Role and purpose of Academic Boards/Senates

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Source: The document below was prepared for University of Western Sydney
                  Senate project groups working on reviews of academic governance and
                  the development of a Senate web-site. The document provided a brief
                  sector overview for these cross-functional project teams.

Purpose:
To provide a brief summary of common features of academic boards/senates and their web-pages.

Background:
In 2005 a University of Western Sydney governance project was commenced through Academic Senate to: review the structure and terms of reference of academic senate and its committees; develop a "senate member orientation pack"; and develop a "UWS senate web-site" comprising senate home page with relevant operational links. The role and purpose of UWS academic senate was benchmarked with other Senates/ Boards as part if this project.

Method:
University web sites were searched for "governance", "senate", or "academic board". Where a word or manual search did not reveal relevant information, "academic policies", or the name of the Chair/president was used to locate necessary information. The UWS web-manager was also interviewed to provide an institution-wide strategic perspective on the purpose and effective operation of web-pages as a communication, culture-building and unifying device.

Findings:
The terms council, senate and board are used interchangeably in different universities. In this report the UWS terms are used: "Board" refers to the Board of Trustees (or Council), "Senate" refers to the peak academic decision making body (sometimes referred to as academic board in other universities).

Web site access: Most senate/board web pages required 4-5 "clicks" from home page to access: usually listed under "governance" with a brief introductory page on the nature of senate/board activity then links to operational sites (schedule of meetings, committees, minutes etc). Some senate web-pages required detailed forensic searching to locate Senate/Board information. Key words in the terms of reference or rules were used to categorize roles and purpose.

Recommendation: UWS Senate home page aims for institutional visibility through co-location with the Board of Trustees link under "governance" which is currently home in "About UWS". This will result in three "clicks" from the public home page to reach Senate home page.

Detail provided and type of sources: All universities presented information relating to academic governance however the extent of detail and type of sources used varied widely. At one extreme, a single paragraph outlined the nature of the Senate (eg

Charles Darwin University) at the other extreme, the University Act and/or university rules were used as the descriptor of Senate (eg ANU; USyd). Middle ground could be found in those universities that presented an Academic Senate home page with orienting statements and links to relevant sources (eg University of Newcastle; University of Adelaide). The latter appear to provide an educative as well as information "portal" function.

Recommendation: UWS adopt the middle ground approach and have an Academic Senate home page with welcome statement, explanatory paragraphs in plain English regarding role and functional areas and links to relevant operational and information sites. Links should be to original sites with no duplication: eg direct link to originals policy directory, Calendar. As far as possible the link should be to the exact web page location so that access to information requires no more than two "clicks" from senate home page.

Links to operational sites: Senate web pages with welcome/home pages usually used a "side menu" or "in-text link" approach as a navigation tool to relevant operational sources. These were either content based (eg UWA) or user centered (eg Newcastle University). Menus usually followed standard web format (between 5-7 categories) or were voluminous (many links).

Recommendation: UWS adopt a side menu and in-text link approach on the senate home page, with no more than 5 menu choices, and for each link-page a topic-banner for ease of access. In-text links on the welcome page can provide more refined topic searching for those unsure of category formation/location (eg the word "committees" will link to the committees home page, "members" will link to the directory of members which will have links to their individual staff home pages).

Purpose of Senate: A number of roles were identified in senate descriptions/ terms of reference/ roles and function statements/ statute statements/ university rules. The descriptions of purpose and role varied in style according to the format used (eg statute statements were in "legalese" eg UWA and description summary statements were in plain English eg SCU).

Symbolic function as peak academic body: There is a consistent theme amongst all senate descriptions/ terms of reference/constitutions etc that it is the peak/ principal academic body of the University (eg UWollongong).

Forum for debate/discussion: It is a primary forum for debate and discussion of academic issues; approves academic policy. A few universities identify particular opportunities for debate (eg for a) while others assume it in their general business.

Quality assurance and quality improvement function: It has a central role in academic quality assurance in both teaching and research through review and monitoring of academic activity by committees of senate and by senate itself. In particular standards and practices are a focus of senate oversight. Statements relating to "fostering excellence"/ "academic excellence"/ "highest standards"/ "maintenance of academic standards" are made.

University "moral purpose": Some senates identify the protection, promotion and enhancement of core academic activities. Some present this moral purpose in terms relating to being the "custodian" of academic values and standards.

Representative of university as a community of scholars and students: Most senates have ex-officio membership on the basis of managerial responsibility, and elected

membership which is representative of different parts of the university. For example, undergraduate or postgraduate student representatives, elected academic staff members at various levels of seniority. Particular attention is paid to membership profile: in some universities the nature of the membership profile is presented while in others the actual names and contact details of members are provided. Election processes are detailed on most sites, and particular attention is paid to the Chair of Senate with some sites describing in detail the role of chair.

Accreditation/approval of courses and academic policies: Some academic boards "recommend" to councils academic programs/policies (eg University Adelaide) while others have the delegated authority to approve them (eg UWS).

Scope of interest: teaching, academic programs at undergraduate and postgraduate level, student administration (primarily in academic policies).

Provide advice: Senates provide advice on any matters referred to it by the vice chancellor or chancellor. In specific cases advice on the "educational profile" is identified.

Strategic planning and corporate goal attainment: Some senates (eg UWS, USyd, UNE) specifically identify a contribution to corporate planning processes either against the academic program plan or in general terms. Others identify senate making a a contribution to the attainment of the institutional mission or goals.

Formal committee processes: Most universities provide information relating to standing orders or procedures for the conduct of meetings

Coordination/communication function: Most senates provide a coordination/ communication function by receiving reports from committees and coordinating implementation/action/ dissemination either through recommendation to delegated authorities or through its own decisions (eg UNE).

Scholarships, prizes and awards function: Senate makes determinations in relation to these policies (eg terms and conditions) and may determine the award of the prizes.

Organization structure/ staffing/ resource advice: There are a few examples of senate (eg UWA, UTS, UNE) being able to advise on matters relating to staffing/ human resource planning and policies, organization structure, capital planning, funding of organizational units, establishment of new academic units, etc. Some (eg UWollomgong) present this issue in terms of defining academic goals which should inform financial planning, including capital works and infrastructure programs. Most are silent on this issue.

Delegations: Usually reference is made to the university Act, by-laws and resolution of the Board to delimit the powers of senate (eg UNSW, CanbU). The powers of senate are delegated from the Board of Trustees or similar (eg SCU) and may vary from time to time according to the Board. Often certain powers are prescribed in the University Rules or statute.

Reporting: All senates are required to document their determinations and provide report to the Board. Some identify the provision of annual reports.

Academic freedom: Some senate statements (eg University of Sydney) specifically identify a function relating to the "safeguarding of academic freedom", others (eg U Wollongong) refer to policies and practices relating to academic freedom.

Regular academic/faculty review: Initiate and coordinate regular academic program reviews, and in some universities review of academic organizational units (eg USyd, UNE)

Approve/recommend graduation of students: Depending of delegated authority, the senate can approve or recommend to the Board the graduation of students.

Student discipline: Few senates identify a student discipline function (eg Canb U) however all have academic misconduct policies which may be implemented through senate committees/ subcommittees.

Inter and cross university collaboration/ communication: UWS appears relatively unique in specifically noting this as a senate term of reference.

Recommendation: Given the delegated powers of the Chair of UWS Senate for structural change in academic governance are limited to committee membership and terms of reference, an options paper should be prepared for the Board of Trustees which canvasses structural alternatives for academic governance and integrates issues of role and purpose to these options. It is preferable to maintain the university rules as they are in this review.