroughly until there is scholarly consensus, and the modern imperatives of efficiency and accountability for the bottom line of the budget is palpable in most modern campuses. While most coal-face academics hold fast to the notion that academic governance should hold equal (or more than equal) sway with financial management, those in senior management sometimes come to regard "due academic process" as a barrier to prudent fiduciary running of what is effectively a large-scale corporation.

Nowhere is this tension more keenly felt than at the level of the university academic board. A form of this body exists in every Australian university, and is usually enshrined in the act of parliament which establishes the university. Its title varies, and it is called variously as Academic Board, Academic Senate, Senate, or Academic Council. In this document, I shall refer to this body as "the Board": it 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".

Indeed, despite the fact that academic governance is a crucial part of the character of a university, it has been rather overlooked in Australian Government statements and policy on universities. The Government's National Governance Protocols, introduced in 2003, dealt with the role of the Council. Subsequent reviews of University Governance, for example, the 2002 Victorian Review of University Governance, have concentrated on the role of Council in commercial activities, and have largely overlooked issues of academic governance, and make little of no mention of the Board.

Baird (2007), after a discussion of external guidance for Council members, concludes:

> For academic board members, there are far fewer external reference points to assist in the transfer of good practice. Even though universities are heavily dependent on academic boards for quality assurance in the core areas of teaching and research, on paper, at least, discussion of the roles of academic boards is not widespread. This state of affairs is the more surprising if we accept that academic boards have a continuing role in ensuring the health of the quality conventions that make the whole enterprise of learning and discovery work – verifiable valid research and expert peer review, open processes of inquiry and public debate, and scholarly integrity. The time is now ripe for a broadly-based conversation about the continuing rationale for academic boards and ways of improving their operations for good institutional governance.

This paper has been written in response to Baird's challenge. It consists of two sections. In the first, I undertake a detailed analysis and commentary on what AUQA reports have had to say about Academic Boards, and in the second, drawing upon my experience in chairing the Board at UNSW for the past three years and in organising and attending national meetings, I will make some suggestions on rationale for boards, and how they can best function in today's universities.

In October 2005, the University of New South Wales hosted the National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates (NCCABS), where an agreed national statement of purpose and functions for Boards was drafted, and subsequently approved by all Boards nationally. I have attached that document as an appendix, as it has served as a structural guide for my analysis.

Section 1: AUQA thematic analysis

AUQA reports have consistently identified the central importance of academic governance within Australian universities. With the completion of the first cycle of reviews, it is of considerable interest to track the views on Academic Boards expressed by the various audit teams in the period from the first reviews in 2002 to the present (April 2007).

The first section of this paper undertakes a longitudinal study of AUQA reviews, asking:

- Is there a consistent interpretation of the role of the Board?

- What do AUQA reports generally see as strengths of Boards?

- What areas are generally seen as in need of improvement?

- Are there aspects of Board roles and contribution which have not been discussed by AUQA?

NCCABS identified the roles of the Board under four main headings: Governance; Maintenance of Academic Standards; Communication within the Institution; and Relationships with External stakeholders. I shall use this framework for my analysis of the AUQA comments.

Overall, AUQA teams have been parsimonious with *commendations* involving Boards: of the many hundreds of commendations in all reports to September 2006, only five commendations specifically mentioned Boards: UQ was commended for its long-standing school review process, and USyd was commended for its recently-introduced reviews of faculties. In addition, UTS was commended for use of a Quality Management Framework and JCU for "sustaining an appropriate balance between consistency and flexibility in the processes used to accredit and review course proposals…". It is interesting to note that these commendations all specifically concern the Board's role as a body of accreditation and review. The University of Western Sydney received a commendation for its "strong corporate and academic governance under the leadership of the Board of Trustees and Academic Senate."

There are just six *affirmations*: in AUQA terminology, an affirmation is in fact a recommendation that it sees the university is addressing. Three of them also pertain to accreditation and review: that Bond University enhance its procedures for approval and monitoring of academic programs; that MCD establish an Academic Audit Committee; and that JCU's Board put in place mechanisms to ensure that the formal review of all courses is completed within the first five-year cycle. The decision by the Australian College of Theology to combine its 3(!) academic boards into one, and to streamline its committee structure is similarly the subject of an affirmation, as a part of a "more robust and centralised approach to quality assurance..". The University of Western Sydney Senate's decision to review assessment practices as a priority also received an affirmation.

The fifth is from the audit of Deakin University and affirms "Deakin's intention to review outcomes from the review of Academic Board and establish it as the principal academic authority within the university". The AUQA audit took place after a comprehensive review of the Board's functions, and this affirmation underlined the importance of following through with the recommendations of that review.

AUQA teams have, however, been more prepared to make *recommendations* concerning Boards. There is a total of 31 separate recommendations concerning Boards and their processes. Of these, the vast majority (20) are concerned with maintenance of academic standards, effective implementation of policy, accreditation and review. Ten others pertain to governance issues: either clarification of the role of the Board within the organisation or clarification of roles and responsibilities of members of the Board. The remaining recommendation is around intra-university communication. I shall discuss these recommendations in more detail below.

The mere categorisation of commendations, affirmations and recommendations given above clearly does not tell the whole story: one retrieves a wealth of detail by delving deeper into the texts of the reports, as we shall do below. However, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn, which are supported by the more detailed analysis below.

- A major concern of AUQA audits has been the role of Boards in reviewing standards, particularly around learning and teaching, but also around research and overseas programs: audit teams question the extent to which policy is implemented and systematically monitored.

- AUQA is concerned that the role of the Board within the Governance structure of the organisation should be clear, in particular its relationship with Council and with Faculty Boards (or equivalents). AUQA is concerned that adequate measures for academic governance are in place and that the relationship between academic and fiduciary governance is clear.

- There is concern that individual Board members should be clear about their roles.

- The role of the Board in communication within the organisation and with external stakeholders has been noted in some cases, but not systematically commented upon.

- The role of student members of the Board has received little attention, despite the evident importance of student involvement in academic governance.

- The role of the Chairman of the Board as a member of Council has not received a great deal of attention from AUQA, although it is a key role within the institution.

The next sections of the paper contain a more detailed analysis of the recommendations and the texts of the individual reports. They are reported under the headings identified in NCCABS.

Governance

Beginning in the 1990's, universities began restructuring their academic governance arrangements and made major consequential changes to their Boards. At the risk of considerable over-simplification, older universities had often inherited professorial boards; with the expansion of numbers of the professoriate, these had become unwieldy, whereas younger universities often emerging from a background as a

technical college had not had the same kind of academic governance and were therefore seeking to establish it *ab initio*. Each of these situations creates its own kind of problems, but the desired end result is common: evolution to a body, founded on consultation , collegiality and broad-based representation which can serve as the principal policy-making and advisory body on all matters relating to and affecting the university's teaching, research and educational programs. It was against this background that the AUQA teams examined the roles of Boards within universities.

AUQA reports generally emphasise the role of the Board as the "principal academic body" within the institution. Often these words are from the Act of Parliament which establishes the Board. In a few cases (Adelaide 2002/3, Deakin 2004/5, ACTh 2007) the audit followed soon after a review and restructure of the Board: such restructures have generally been viewed favourably by the audit teams.

Audit teams have been at pains to make sure that the relationship of the Board with Council and the Executive are clear: Bond (2004/5) is recommended to "ensure its governance and management processes enable academic representatives to play a substantive role on the academic affairs of the university"; CQU(2005/6) Council is exhorted to "develop strategies to…ensure it is able to balance its fiduciary governance responsibilities with its academic governance responsibilities" by "robust information exchange with its Academic Board"; at CSU (2004) the relationship with Council was questioned, and it was suggested that clarification was needed around the extent to which "CSU wishes the Academic Senate to operate as a lead body in the formation of academic plans and policies and in monitoring their implementation" . At Newcastle (2002/2003) it was recommended that "Senior Executive Group provide clarity to the University about the respective roles of the Academic Senate and the Portfolio Committees": the latter had recently been established to ensure the independence of the Senate from line management. At QUT(2005), the relationship between the University Academic Board and the newly-established QUT Blueprint objectives was needed "with the purpose of ensuring that University Academic Board provides strategic leadership on academic issues". At SCU (2003), it is recommended that the Executive move forward with the stated intention to involve the Chair of the Academic Board in academic planning with the University Executive. The review of UWA in 2003/04 suggested the need to clarify the relationship between the Academic Board and the Academic Council "in terms of their respective responsibilities and purpose". MCD (2005) had just established a single Academic Board, and there were issues around enuring its status was clear. Murdoch (2006) was recommended to identify the role that the Academic Council's Research and Development Board would play within the academic governance and management of the University. At Monash (2007), the audit team commented:

"As part of its continuous improvement, AB will need to reaffirm its role in regard to its main responsibility for the supervision of the academic direction of the university"

Overall, then, AUQA is interested in a clear institutional view of Academic Governance, with delineation of lines of responsibility between Board, Council and Executive.

A second set of comments under the heading of Governance concerns the role of individual Board members. Some audit teams have been concerned to know whether Board members understand the role and whether there is an induction process. At QUT, there was a recommendation that the university "strengthen the induction and training program for members of Council and Academic Board and the QUT works

with the Student Guild to ensure that the induction process has a major focus on the students' needs".   At the University of the Sunshine Coast, while students expressed satisfaction that their input is listened to, "there is opportunity to ensure that students are adequately supported to fully participate in committees through appropriate induction…"Aside from the latter, there has been little comment on the role of student members of Academic Boards, an issue identified as important in NCCABS. This is not to say that students have been ignored in AUQA reports, merely to make the point that their roles as members of the Board have not been singled out.

At Melbourne University, commenting that the Board's membership profile does not reflect the university's academic staff profile, for example in terms of gender and seniority, the panel recommended "…that the responsibilities and membership of the University Academic Board be reviewed against the Board's Terms of Reference to ensure that the Board can effectively comply with these." Overall, however, there has not been systematic commentary on either of the two issues of : (i) whether the Board is (or should be) truly representative of the staff profile, or (ii) the extent to which the membership of the Board is aligned with its stated terms of reference in order to allow it to meet its goals. Given that most Boards see a major part of their mission as representing the academic voice, these two issues are linked.

In most universities, the chair of the Academic Board plays a key role on the Council, as a vehicle for communication of academic issues to the governing body. This role also has received no commentary from AUQA teams, although there are a couple of references to the role of the Chair of the Board on the Executive Committee (UNE and SCU) in aligning Academic Governance and Executive Management, and at UQ, it was reported that "the President of AB is an ex officio member of the Executive, and the Panel ascertained that there is an effective partnership between Academic Board and Executive." In the 2007 audit of Flinders, it is commented that:

"Although not a member of VCC, the current chair of Academic Senate attends VCC meetings from time to time. The Audit Panel considers that full membership could enhance communication between the two key decision-making bodies."

The panel goes on to comment that a time allowance of ten percent for the chair of Senate is "small in comparison to time allocations in many other universities".

Maintenance of Academic Standards

It is clear that "academic quality assurance" in its broadest sense is seen by many people, including AUQA teams, as a major function of Boards. This is manifest both in development of policy to ensure high standards are met by learning and teaching programs and in research, but also in ensuring that institutional academic policy is implemented. The latter has been somewhat of a preoccupation of the AUQA teams, since Boards' roles as forums for collegial discussion are often at odds with their perceived roles as policemen. Furthermore, Boards are often not equipped with sufficiently strong "teeth" to ensure that their policies are being adhered to: this issue is often raised in AUQA reports. Indeed, the rather few commendations and affirmations in respect of Boards are mostly around robust review processes which the institution has a strong commitment to implement.

The recommendations around quality assurance usually concern course approvals and delivery, for both local and off-shore offerings. There is often ambiguity about who in the institution should be responsible for Quality Assurance. For example, in the 2002 audit of AMC, it is noted:

"There were also conflicting views about the respective roles of Quality Advisory Management Group and the Academic Board in reviewing and improving academic quality assurance policies and practices."

The University of Adelaide's Academic Board is exhorted to:

"…strengthen its ability to maintain an oversight of the teaching activities of the university and, in particular, assure the quality of teaching and learning activities"

and the AUQA report also recommended that:

"Faculty Boards develop, as a priority, effective mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of University policy and, in conjunction with Academic Board, academic quality and standards."

At Deakin, the report states bluntly: "A core responsibility of the various committees of the Board is oversight of the quality assurance mechanisms of the University", and members of Deakin's Board are asked to develop an improved understanding of their important quality assurance roles; similar comments are made at Griffith with respect to its Program Committee. The University of Canberra is asked to review its Academic Board membership and involve the Board earlier, in the light of increased devolution of academic quality assurance standards; the senate of CSU is recommended to reconsider the various mechanisms it has in place for assuring the quality of teaching and learning; at UTS, AUQA complements the Board on its Quality Management Framework, but then follows with a recommendation that the Board "play a stronger role in advising on quality improvement across all aspects of learning and teaching, including off-shore programs." At the University of the Sunshine Coast (2007), the panel comments that:

"It was not always apparent to the Audit Panel, however, on the evidence provided, that full consideration of program accreditation and course approval proposals by faculty learning and teaching committees had occurred prior to deliberation by the Academic Board."

At Monash (2006), the Board's main responsibilities to Council are seen as: "supervision and direction of the academic affairs of the university, including maintenance of high standards in teaching and research…", which is contrasted with the observation that "AB members saw the Board's main role as serving as a conduit for communication between the academic community and management and as a disseminator of information through the deans."

The issue of monitoring of off-shore programs is a recurring theme in AUQA audit reports: the Swinburne report says that "Presently lacking at SUT is a systematic means of assuring the equivalence of academic standards at its on-campus and off-shore courses. Academic Board has also failed to be sufficiently involved in the approval and accreditation of courses offered through at least one of its off-shore partners. The panel at UNE observed that the "Academic Board has not always been sufficiently rigorous in ensuring that its policies have been effective in respect of some of the University's newer, innovative activities such as articulation agreements and offshore teaching partnerships". The RMIT report notes that "Sharing of responsibility must be within the context of definite, formal accountabilities given to designated officers. A particular illustration of where this is not occurring is in the oversight of off-shore programs." The Monash report comments that the integration of the campuses in Malaysia and South Africa is facilitated by having two representatives from these two bodies on Academic Board, and also by the fact that their Academic Advisory bodies report to the Education Committee.

Some panels have been able to break their comments on quality assurance into two parts: development of appropriate policy; and monitoring its implementation. These are both seen as key roles of Boards, although the weight of commentary has been on the former.

As noted above, the ability of a Board to monitor compliance with its own policy, and to take decisive action when it finds non-compliance, is an issue that occupies the mind of many people associated with academic governance, not only AUQA audit panels! In practice, many institutions expect others (Deans, Heads of Schools) to implement the policies which Boards make. This may lead to conflicting roles within the organisation. Even at the University of Sydney, where the Board was commended for the effectiveness of the Phase One review of Faculties, the report expresses reservations about reliance upon these five year reviews as a primary means for monitoring compliance with Board policies, stating "Policies ought to have built-in systems for ensuring compliance and ongoing monitoring of the same. Review ought to be a separate issue, focussing on periodic assessment of the systems for ensuring compliance."   The panel auditing the University of Ballarat recommended boldly "That once the changes to the five-yearly course review process have been further considered by the Academic Board, and agreement has been reached, the Board ensures they are implemented". A similar recommendation was made at James Cook University. At Curtin University, the panel notes: "The main way in which a failure of policy implementation is discovered is through the occurrence of an error…" and recommends "That Curtin ensure, with appropriate safeguards, that policies are implemented by divisions, schools etc."

There are also comments, though less frequently, about the actual development of policy. The UNE "policy environment could be improved", and there are some concrete recommendations for new policies around transnational courses. UNSW was recommended to improve its Guide for Submission of Academic Proposals to ensure that programs are properly aligned with the university's strategic priorities. The SCU Academic Board is exhorted to "accelerate the approval of plans for the embedding of graduate attributes across the curriculum", and at JCU it is noted with approval that "due attention is being paid to the development of graduate attributes at a University-wide level", although the comment is also made that "This kind of monitoring is now fairly standard at Australian universities". At Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, it is stated that "The Academic Committee needs to take a stronger role in ensuring the standards of courses and their equivalence to comparable qualifications from other HE institutions".

The last issue, that the Board should be an instrument for benchmarking standards across the sector, seems to the author to be an interesting suggestion which has not received much attention in AUQA reports. It is my observation that the academic membership of most Boards has a great awareness of national and international standards pertaining in their discipline; many of them have taught at a range of institutions. I believe that there is great potential to build upon this character, and for Board-to-Board communication on issues such as admission standards, examination practices, plagiarism policy, standards for thesis examination and many other areas. To some extent, this happens in New South Wales, where the chairs of Boards meet approximately once a quarter and discuss current issues. However, cross-institutional benchmarking is not systematic.

Communication within the Institution

The combined wisdom of Board Presidents is that communication should be a key institutional role for the Board. However, this aspect has not received nearly as much airtime from audit panels as has the QA role of Boards. It could be argued that this is a reasonable situation: quality assurance is close to the central mission of AUQA. On the other hand, good quality assurance within an institution is at least facilitated by good internal communication within the institution; and it can be argued that the two go hand-in-hand (at least when they are backed up by strong institutional values).

Two AUQA recommendations address this point: the University of Ballarat was recommended to consider ways in which the Academic Board could play a part in improving the intra-University communication and discussion of broad educational issues (both internal and external), and at CSU, recommendation 4 suggested that the university "clarify for all staff the intended role to be played by Academic Senate in fostering collegial discussion and debate and in leading academic policy development and monitoring".

The actual texts of the reports yield some more information on the attitudes of audit teams. At Adelaide, it is expected that the Academic Board "…would take on an increasingly strong role in facilitating communication between the senior executive of the university, the heads of academic units and the professoriate." The Melbourne University report (2005/6) states:

The climate of surveys amongst staff show a low level of satisfaction with the dissemination of information to the departments on University affairs, which is an aspect of communication that falls in part to the UAB to deliver. UAB has identified a need to improve the communication with the wider community, and some initiatives have been taken in that regard.

At CDU, the report was perhaps, more stringent:

…the Performance Portfolio stated that `issues such as academic structures…are outside the domain of the Board. The Panel investigated this and found that the AB expects to be able to comment on changes, but nonetheless it reinforces the view that the Board itself does not play a significant role in academic affairs."

At Sydney, a positive note:

The Academic Board operates an `Academic Forum', which now meets at least once per semester to discuss matters of interest…All members of the University community are invited to participate. Such for a help keep the wider University community apprised of current issues and are valued by staff.

An issue of the balance of size was recognised at Wollongong, where the audit team reported "The University has decided to retain a fairly large academic senate of 85 members so that it may continue to function as the primary means of communicationwithin the academic University community. Having made this decision, the Senate will also need to consider how to respond to criticism in its survey that the size of the Senate and the volume of paperwork constrain its potential as a forum for academic discussion and debate."

It is clear from these comments that many audit teams consider that the Board has a role to play as an important vehicle for communication within the institution, and that when this is not happening, the issue needs to be addressed.

Relationships with External Stakeholders

AUQA reports in general have focussed on relationships between the Board and various external learning and teaching activities of the universities. There is a recommendation at Newcastle about "better articulation arrangements especially regarding community colleges", and at Swinburne, there are comments about the Board being "insufficiently involved" with one of its off-shore partners." For dual sector institutions, there has been commentary on articulation between VET and higher education: for example, the recent audit of Victoria University commends the creation of a single Education and Research Board which is integrated across the two sectors, and recommends that they "rapidly develop systems to track the number and proportion of students articulating…"

However, there has been scant comment on other issues identified by NCCABS in giving informed commentary on Government policy; policies that regulate academic relations with stakeholders; recruiting; State and Territory education authorities; conditions for scholarships and prizes; engagement with the graduate community and alumni; monitoring equity and diversity programs; and introduction and deletion of courses, for example in response to National Strategic Priorities. I believe that there is a case for audit committees of the future to be asking whether Boards are fulfilling a role in these areas as well as in Quality Assurance of programs!

Conclusion

AUQA audits have tended to concentrate on two major aspects of Board activities. They have seen Boards as upholders of institutional standards, and have displayed concern about the extent to which Boards can enforce their policy: the tension between a community of scholars and the meeting of an enforced standard is one which is felt in many aspects of university governance, particularly when the standard is imposed from outside. Audit teams have been assiduous in commenting upon this.

The role of Boards in institutional governance, and their performance as part of the tripartite relationship between Council, Senior Management and Academic Governance has been critically examined.

However, one of the real potential advantages offered by a model of academic governance involving such a body as an Academic Board is the possibility of involving many academics in the process of collective, yet focussed and strategic governance. To the author, it appears that this aspect of Board activities has not systematically been commented upon by AUQA teams. To the extent that AUQA comments may guide institutional policy development, this is a pity.

The Board can also play a key role in defining the relationship with the wider community; in bringing issues from outside into the university and also in communicating university values and ideas to the wider community. Neither of these roles has been a major preoccupation of audits.

It is sometimes argued that collegial discussions can slow the inexorable march of progress necessary for the survival of the university into a glorious new millennium and that therefore Academic Boards can be done away with and replaced. Where this is done, the nature of a university changes radically away from the ideal of a community of scholars: policy is implemented by fiat and performance measures rather than the traditional shared understanding of the institutional and disciplinary values, and respect for peers, which have driven the development of a resilient academic culture, over many centuries.

9

In the second section of the paper, I shall amplify and extend some of these comments, and set out some ways in which Academic Boards can function well, and how universities can support them in their role.

Section 2: Why have a Board, and how to make it work

Attend any gathering of academics, and you will hear horror stories of Academic Board meetings: "I remember the time when the Board debated for 4 hours whether Associate Professors should be referred to as *Professor* in university correspondence…" is one of my favourites. No doubt it is an important issue, but not perhaps, one to be debated by a room full of people with axes to grind. These stories tend to linger in the collective mind, and are re-told over many years. I am not sure how often they actually happened, even in the "bad old days". No doubt such debates still happen, but my observation is that they are the exception rather than the rule.

Baird and Woodhouse (2007) provocatively suggest that academic boards might be an anachronism, that Board members "lack the contextual knowledge, policy skills and focus and of senior management group…" and that the Board's role in quality assurance of teaching might adequately be addressed by having a small group of "acknowledged leaders in learning and teaching from across the institution". They claim that Boards "accord primacy in any discipline to academics in that discipline", suggesting that this is a weakness or failing. I would argue on the contrary that the academics in a given discipline usually do know what they are talking about: the Board's role is to test their motives by rigorous academic debate. It is difficult to "pull the wool over the eyes" of a room full of sceptical colleagues. Furthermore, the acknowledged leaders in learning and teaching are already on the Board and its committees. They are trained by the process of serving on these committees and their working groups. It is precisely cross-institutional organisms like the Board that enable them to develop and be recognised. I have argued in this paper that it is precisely in the fertile interchange between the Board members (who I assert *do* have a great deal of contextual knowledge and experience in policy formulation) and senior management, that well-tested, accepted and implementable academic policy is conceived.

The reality is that modern academic boards deal with a huge spread of crucial institutional policy, usually in a thorough, transparent, and businesslike fashion. This can be seen from the annual report or the work plan of any Academic Board. The Board should be the engine room of the university, where day-to-day issues are translated into sound institutional policy, with buy-in from the academic community at large. It should be a key interface between Council, the Executive and the Academic Community. At best, it can be a key contributor to institutional strategy. And it does this while being rooted in the fine traditions of scholarship and academic discourse!

Anyone who has had the privilege of becoming a chair of an Academic Board, whilst being aware of this in theory, confronts certain uncomfortable realities, which I have characterised under the following headings: Role of the Board; Process; Policy; Institutional Memory; Quality Assurance. I should like to discuss these in turn.

Role of the Board: Most Boards tend to see themselves as custodians of policy, process, quality control and institutional memory. They also see themselves as a key place where issues affecting academic life can be discussed, and, if necessary, challenged. However, there is not always unanimity across institutions about what

Boards should do. Members of Council from the business sector may have a rather hazy idea about the Board as the "compliance unit". Indeed, the whole concept of a Board where there is free debate on institutional policy is rather distant from what happens in commercial businesses. It is important for any Board to be very clear about its role, and then to promulgate this clarity through the organisation, especially to Council members. Some universities have a regular schedule of invitations for Council members to attend Board meetings. Reaching the academic staff and the Executive is equally important.

Process: Principal amongst process issues, is the feeling on behalf of those in executive positions (eg deans) that the Board is there to frustrate the progress of their schemes, countered by the feeling of those in the non-executive positions that the deans are about to compromise every academic standard in their pursuit of the unholy dollar. Fortunately, this is only a caricature, and reality is not so stark! Yet the very heart and reputation of the institution is built on that certainty that its processes are fair, transparent and above board! It is my advice to a would-be Chair that abandoning process in particular special cases is something not to be toyed with lightly: but questioning whether processes are implementing the policy which they underpin, and whether alternative processes can deliver the same outcomes more efficiently or with less friction is at the heart of what a good Board will be doing. This, however, is best done without the imperative of a special case being pushed by a particular party.

Policy: Then there is the problem that, after careful consideration, the Board might adopt well constructed policy, but has only indirect power to ensure that it is implemented. This is probably one of the most common areas of difficulty for a Board, and one which underlies many of the AUQA recommendations discussed above.

Whereas one knows theoretically that if a program is in breach of Board policy, one should be able to argue at Council that all teaching in the program should be suspended until the breach is fixed, it would be a brave Chair of the Board who took this path. More commonly, one talks to the Dean or the DVC and either the program becomes compliant or the policy is amended.

Ideally, the institution should recognise the value of the Board and respect its decisions. For this to occur systematically, the VC and the DVC's and Deans who are in charge of implementation need to believe that the Board policies are sound and to support them. They need to be continually made aware of the reasons behind existing policies and actively involved in reviewing them. In this model, the rationale for all policy needs to be continually re-explained, as management can change frequently in the current higher education sector.

Institutional Memory: In fact, many of those responsible for implementing institutional policy are ignorant of it, or invent novel interpretations of it. Indeed, Board presidents themselves have terms of 2 or 3 years (some with renewal). It can be a steep learning curve for someone who is expected instantaneously to become the font of all knowledge on academic policy! In some universities, however, there is a bulk of policy accumulated over many years, much of which is more honoured in the breach than in the observance. This is clearly an undesirable situation, which should be addressed.

It is therefore important for policy to be clear and unambiguous, accessible, accompanied by good rationale, and regularly reviewed. These things are all eminently achievable if there are sufficient support staff and information technology resources at the Board's disposal.

Quality Assurance: It is in this area where "business meets academia". As noted above, the most common question asked by AUQA panels is: "but how do you know that they are implementing Board policy?" or "how do you know that the standard of your courses is as high as you say?".

Many universities expect Deans and Heads of School to implement Board policies, and to a greater or lesser extent, have key performance indicators to show whether this is being done. But these are established and monitored by the VC, who does not necessarily share the information with the Board.

Some Boards conduct regular reviews of faculties or of disciplines: one that I have looked at in some detail, and which seems to work well, is that at the University of Sydney. There, the Board sets up review panels, with some external members, to work collaboratively with each Faculty to produce a report with an action plan for improvement. Like AUQA, the aim is to help faculties to identify how to improve. So far, Sydney has run two iterations of the plan. I gather that the first one was met with resistance, but that the second one was welcomed by faculties who saw positive outcomes from the previous ones. I don't know, however, that Sydney can answer the question "how do you know that the plan is being adhered to?"…until the next review. I believe that there is benefit in setting up regular Board reviews of this type, though without doubt, it requires considerable time and resources.

If a Board becomes obsessed with policy, process and compliance issues such as those discussed above, it will lose institutional respect and relevance. The antidote to the fact that some of the time and energy must be spent on these necessary, but arguably more rebarbative, roles of the Board is for it to devote part of its time to positive activities which are institution building. In business-speak, this could be described as Quality Improvement. Indeed, I have found it useful in my Annual Report of Activities, to use three headings of *Improvement*, *Policy* and *Compliance*.

Having discussed Policy and Compliance above, I would like to spend some time discussing Improvement. This also presents challenges for any would be chair. In my view, these revolve around issues of how to:

(i) maintain good collective yet focused strategic discussion;

(ii) develop outcomes into meaningful institutional initiatives;

(iii) ensure that the Board is open and transparent, yet effective;

(iv) maintain credibility within the university as a central and valuable part of institutional governance;

(v) maintain cordial and effective relationships with "competitor" institutions.

Collective yet focussed discussions: If a Board is to operate in the traditions of a community of scholars, it should not feel itself constrained by the views of the VC and Senior Management: no topic should be "off limits". Yet most modern academics are sufficiently pragmatic and time-poor not to want to spend hours discussing something which has no chance of ever being realised. A key to good discussion at Board is to have good, practical and realisable topics for discussion, and to clearly

focus the discussions towards concrete outcomes, which are hopefully not totally diametrically opposed to the chosen path of management.

I have found it extremely useful at UNSW to have "hot topics" on the agenda. A half hour of each two-hour meeting is devoted to the month's topic, which is chosen because it is important for the institution, but is generally not being debated elsewhere. Any member of the Board may propose a hot topic: the proponent must write a couple of paragraphs, hopefully provocative, about it and introduce the topic at the meeting. The combined wisdom of 65 thoughtful academics and students usually produces some interesting ideas, and a challenge for the chair and the institution to take on. If the hot topic's conclusion is opposed to current management strategy, it is still not a bad thing to debate it: growth often occurs by difference of opinion. I have found that this active role in discussing relevant issues also assists the Board to achieve its compliance and policy work on a distinctly more positive note.

Develop institutional initiatives: If the Board deliberations and discussions result in positive institutional improvements, all parties support them. Unfortunately, there is not always universal buy-in from parts of the university which have not been part of the Board debate. A key role of the Chair of a well-functioning and supported Board would be to be able to take new initiatives developed at the Board to management and negotiate an implementation strategy. Of course, this may be hard, as there is often not an allocated budget for Board initiatives. But a skilful chair must try to find the proper way to effect sensible changes. I have found this to be particularly easy if the changes mean lower expenditure and greater efficiencies! I recommend that Chairs should not be hesitant to suggest policy improvements, and to use their deep institutional knowledge and connections to develop implementation plans.

Open and transparent yet effective: Striking the balance between openness and transparency on the one hand, and the necessity for the institution to move decisively on the other, is at the core of the Board's business. In my experience, academics are highly committed people, but with multiple professional allegiances: to the institution, to their own discipline, to their students, and to their own research programs. They are generally not afraid to speak out, lucid and intelligent enough find ways around most situations which frustrate them. Thus an open and transparent debate on some issue can take unexpected turns. The suggestion of a manager that "I'll get this issue approved at the Board" shouldn't work in any company board, and it certainly doesn't at university academic boards. On the other hand, a room full of motivated academics discussing an issue will give it thorough consideration, and may produce new and interesting angles. There is a crucial time in the development of a policy initiative when it is appropriate to take it to a Board discussion. It must be clear in its direction, but not so defined that there is not room for reasoned input and modification. It is a part of the Chair's job to ensure that the Board sees issues at this moment.   This requires information flow on issues within the organisation. In an ideal institution, there should be transparent mechanisms for issues of academic governance to be transferred between the "executive" and the "academic" stream, in both directions as appropriate.

Credibility within the university: In order for the Board to remain a credible organisation within the university, it is necessary for it to have a clear mission and to communicate how it is fulfilling that mission to all parts of the university who deal with it. Key stakeholders are Council, the Vice-Chancellor and Deputy/Pro Vice Chancellors, Deans and Heads of School, Academic staff, and of course the student

body. Ultimately, the Board is judged upon whether it is adding value to the institution in the estimation of these and other interested parties.

Each Board member should have some stake in such communication, and their induction should provide ideas and help for them to communicate within their own sphere of influence. The Board should do whatever it can to facilitate this.

Cordial and effective relationships with "competitors": Whereas government policy often sees the Higher Education sector as a competitive market, I have invariably found a great deal of commonality and a desire for cooperation with my counterparts from other universities. Academic Boards face very similar issues across the sector. By discussions, and sharing policy and information on institutional governance and standards, the quality of all parties' education and research is improved. As mentioned at the end of the previous section, and also in NCCABS, the role of the Board in national benchmarking of educational standards, policy and research performance is one for which I believe it is well equipped, but under-utilised. See Moodie (2004) for some amplification of this point.

The role of an academic board in a higher educational institution does not have an exact analogue in a purely commercial organisation. Boards have grown from traditional origins, and are well adapted as a means of governance, to the nature of the academic workforce and to the academic endeavour in general. In a university which recognises and supports the Board, it can play a crucial role in strategic management, policy development and implementation, and communication.

Appendix:

THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION

OF

ACADEMIC BOARDS AND SENATES

A Policy paper formulated
at the National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates
held at the University of New South Wales
October 13-14th 2005

In October 2005, the University of New South Wales hosted the National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates. A draft of the following document was produced: this has been successively refined, with commentary from all Chairs of Boards across Australia. 36 of the 38 Chairs attended the meeting, and all Chairs had the opportunity to have input to the final version.

I would like to thank all involved for a collegial process, which has yielded what may be regarded as a national statement of function and purpose for Australian Academic Boards.

Tony Dooley

Professor A.H. Dooley
President, Academic Board
University of New South Wales

Preamble: Every Australian University 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, the Board of Trustees. The latter body is referred to as "the Council" in this document.

In 2000, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs approved a set of national Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes. The Government's National Governance protocols, introduced in 2003, dealt with the role of the Council. Neither of these documents provides sufficient basis to delineate the role of the Board within the University.

Subsequent reviews of University Governance, for example, the 2002 Victorian Review of University Governance, have concentrated on the role of Council in commercial activities, and have largely overlooked issues of academic governance.

The purpose of the present document is to formulate an agreed national statement of purpose and functions for Boards. The document seeks to delineate the relationship between the Board and the Council, and between University Senior Executive and the Board.

It is important that Governments should recognise the significance of the Boards' roles, especially as upholders of academic values and standards. There may be value in the creation of a peak body with formal recognition, provided its relationship with the AVCC is carefully delineated.

Mission of the Board: The Board is the principal policy-making and advisory body on all matters relating to and affecting a university's teaching, research and educational programs. It is also responsible for assuring academic quality including academic freedom, academic integrity, assessment, admissions, and research conduct.

The Board model of academic governance is founded upon consultation, collegiality and broad-based representation, and had its origins in the historical tradition of a university as a community of scholars.

The Board is composed primarily of academics, who are representative of the diversity of the academic diversity in the university, but includes also students and may include professional staff. It is independent of, but shares membership with, senior executive, senior management and Council. It is a representative body of colleagues engaged in the compliance and innovation processes of the university.

The Board provides an important venue for student involvement in academic decision-making.

The Board upholds the voice and the interests of the Academy in a tripartite relationship of the Academic Board and Council; the Vice-Chancellor and Senior Executive; and the academic community. The Board has a well-defined role in governance, both as a policy making body and as an advisory body, on all academic matters, including academic activities, policies and strategic planning.

Free and open debate fosters moral authority within the academic community, and the Board provides a forum to facilitate debate and information flow on a range of educational and university sector issues, across the senior executive and the wider academic community. Boards provide cross-functional mechanisms to address and resolve complex problems that cut across academic and administrative policy.

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 here 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. Most also have one or two Deputy Chairs. It is desirable, and almost universal, that the Chair is on the University Council. Frequent and full communication between the Chair, Deputy Chairs and Vice-Chancellor is necessary to implement the Board's mission. Ideally, this should be recognised by formal communication mechanisms.

Practice: In an institution where the Board is contributing well to fulfilling these aims, one would expect to find the following features.

Governance:

- There should be a well-defined statement which clarifies roles and delegations of the Board, the Council and the Executive. This should establish a shared governance role; distinguish between the Board's role in governance and the function of management; guarantee independence of the Board; ensure that it has a regular reporting relationship to Council; ensure good, evidence-based advice to the Council and Executive on academic matters; and include clear and consistent terms of reference concerning which matters are dealt with by the Board. Generally, the Board should contribute to setting the institutional agenda rather than merely responding to agendas established elsewhere. The Board should have the power to request reports from or refer matters to Faculties, Schools, Departments and Boards of Studies.

- The Board should play an important role in debating, developing and implementing institutional strategy in a range of academic areas including educational and information technology, international development and community engagement.

- The Board should have an established and effective standing committee structure, typically with memberships beyond the Board itself, to ensure distributed participation throughout the university. Much of the Board's work will be conducted through these standing committees. The Board should establish effective relationships with its standing committees to achieve change in a timely manner. The relationship between these standing committees and the Council and Senior Executive needs to be clearly defined, particularly if Deputy and Pro-Vice-Chancellors are members of these committees.

- The work of the Board should be aligned with institutional strategic plans and policies, and the Board should play an important role in their formulation and implementation.

- The Board should have a key role in the formulation and approval of policy on and relating to teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

- While Boards do not generally have budgetary responsibility, they may play a key role in assessing the impact of budgetary decisions on academic matters.

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

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 should have a key role in the development and long-term preservation of balanced, clear, shared definitions of academic standards and integrity.

- The Board should have an accountable and transparent framework for implementation and review of policy; for the development and review of academic quality assurance measures; and for facilitating compliance with its policies and procedures. 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 should play a key role as a forum for students to be involved in the development and evaluation of academic processes.

- The Board should hold authority for approval, accreditation and review of new and existing academic programs, including those offered by commercial entities owned or partially owned by the university. The Board has ultimate oversight of all programs, onshore and offshore, and its processes play a key role in ensuring comparability of standards both within the institution and externally.

- The Board has an important role in the assessment and evaluation of learning and teaching and in learning and in ensuring the quality and in improving teaching and learning practice. The Board should ensure transparency of the performance of particular subjects/courses and how this links to policy implementation, revision and development. This should be done both for examples of best practice, and for areas of difficulty. In fulfilling this role, the Board may use national, institutional or its own academic performance indicators, including the CEQ; student feedback; course evaluations; and external evaluation of courses/subjects. These indicators may relate to assessment modes; academic progress; admissions policy; progression rates; exclusions; appeals; articulation; plagiarism; effectiveness of blended learning; and English entry standards.

- The Board has an important role in debating and establishing research policy, and in encouraging and supporting research. Boards should have 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.

- Boards should have a role in broad benchmarking with other universities. Boards may conduct regular reviews of Departments, Schools, Faculties or disciplines within the university.

- Boards may play a key role in establishing performance criteria for probation and promotion. Board members may have active involvement in senior academic appointments and promotions.

Communication within the Institution:

- Boards should bring a whole of institution perspective on academic matters and through effective communication, they should maximise efficiency and quality and remove unnecessary duplication. Boards should promulgate essential academic information, and ensure wide input into academic governance, thus assuring a clearer institutional focus. The Board has a key role in identifying and promoting academic priorities for the institution.

- Boards should develop high level strategies and mechanisms for communication including: policy dissemination; transparency and accountability of process; agendas and discussions; actions taken; people involved; predictable milestones and reporting.

- 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; and communication with student groups; and in providing a forum for discussion of external issues to inform decision makers in the university community. The Chair of the Board plays a key role in both the vertical and the horizontal communications. The Board should also be represented on the various committees of Council.

- In addition to, or in place of, promulgating agendas and minutes of meetings, the Board should have in place some or all of the following strategies to ensure transparent communication: regular reports; summaries of agendas; minutes etc; an internal bulletin notifying issues for debate and resolutions of the Academic Board; a functional website; a guide to academic policies (academic manual or website).

- The Board should hold professional meetings, where the processes are transparent, ethical and moral; the discussion participatory and robust; the debate vigorous; and the communication designed to have strategic impact both within and outside the university. Board members should have the possibility to question the Vice-Chancellor and senior management on matters of importance.

- There should be 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 should ensure that its committee structure supports communication within the institution and should play a key role in coordination and oversight of its committees. Appropriate cross membership of committees is vital to ensure communication.

- The staff induction process should create awareness of the Board's role within the university.

Relationships with External Stakeholders:

- The relationship of the Board to the wider community is necessarily less direct, as the Chair cannot speak on behalf of the university in the same way as can the Chancellor or the Vice-Chancellor (unless the Chair is the Vice-Chancellor). Nevertheless, it is important for Boards to be engaged with community issues so that they can participate in their timely identification and provide strategic analysis and advice to the university community. Consequently, many Boards are active in discussing and providing comment on contemporary issues in policy, political and public contexts for higher education. They can provide informed commentary on Government policy.

- Boards should have oversight of policies that regulate academic relations with stakeholders such as professional training placement policies; credit transfer and articulation arrangements; schools programs; open foundation programs. Boards should have appropriate structures and quality assurance processes for this type of community engagement.

- Most Boards have involvement with the secondary sector via recruiting. Board Chairs may provide formal advice to external bodies such as Boards of Studies on the Higher School Certificate.

- Boards may determine forms and conditions of awards, scholarships and prizes.

- Boards may be engaged with the graduate community via alumni associations or Board membership of alumni representatives.

- Boards provide substantial input for audits by the Australian Universities Quality Agency.

- Boards usually play an important role in monitoring their universities' equity and diversity policies, and in reporting on the outcomes of their equity and diversity policies.

- Under the new National Strategic Priorities legislation, Boards will need to consult internally and externally regarding introduction and deletion of programs/courses.

References

ANAO (Australian National Audit Office) (2003). *Public sector governance*, better practice guide. ANAO, Canberra. Retrieved 10 October 2006 from

http://www.anao.gov.au/WebSite.nsf/1c8fb55046f2cc5cca256bed00179e7f/957 e55a69b1050724a256d73001dfd1c!OpenDocument

AUQA (Australian Universities Quality Agency). (2006). *Audit reports: institutions*. Retrieved 30 April 2007 from

http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/sai_reports/index.shtml

Baird, J. (2004). Repertoires of governance among members of Australian university governing boards. PhD thesis. University of New England, Armidale.

Baird, J. (2006). Beyond professionalisation: enhancing the governance culture for Australian university governing boards. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 12(4), 297–309.

Baird, J. (2007) Taking it on board: Quality audit findings for higher education governance, HERD Conference (to appear)

Baird, J. and Woodhouse, D. (2007) Academic Boards' role in quality and standards, *Campus Review* 17(16), 10.

Bishop, J. (2006). Speech to 6th annual Conference on University Governance, Old Parliament House, Canberra, 10 0ctober 2006. Retrieved 3 November 2006 from

http://www.dest.gov.au/Ministers/Media/Bishop/2006/10/B001101006.asp

CHEMS (2004). *A final report to the CUC on good practice in six areas of the governance of higher education institutions*. Retrieved 27 July 2006 from http://www.shef.ac.uk/cuc/pubs.html

Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). (2002). *Higher education at the crossroads: An overview paper*. Retrieved 19 August 2006 from http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/publications/crossroads/default.htm

Duderstadt, J. (2004). Governing the twenty-first century university: A view from the bridge. In W. G. Tierney (Ed.), *Competing conceptions of academic governance: Negotiating the perfect storm* (pp. 137–157). Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hoare, D. (1995). *Higher education management review: Report of the committee of inquiry*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Lapworth, S. (2004). Arresting decline in shared governance: towards a flexible model for academic participation. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 58 (4), 299–314.

Lorsch, J. W., & MacIver, E. (1989). *Pawns or potentates: The reality of America's corporate boards*. Boston MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Marginson, S. (2004). Going global: Governance implications of cross-border traffic in higher education. In W. G. Tierney (Ed.), *Competing conceptions of academic governance: negotiating the perfect storm* (pp. 1–32). Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Marginson, S., & Considine, M. (2000). *The enterprise university: Power, governance and reinvention in Australia.* Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Moodie, G. (2004) The Neglected Role of a Neglected Body: Academic Boards' Role in Assuring "Equivalent" Standards, *Australian Universities' Review* 47(1), 35—41.

NCCABS (National Committee of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates) (2005). *The purpose and function of academic boards and senates.* Retrieved 27 July 2006 from:

www.gsu.uts.edu.au/cabs/061/papers/061-attachment-b.pdf

Nelson, B. (2005). Transcript of address to the 5th annual Conference on University Governance. Canberra, 6 October 2005. Retrieved 7 November 2006 from:

www.dest.gov.au/Ministers/Media/Nelson/2005/10/tran061005.asp

Shattock, M. (2002). Re-balancing modern concepts of university governance, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 56(3), 235–244.

Swansson, J. A., Mow, K. E., & Bartos, S. (2005). Good university governance in Australia. *Proceedings of 2005 Forum of the Australasian Association for Institutional Research.* Retrieved 20 October 2006 from: www.aair.org.au/Forum2005/Swansson.pdf

University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). (2006). Rules relating to the Academic Board: Functions and powers of the Board. Retrieved 23 November, 2006, from:

http://www.gsu.uts.edu.au/rules/g3-d4.html

Winter, A., Wiseman, J., & Muirhead, B. (2005). *Beyond rhetoric: University-community engagement in Victoria.* Retrieved 2 August 2006 from:

http://www.highered.vic.gov.au/news/australian_uni.asp

West, R. (1998). *Learning for life: final report - review of higher education financing and policy* (West Report). Canberra, Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA).