

The Central Role of Academic Boards in Quality and Standards

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Academic boards have major responsibilities for advice and for academic quality assurance in Australian universities. How well designed and equipped are boards to effectively discharge these responsibilities? Is the academic board form becoming redundant?

University Governance and the Academic Board

Academic governance of universities has a long history, stemming from the fight against the church led by academics at the University of Paris. As the university became differentiated into departments, staff infighting began, strong walls were erected between departments, and a federal arrangement emerged with complex voting structures (Lohmann, 2004).

The 'peak' academic body in the university has continued to evolve. In the last century, power was in the hands of the group of all professors – 'the professorial board'. Democracy began to grow in the 70s/80s with non-professorial heads of departments, leading to non-professorial members of academic boards. In the 1990s, Australian university academic boards lost their roles in financial decision-making, thus separating academic priority from resource priority, and many academic leadership roles have been assumed by senior executives. With these changes, the academic board no longer functions as the prime source of institutional identity, being restricted to advising or commenting on matters for which the decisions are made elsewhere.

Mention the words 'academic board' in any gathering of Australian university academics today, and you're not sure whether you'll hit a sore spot. While a few academic boards provide valued input to policy development, others content themselves with enacting a 'shadow-form collegiality' (Marginson & Considine, 2000). Also, unresolved tensions persist between executive and deliberative roles, with management and academic boards cutting across each other.

So, what roles are university academic boards expected to fulfil? As the following quote from a 2005 policy paper of the Chairs of Australian Academic Boards and Senates indicates, boards have two major roles: advising, and assuring the quality of academic activities.

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.

Is the current academic board form the most suitable for the carrying out these roles?

Academic board as an advisory and 'peak' body

The usual constitution of an academic board is designed to give a broad spread ('certain numbers from each faculty'), and to include senior managers ex officio together with non ex

officio members elected from various constituencies. Such a body is an interesting university-wide debating forum, but not well-designed for its advisory roles.

On the whole, academic boards lack the contextual knowledge, policy skills and focus of the senior management group or other expert groups. For these reasons, the exchange of information, rather than informed deliberation, dominates academic board meetings. The contribution of the board to institutional strategy frequently is negligible. This in turn may create a vicious circle, where more knowledgeable and senior academics withdraw from involvement in board discussions, finding them uninformed and ill-directed.

Academic board as a quality assurance body

As a group, usually large, of academics from across the institution, the academic board also faces difficulties in discharging its critical quality assurance responsibilities.

Academic boards tend to accord primacy in any discipline to the academics in that discipline, as most members lack the relevant discipline-specific knowledge. This sounds very commendable, but it does not sit easily with the academic board's claim to be the peak institutional academic quality assurance body. Moreover, it is unlikely that all members of the academic board (or the board's sub-committees) have professional expertise in the design and quality assurance of higher education curricula and assessment methods.

The board needs to have ways of informing itself about the standards and standing of departments or schools, and making decisions and recommendations accordingly. Boards must be willing to take difficult decisions if they are to be credible.

Alternatives to the academic board

One argument for having academic boards is that an enterprise needs a 'peak body' that can take overall responsibility for its activities, and a university, as an academic enterprise, needs a 'peak body' with overall responsibility for the academic activities. But in fact the governing body (often termed 'council') is the ultimate peak body of a university. Is a separate academic 'peak body' really needed? Would it be better to have just one body for academic governance – stressing both those words?

If so, then despite current dogma about university governing bodies (where academic representation is much reduced), wouldn't a more sensible structure have **no** academic board, but a governing body that contains a reasonable number of people who know about an educational enterprise, ie academics? Such a governing body/council could have about 20 people, including 7 academics 2 administrators, 3 students, 3 senior managers, and 6 external members. The academic staff on a council need not necessarily be staff of that institution.

Internal academic quality assurance for learning and teaching could be strengthened through the replacement of a central academic board by a small committee of acknowledged leaders in learning and teaching across the institution. This committee might be responsible for university-wide review of standards, including external comparisons, and ensuring good practice in curriculum and assessment design.

Reclaiming the academic board

Conversely, rather than doing away with academic boards, can they be assisted to perform better? The first task is to consider whether their composition should be re-engineered, ie whether a more effective and respected academic board could be constructed according to the dictates of the board's functions rather than a perceived need for widespread elected (and ex officio) representation. If the board's terms of reference are taken as the starting point, relevant questions are: 'What skills and expertise are needed to fulfil these functions?' and 'Who are the most appropriate academic leaders (not necessarily the managers) in the university and how can they be involved?' A board made up of acknowledged experts and leaders, could better discharge quality assurance functions and assist in holding others accountable for the achievement of the institution's strategies.

Lohmann, S. (2004), 'Darwinian medicine for the university' in Ehrenberg, R.G. (ed.) 'Governing Academia', Cornell University Press.

Marginson, S. & Considine, M. (2000), *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*, Cambridge University Press.