

**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 13-14<sup>th</sup> 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.

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**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.