

Role and function of the Academic Board

A recent article by David Woodhouse and Jeanette Baird of AUQA¹ offered some criticism of the structure and operation of Academic Boards in Australian universities. Their concluding remarks state

“Conversely, rather than doing away with academic boards, can they be assisted to perform better?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? 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.”

The role of Academic Boards has been a matter of some interest for AUQA. Anthony Dooley has prepared an analysis of the attitude of AUQA to Academic Boards as evidenced by comments made during AUQA reviews². Dooley's analysis is that AUQA has seen Boards as upholders of institutional standards, has critically examined their performance as part of a tripartite governance structure but has not focused on the role of the Board in involving “many academics in the process of collective, yet focused and strategic governance.”

This discussion paper aims to suggest a basis for developing the culture and processes by which our Academic Board can constructively encompass these roles. We begin, as one should, with the fundamentals.

What is a University?

While there is a long and sometimes varying history of what constitutes a university, a contemporary and local perspective can be gained from the revised protocols for approval of Australian higher education providers³, effective from December 2007. These state, inter alia,

“Additional criteria for all Australian universities

4. In addition to meeting the nationally agreed general criteria for higher education delivery in Protocol A, an Australian university will meet the following criteria:

- D1. demonstrates a culture of sustained scholarship which informs teaching and learning in all fields in which courses are offered
- D2. undertakes research that leads to the creation of new knowledge and original creative endeavour at least in those fields in which Research Masters and PhDs or equivalent Research Doctorates are offered
- D3. demonstrates commitment of teachers, researchers, course designers and assessors to free inquiry and the systematic advancement of knowledge

¹ Woodhouse, D. and Baird, J. (2007). Academic Boards' role in quality and standards. *Campus Review*, 23 April 2007, p10.

² Dooley, A.H. (2007). The role of Academic Boards in university governance. Submitted to AUQA as an Occasional Publication, personal communication.

³ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, As approved 7 July 2006. Available online at <http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/RevisedNationalProtocols20081.pdf> (22/05/2007).

D4. demonstrates governance, procedural rules, organisational structure, admission policies, financial arrangements and quality assurance processes which are underpinned by the values and goals of universities and which ensure the integrity of the institution's academic programs.”

These criteria include statements that encompass what many would accept as “academic values”.

Other statements of academic values appear in, as examples:

- Magna Charta Universitatum⁴
- American Council on Education Statement on Academic Rights and Responsibilities⁵
- Strategic Directions⁶.

For this paper, we take statements of academic values to embrace the essential nature of a university, compatible with the following definition:

“...the university... is an institution created or allowed by society and the State to participate in the development of knowledge and its dissemination through research and higher education for the welfare of mankind.”⁷

How important are core values?

One of the major dilemmas facing modern universities has been clearly described by Ward (2007)⁸:

“Changes in higher education worldwide do seem to confront shared issues as well as those specific to distinctive national arrangements. The expansion of public expenditures in higher education has been associated with demands for enhanced accountability and effectiveness. These demands have required a more active managerial approach to the administration of universities and increased pressures for universities to seek revenues beyond those provided by public funding. These pressures sometimes conflict with the academic values that have inspired and sustained the university throughout its history. These values include academic freedom, intellectual integrity, moral and ethical probity as well as a commitment to ensure fairness in access and a commitment to respond to social concerns. Although universities have not always been true to these values and commitments, they remain the bedrock of higher education's identity and institutions need to be alert to any pressures that diminish their influence. In addition, demands for narrowly construed outcomes combined with the market-related basis of new revenues may create incentives that distort the core missions of higher education institutions as purely utilitarian motives drive both curricula and research. “

⁴ <http://www.unibo.it/PortaleEn/University/Our+History/The+University+Today.htm>

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http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Search§ion=Statements_and_Testimony1&template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentFileID=2078

⁶ <http://www.usyd.edu.au/about/publication/strategic/2006/index.shtml>

⁷ Thorens, J. (2006). Liberties, freedom and autonomy: a few reflections on academia's estate. Higher Education Policy, 19: 87-110. Available on Unikey login (when off-campus) at

<http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/pqdweb?did=999806651&sid=1&Fmt=1&clientId=16331&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

⁸ Ward, D. (2007). Academic values, institutional management and public policies. Higher Education Management and Policy, 19: 1-12. Available on Unikey login (when off-campus) at <http://ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/login?url=http://www.sourceoecd.org/vl=3518119/cl=12/nw=1/rpsv/~6141/v19n2/s1/p1> (22/05/2007).

There is a rich literature on this apparent conflict. Winter and Sarros (2002)⁹, for example, provide a cross-sector analysis of academics' responses to corporate reforms in Australian universities. Sheehan et al (1996)¹⁰ paint a similar picture of disenchantment of academics with increasing management pressure apparently alienating them from their core purpose.

The negative effects of separation of management direction from organizational core purpose are not restricted to universities. The major thrust of Collins and Porras (1994)¹¹ is to demonstrate the long-term inferior performance of organizations that failed to develop a strong and enduring core ideology, which they defined as core values + purpose. Enduring, visionary corporations (up to 1994, at least) were based on core ideologies that emerged early in the corporation's life and were used as constant reference points across decades of externally-induced change.

Core values are important to modern universities

In the last decade, while there has been disquiet at the increasing demands for and of efficient management, there has also been a call for universities to maintain and affirm core academic values, for example, in a policy statement by the Business/Higher Education Round Table¹², although, interestingly, this had disappeared from their subsequent paper with the same title in 2002.

In 2000, Alan Gilbert, in the Bert Kelly lecture series, included in his lecture¹³

"No one, presumably, believes that wealth is a sufficient condition of institutional success. Unless driven by a profound commitment to core academic values and principles, a rich university might be of only marginally greater value than a profitable circus. Yet the truth remains that genteel poverty is not a sound basis for preserving the core academic values and principles. The very people who equate concern to secure and strengthen the resource base of the University with corporatism or economic rationalism, frequently draw another breath and demand to know why the Administration is letting research infrastructure run down, or not supplementing research-only staff salaries, or being niggardly in providing faculties and departments with adequate budgets. "

Lauchlan Chipman, in the same series, concluded his lecture¹⁴ with the words:

"I hope in what I have said to have convinced you that Australian universities need to be managed as never before if they are to triumph on behalf of their constituencies within the industrial revolution now taking place worldwide in the higher education industry. At the same time, the cherished values that are vital for a flourishing, creative, independent, and far-sighted university need not be compromised by a more

⁹ Winter, R. and Sarros, J. (2002). Corporate reforms to Australian universities: views from the academic heartland. *J. Institutional Research*, 11(2). Available online at <http://www.aair.org.au/jir/Oct02/Winter.pdf> (21/05/2007).

¹⁰ Sheehan, B.A., Welch, A.R. and Lacy, F.J. (1996). The academic profession in Australia. EIP paper 96/1. Available online at <http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip9601.htm> (22/05/2007).

¹¹ Collins, J.C. and Porras, J.I. (1994). "Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies". Century, Random House.

¹² Business/Higher Education Round Table. (1998). Higher Education in Australia: the Global Imperative. A Policy Statement. B-HERT Position Paper No. 1. Available online at <http://www.bhert.com/Docs/policy1.rtf> (22/05/2007).

¹³ Gilbert, A. (2000). The idea of a university beyond 2000. Available on-line at <http://www.cis.org.au/events/bertkelly/bk300.htm> (21/05/2007).

¹⁴ Chipman, L. (2000). Academic freedom and the well-managed university. Available on-line at <http://www.cis.org.au/events/bertkelly/bk400.htm> (21/05/2007).

effective management structure; on the contrary, that structure should exist to make them, and all other things that are important to the university, robust as never before.”

Note here the duality of a modern university like Sydney. Academic standards, a manifestation of academic values, provide the basis for our business success, but efficient management of the business is necessary to ensure the supply of resources that underpin our ability to maintain high academic standards.

How do organizations preserve and apply their core values?

- Some, like Johnson&Johnson, have a long-established credo to which management refers¹⁵.
- IBM used IT to engage its communities in a company-wide debate on core values¹⁶
- A European model, exemplified by Roche, is to have an independent organ within the company that “develops and coordinates the Group’s strategy for sustainable development”¹⁷.

How does this relate to the Academic Board?

The Academic Governance Rule provides clear specification of the responsibilities and functions of the Board. These are compatible with a view that the Board also has an important role in preserving the core values and purpose of the institution.

However, a traditional approach would suggest that the Board cannot fulfil its responsibilities without management capability. Is this necessary, as the Board specifically does not have this capability?

The answer, perhaps, lies in appreciation of the positioning of the Board within the University. A traditional organizational chart offers little information, but a mapping of academic communities within the university shows a rich structure (Figure 1). The important feature is that membership of the Board includes and overlaps with membership of other key communities. Thus, for instance, senior management has a separate identity, responsibilities and authority in its own right, but also joins with other members of the university to form the Academic Board, where the Board has separate but complementary responsibilities.

¹⁵ http://www.jnj.com/our_company/our_credo/index.htm

¹⁶ <http://www.ibm.com/ibm/values/us/>

¹⁷ http://www.roche.com/home/sustainability/sus_prin/sus_prin-scom.htm

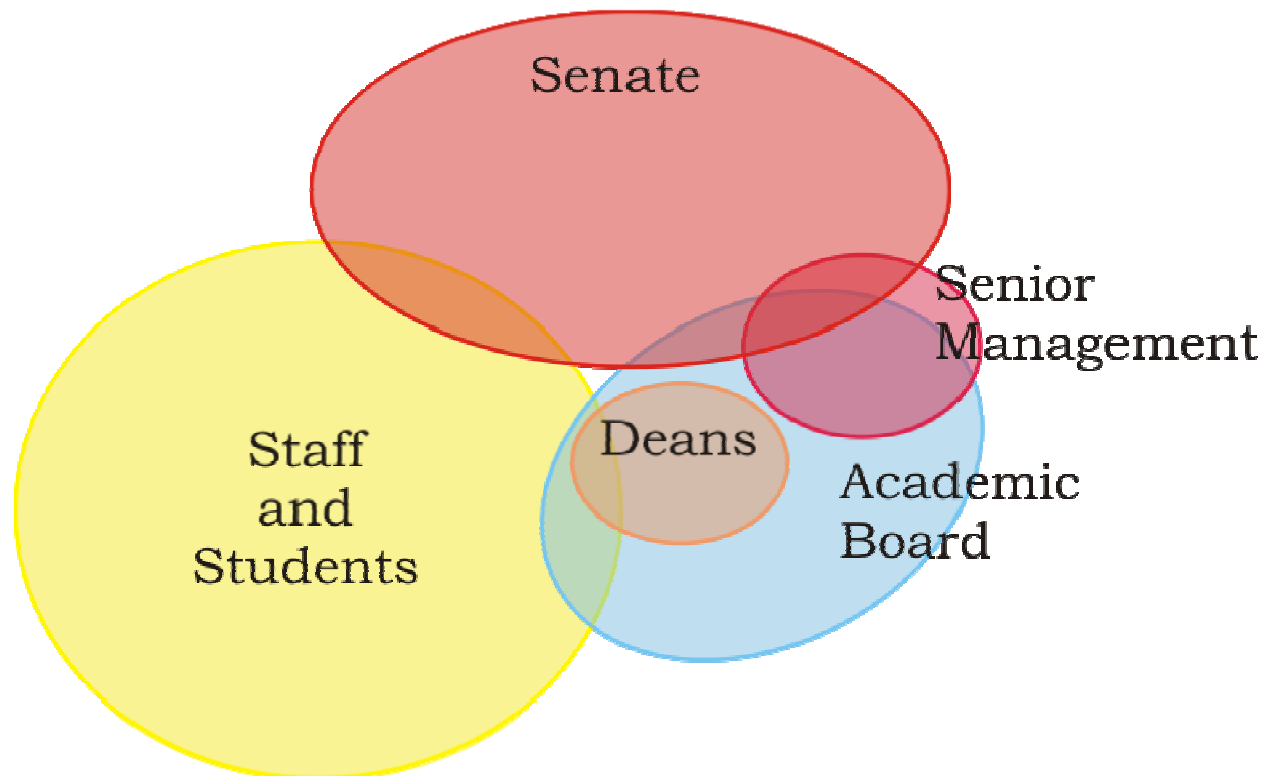


Figure 1 Academic communities within the university.

As indicated in Figure 2, management conversations occur among academic communities outside the Board. The value of the Board must therefore lie in the capabilities that arise when the communities that are represented within it come together. The core values and purpose of the institution then constitute a *lingua franca* that allows different communities to engage, in common, with the responsibilities of the Board. The Board also provides a common ground where individuals with interests in the institution's core values, e.g., Vice Chancellor, Deans, staff and students, can examine and re-affirm these propositions.

Potentially, the Board could provide the environment in which strategic and operational initiatives are tested for and achieve alignment with the core values of the university. This should happen in a way that does not impede but, in fact, supports and enhances management portfolios.

How would this work?

An almost inescapable consequence is that there should be a culture of the Board and management working in partnership, as required, each concentrating on their own responsibilities, but supporting the other. These partnerships may take a number of forms.

- The Board, in meeting its responsibilities, already forms partnerships with appropriate management portfolios. For example, with respect to reviews, the partnership includes the offices of the PVC L&T, PVC Strategic Planning and Deans. Core values and principles are implicit in defining academic standards and academic culture and processes within the faculties.
- In the formation of Board working parties to develop and review policies, relevant management representatives are included to ensure that the policies align well with operational requirements of the university, while also aligning with academic values and principles.

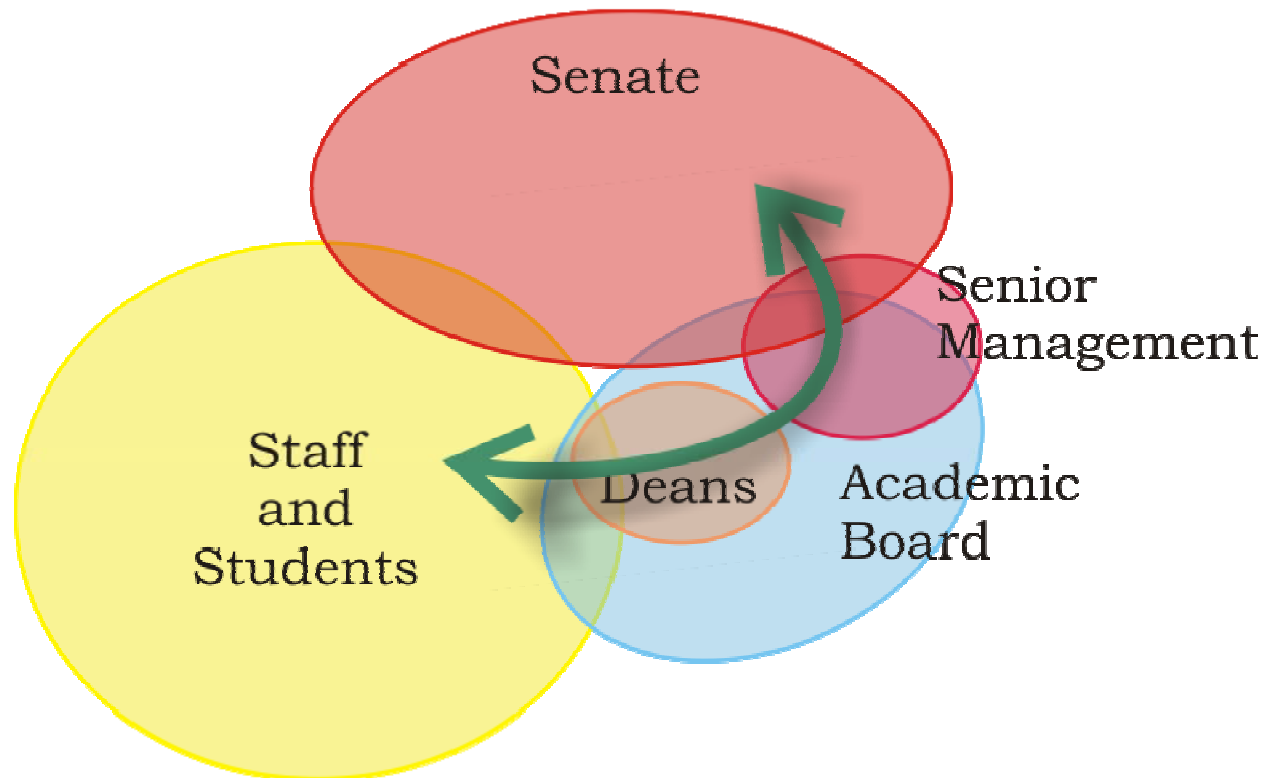


Figure 2 Management conversations (green arrow) occur among communities, but outside the Board

- Perhaps an area that needs encouragement is the inclusion of a Board voice in working parties formed by management, so that the Board can contribute relevant academic perspectives to the conversation. The key word here is “contribute” rather than “control”.
- The Board meetings should provide the opportunity for management and staff to discuss issues of common interest, especially from a perspective of alignment of the issues with core values and principles. What culture, processes and behaviour should the Board adopt to ensure such meetings are valuable for all to attend, respect the diversity of interests and responsibilities present and achieve significant outcomes?

Will this approach yield benefits?

Corporate experience suggests that enduring visionary organizations have a culture that “Preserves the core and stimulates progress”¹⁸. Collins and Porras suggest such a culture allows, and perhaps encourages, innovation in strategy and operations without loss of adherence to the core values and purpose of the organization. Ryan and Eckersley (2005)¹⁹ report that reaffirmation of core values was an essential part of the recovery of the University of Newcastle from the plagiarism scandals.

¹⁸ Collins, J.C. and Porras, J.I. (1994). “Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies”. Century, Random House.

¹⁹ Ryan, S. and Eckersley, C. (2005). Reconceptualising quality in the revival of academic values. Proc. Of the 2005 Australian Universities Quality Forum. AUQA Occasional Publications, No. 5, pp151-6. Available online at http://auqa.edu.au/auqf/2005/proceedings/full_proceedings.pdf (22/05/2007).

Clark (2001)²⁰ proposes that the universities that prosper in the coming years will be autonomous, entrepreneurial, able to generate sufficient independent income to relieve dependence on government funding, collegial and with a strengthened steering core that embraces both managerial groups and academics.

In this light, the exercise of the Board's responsibilities seems natural and constructive. Management retains the responsibility to take the lead in institutional strategy and operational issues, for which the Board provides constructive criticism, development support and quality assurance. With the core institutional values and purpose the basis for the Board's actions, the university should be able to mutually enhance the complementarity of academic excellence and a strong, agile business.

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22 May 2007.

²⁰ Clark, B. (2001). The entrepreneurial university: new foundations for collegiality, autonomy and achievement. Higher Education Management 13:9-24. Available with Unikey login (when off-campus) at <http://ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/login?url=http://www.sourceoecd.org/vl=1442801/cl=16/nw=1/rpsv/ij/oecdjournals/16823451/v13n2/s1/p1> (22/05/2007).

AUQA thematic analysis

The role of Academic Boards in University Governance¹

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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 to government 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 felt more strongly 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 Acts 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".

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. 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. 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 University Governance.

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.

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 2002-2006.

The present paper undertakes a longitudinal study of AUQA reviews, asking:

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

¹ This document has been submitted to the series AUQA occasional papers.

- 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?

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.

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

Overall, AUQA teams have been parsimonious with their *commendations* involving Boards: of the many hundreds of commendations in all reports to September 2006, only four 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 all commendations concern the Board’s role as a body of accreditation and review.

There are just four *affirmations*. Three of them also pertain to accreditation and review: that Bond 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 fourth is from the Deakin audit 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 Deakin audit followed 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, and we have identified 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 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 (UB). 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

Mainly during the 1990's, a majority of universities had restructured 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 couple of cases (Adelaide 2002/3, Deakin 2004/5) the audit followed soon after a review and restructure of the Board, and this has generally been favourably received.

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.

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”. Aside from this comment, there has been little comment on the role of student members of Academic Boards, an issue identified as important in NCCABS.

At Melbourne, 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 these issues.

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.”

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 its perceived role as a policeman. 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 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 doing QA. 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 is exhorted:

“That the Academic Board 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 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 baldly: “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.”

The issue of monitoring of off-shore programs is a recurring theme: 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.”

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 least 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”, but that “This kind of monitoring is now fairly standard at Australian universities”. At the Batchelor Institute, 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.

Communication within the Institution

The combined wisdom of Board Presidents considered that communication was 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. However, 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).

Nevertheless, 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 of 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 communication within 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 most audit teams consider that the Board has a role to play as a key communication tool 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.”

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 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 under the National Strategic Priorities legislation.

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 to involve 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 our 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 idea 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.

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