

A proposal for changes to the standing committees of the University of Sydney's Academic Board

Submitted jointly by the Chair of the Board and the Vice-Chancellor
for consideration by members of the Board

October 2009

Recommendation

That the Board adopt the principles for changes to its standing committees set out in this paper and direct the Chair of the Board to bring forward a plan to implement the proposed changes.

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1. Background to this proposal

At the 26 August 2009 meeting of the Academic Board the Vice-Chancellor raised a number of ideas for changes to the structure, function and membership of the Board's committees that in his view would enable the Board to refocus on its core roles, which he described as:

- “upholding the University’s academic standards”;
- “keeping the University academically honest”; and
- “defending the University’s core values of academic freedom and integrity”.¹

The Vice-Chancellor described how when he first arrived at the University he found that while both the Senate and the Academic Board had clearly defined functions and processes for decision-making, the processes by which University office holders made decisions seemed in some cases to lack the same degree of clarity and transparency. He outlined how, with the creation of the Senior Executive Group (SEG), he had sought to establish clear lines for consultation and decision-making by University office holders, which included the deans of the University’s 16 faculties as integral partners in the process. With SEG and its committees in place, significant matters of strategic planning, resource allocation and policy are now discussed with the deans of all faculties at SEG prior to decisions being made or proposals being taken to the Academic Board or the Senate for approval.

In preparation for anticipated changes in the regulatory environment in which the University operates the Vice-Chancellor stressed the need for the Academic Board, as the independent voice of the University’s academic community, to focus more keenly than ever on assuring and enhancing the quality of the University’s education and research activities, but to step back from taking such a hands-on approach to the development of academic policy. He spoke of the difficult position in which the Board sometimes found itself, in having to develop and approve its own policies, and argued that a better approach would see academic policies developed at arms-length from the Board by the central portfolios, with the Board playing policy initiation, review and approval roles.

The Vice-Chancellor also stressed the need to reduce duplication and overlaps between the activities of the SEG and of the Board, and to free up the time and resources of key Board and secretariat personnel to focus their efforts on the Board’s core quality assurance roles. He expressed his keen desire to establish functional working arrangements and processes between the portfolios, SEG and the Board to enable the three bodies to work together effectively in pursuit of the University’s strategic objectives. The Board broadly endorsed the Vice-Chancellor’s proposals for reform and resolved that the Chair of Board and the Vice-Chancellor should bring a paper together jointly to a future meeting of the Board elaborating on how the proposals might work in practice.

¹ This discussion was informed by a Discussion Paper ‘*the Academic Board: membership, committees & future directions*’, prepared for consideration by members of the Board by the Office of the Vice-Chancellor in June 2009, following the cessation of an Independent Review commissioned by the Board in March 2009. That review was postponed indefinitely after its Chair, Professor Deryck Schreuder, advised that he had to withdraw from it due to other commitments.

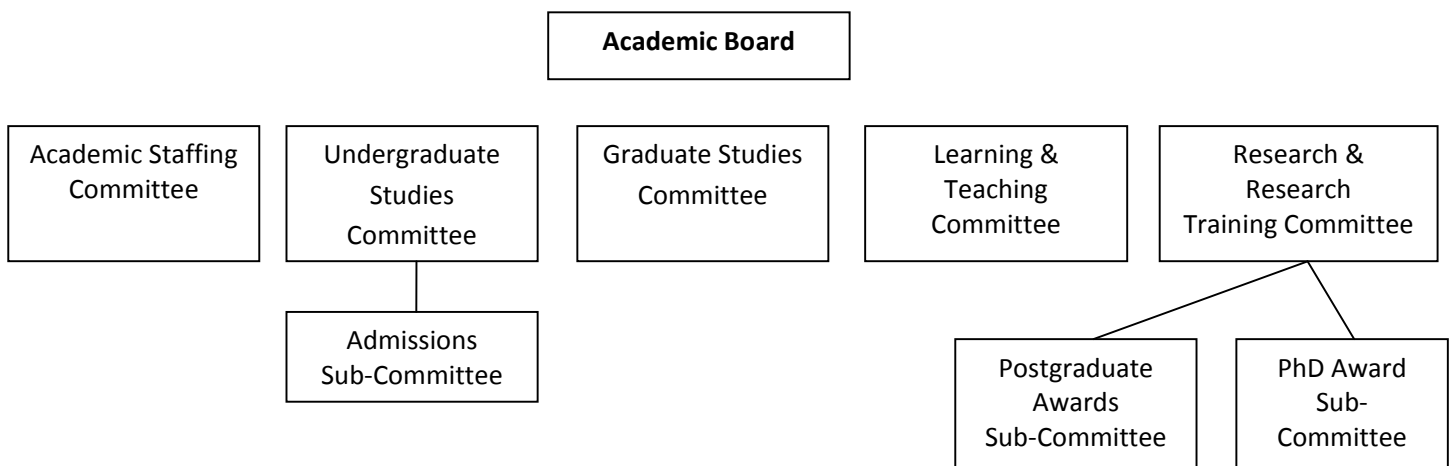
2. The objectives of the proposed changes to the committees of the Academic Board

The proposal put forward in this paper by the Chair of the Board and the Vice-Chancellor encompasses the following features for a revitalised and refocused Academic Board:

1. A Board with a strong and independent academic voice committed to upholding the University's standards.
2. A Board with an enhanced, robust and demonstrably independent focus on:
 - monitoring and assessment of the University's performance and quality in teaching and research;
 - formal and regular reviews of the academic activities of the faculties and similar units in cooperation with the University administration's periodic reviews; and
 - approval of new and modified courses including changes to the academic requirements for awards.
3. A Board with an important policy initiation, review and approval function, but which works with and relies upon the University's operational portfolios for the development of academic policy.

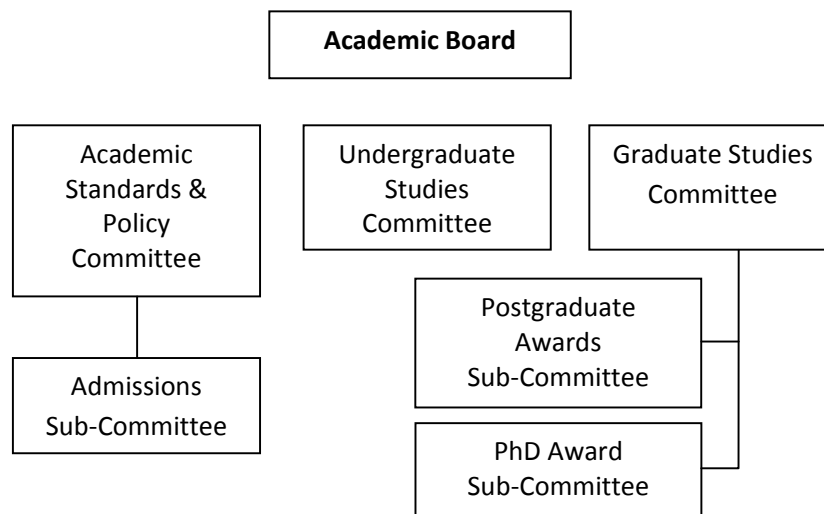
To enable the Academic Board to perform these functions, a new committee structure is proposed below, following a description of the current committee arrangements.

3. Current structure of the Academic Board's committees



The function of each committee is contained in the Appendix.

4. Proposed new structure of the Academic Board's committees



4.1 Summary of key proposed changes

In summary, the key proposed changes to the standing committees of the Academic Board are:

- the dissolution of the Learning & Teaching and Research & Research Training committees;
- the establishment of an Academic Standards & Policy Committee, which will assume the current roles of the Learning & Teaching Committee, the research responsibilities of the Research & Research Training Committee, and play a key role in enhancing and ensuring the overall quality of the University's education and research activities;
- reconstituting the Academic Staffing Committee as an advisory committee to the SEG, retaining strong Board representation, but reporting to the SEG directly through the Provost or the Vice-Chancellor;
- maintaining the Undergraduate and Graduate Studies Standing Committees with responsibilities for advising the Board on the approval of new and modified courses at the respective levels of study, with the Graduate Studies Committee also assuming responsibility for quality monitoring and academic policy in relation to higher degrees by research;
- maintaining the Postgraduate Awards and PhD Award Sub-Committees unchanged, but having them report to the Board through the Graduate Studies Committee;
- reconstituting the Admissions Sub-Committee as a Sub-Committee of the Academic Standards & Policy Committee and expanding the scope of the Admissions Sub-Committee to cover matters of graduate as well as undergraduate admissions;
- changing the method of appointment to Board committees so that academic members are appointed by the Board on recommendation by the Chair of the Board and the Chair of each committee, based on their relevant expertise and experience; and
- changing the membership of key committees and review panels (including external representation) to ensure independence and enhance relevant expertise, whilst retaining strong student representation on all standing committees.

The proposed function of each new committee is set out below.

4.2 Academic Standards & Policy Committee

The key proposed change is the establishment of a new committee of the Academic Board to be called the Academic Standards & Policy Committee. This committee will assist the Academic Board to discharge its core responsibility - the achievement and maintenance of the highest standards in teaching, scholarship and research, and the safeguarding of academic freedom.

The Academic Standards & Policy Committee will subsume the current roles of the Board's Learning and Teaching Committee and the research component of the Research and Research Training committee.

This new committee will assume responsibility for quality enhancement and assurance in relation to education and research (undergraduate and postgraduate coursework but not higher degree by research training which will be assumed by the Graduate Studies Committee).

The principal functions of the Academic Standards & Policy Committee will be to:

- assist the Board to ensure the University's core education and research activities meet the highest standards possible;
- conduct academic reviews of faculties and other similar units on behalf of the Board in conjunction with the University administration;
- advise the Board, and through the Board, the University and units within the University, about areas that require attention in order improve academic standards and about what action is required;
- consider and advise the Board on policy proposals received from the portfolios that are of general application or which are not covered by the Undergraduate or Graduate Studies Standing Committees; and
- ensure that all Academic Board policies are developed according to consistent processes, are clear, consistent with each other, accurate and subjected to regular review.

In order that the Board's critical role in enhancing and assuring standards is perceived as credible both within the University and externally, the Academic Standards & Policy Committee must be seen to function with independence from the University's Senior Executive and faculties. Members of the Committee will need to have sound expertise in assessing and assuring the quality of teaching and/or research and in assessing and reviewing academic policies of general application. It is therefore proposed that:

- the membership of the Committee will be independent of the operational portfolios, SEG and its committees and like all standing committees of the Board it will have student members;
- the academic members of the Committee will be appointed by the Board, on recommendation by the Chair of the Board and the Chair of the Committee, based on their relevant expertise;
- the membership of the Committee will include a number of experts drawn from outside the University, also appointed by the Board on recommendation by the Chair and the Chair of the Committee.

The scope of the work of this committee will be necessarily broad, encompassing ‘all academic activities of the University’.²

The committee will provide a single, logical locus for the Academic Board reviews of the quality of education and research occurring in individual faculties. To strengthen the independence of these reviews it is proposed that each review panel will include at least one member appointed from outside the University.

It is proposed also that the Committee’s reviews of faculties will occur in conjunction and alignment with the University administration’s own periodic reviews of the performance of faculties, both in terms of management review and quality review, and that the Chair of the Board and the Chair of the Committee will work with the Provost and relevant portfolios to establish a coordinated and complementary framework for periodic reviews.

The Committee will receive data and reports from the Education, Research and International portfolios on a regular basis. The Committee will not collect the data and information itself, but will scrutinise and report to the Board on the information provided to it by the portfolios.

4.3 Academic Staffing Committee

It is proposed that the Academic Staffing Committee of the Board be reconstituted as an Advisory Committee to the SEG, reporting to the SEG through the Provost or the Vice-Chancellor. The membership of the Academic Staffing Committee currently comprises a large number of SEG members; its terms of reference largely cover matters of strategy, operation and resource allocation that are properly the responsibility of SEG; it reports to the Chief Operating Officer as well as the Board; and the recent work on Academic Career Paths and Performance Management present as examples of how the Committee can play an effective role in the development of University staffing policies through direct engagement with the relevant portfolios and the SEG.

The Academic Board will have a continuing responsibility to form and express views about academic staffing matters. It would retain significant membership of the Academic Staffing Committee, with a fixed number of positions on the Committee to be reserved for non-SEG members of the Academic Board on appointment by the Chair of the Board. In practice, the Academic Standards & Policy Committee will review all matters of policy relevant to academic staffing prior to them being considered by the Board itself.

4.4 Undergraduate Studies Committee

It is proposed that the role of the Undergraduate Studies Committee in relation to the approval of new and modified undergraduate courses will remain unchanged, but that the processes for course approvals will be made more robust.

² University of Sydney (Academic Governance) Rule 2003 (as amended), s. 4.1.2.

The Committee will no longer advise the Board on matters of undergraduate admissions, with this function to be assumed by the Academic Standards & Policy Committee for both undergraduate and graduate coursework programs.

Traditionally, the Undergraduate Studies Committee has considered proposals for new courses, modifications to existing courses and their deletion, brought to it by faculties. In order to achieve the highest academic quality and standards in the University's undergraduate degree offerings, it is proposed that:

- There will be a separation of membership of this Committee from the faculty representatives who bring proposals for consideration. This will ensure the academic independence of the committee and remove any perceptions or potential for conflict of interest.
- The Committee will require serious academic review of all proposals before recommending them to the Academic Board for approval. To enable this, the use of assessors, including external assessors, is recommended if this is judged necessary by the Committee to reach a properly formed decision regarding a proposal.
- To assure continuing high standards of degree offering, the Committee will ensure that each degree has a defined lifecycle, at the end of which it is reviewed. Where faculties do not initiate such reviews, they will be commissioned by the Committee in dialogue with the SEG Course Profiles Steering Committee.³ The Undergraduate Studies Committee may also wish to commission reviews of courses where other evidence, for instance gathered through the Academic Standards and Policy Committee and University administration's periodic reviews of faculties, indicates that this is warranted.
- The Committee will recommend for approval only those proposals or reviews that demonstrate the degrees proposed or under review will enhance the academic reputation of the university. Further, it will be persistent and diligent in ensuring the revision or deletion of courses that do not meet these standards.

As an additional step to the current approval process for new courses, it is proposed that prior to the submission of any new course proposal to the Undergraduate Studies Committee, the faculty proposing the course must make a case for its establishment to the SEG Course Profile Steering Committee. Transitional and operating arrangements will be required which ensure that the introduction of this additional step does not unduly lengthen the lead times required for the submission of proposals, or the timeliness of the approval process.

In the event that SEG and the Academic Board cannot reach agreement about whether a new course proposal should be allowed, then the proposal would be listed as a special item for discussion and detailed debate at a full meeting of the Board.

³ The SEG Course Profiles Steering Committee has been established by SEG to oversee coordination of faculty and University course priorities in the context of the University's Strategic Plan. It will review the business case for all new course proposals and advise SEG about matters such as the financial viability, load implications and strategic fit of each proposal.

4.5 Graduate Studies Committee

This committee will serve, for postgraduate coursework, the same functions as it is proposed the Undergraduate Studies Committee will serve for undergraduate coursework approvals. The Graduate Studies Committee will also assume responsibility for enhancing and assuring the quality of the University's research degrees, but will no longer advise the Board in relation to admissions to graduate coursework programs.

The terms of reference, membership and processes for the Graduate Studies Committee will largely reflect those of the Undergraduate Studies Committee so far as they relate to the approval of new courses, and the modification or deletion of existing courses. The same requirements will apply in terms of the SEG's involvement in the consideration of new course proposals.

The Graduate Studies Committee's current responsibilities in relation to the admission of students and recognition of prior learning, exemption, credit transfer and advanced standing will be assumed by the Admissions Sub-Committee - which will advise the Academic Standards & Policy Committee on all matters of admission.

The Graduate Studies Committee will assume responsibility for advising the Board in relation to the allocation of Postgraduate Awards and the awarding of PhDs. To enable it to do this, the existing Postgraduate Awards Sub-Committee and the PhD Award Sub-Committee of the Research and Research Training Committee will continue unchanged, but report to the Board through the Graduate Studies Committee.

4.6 Admissions Sub-Committee

As the University examines options for admitting the most promising students whatever their social background, it is proposed that the Admissions Sub-Committee will work closely with the Education portfolio towards the achievement of this goal, whilst ensuring the maintenance of standards and consistency in the approach that the University takes to admissions at different levels of study.

The Admissions Sub-Committee will report to the Board through the Academic Standards & Policy Committee and will advise it and the Board in relation to both undergraduate and graduate admissions. The Admissions Sub-Committee will receive and consider all proposals for changes to the University's admissions policies developed by the Education portfolio in consultation with the SEG Education Committee. The Board will retain responsibility for setting admission standards and criteria and no changes to admissions policies will be implemented without the Board's approval.

4.7 Postgraduate Awards Sub-Committee

The function and membership of the Postgraduate Awards Sub-Committee will remain unchanged. It will report to the Academic Board through the Graduate Studies Committee.

4.8 PhD Award Sub-Committee

The function and membership of the PhD Award Sub-Committee will remain unchanged. It will report to the Academic Board through the Graduate Studies Committee.

5. The development of academic policy under the proposed new arrangements

The objectives of the proposed changes to the way that academic policy is developed at the University of Sydney include:

- allowing the Academic Board to refocus on its core roles of upholding the University's academic standards;
- improving the quality and consistency of the University's academic policies;
- improving the timeliness of the University's policy development processes; and
- maximising alignment between academic policy, financial and administrative realities and the University's strategic priorities.

The proposal seeks to provide a framework to underpin the achievement of these outcomes through increased levels of cooperation and consultation between the operational portfolios and the Academic Board.

Under the proposed changes, academic policy reform may be initiated by a portfolio, by the SEG or by the Academic Board. Once agreement has been reached about the objectives and scope of a project it will be the responsibility of the relevant portfolio head, utilising the resources of his or her portfolio, to undertake the work in a timely fashion, and to obtain the approval of both the SEG and the Academic Board prior to the implementation of any changes. In the event that SEG and the Academic Board cannot reach agreement over a matter of policy, then the issue would be listed as a special item for discussion and detailed debate at a full meeting of the Board.

Two policy projects currently underway may be used to illustrate how it is proposed that academic policy will be initiated, developed and approved, under the proposed arrangements.

The first is a proposal for the University to establish a clear policy governing the approval of research agreements where the potential sponsor of the research may seek terms that are at odds with the principle of academic freedom - such as bans or delays in the publication of findings resulting from the research. No such policy currently exists and there is a need for clarity to assist researchers in their dealings with potential sponsors and to provide guidance to the decision-makers who are ultimately required to approve or reject proposed research contracts on behalf of the University.

The Research Agreements policy proposal originated in the Research portfolio. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) has taken an Issues Paper to the SEG Research Committee. The Chair of the Academic Board represents the Board on that Committee and contributed to the Committee's initial discussion of the issues. The Academic Board will be formally consulted during the consultation phase of the policy's development. The policy will then be developed by the Research portfolio. Once approved by the SEG Research Committee the policy will be provided to the SEG and the Academic Board for approval prior to implementation by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research).

The second is a proposal for the University to establish a policy setting out the criteria upon which it will enter into jointly badged degrees with universities in other countries. This proposal was initiated by the Academic Board, was taken to the SEG by the Chair of the Board, and has been referred to the SEG International

Committee for consideration. The Academic Board is represented on the SEG International Committee. The Chair of the Academic Board and the Deputy-Vice Chancellor (International) are in dialogue about the proposal. If such a policy is to be developed, it will be developed by the International portfolio and/or Education portfolios, in consultation with the Board. Once a draft policy has been prepared, it would be considered by the SEG prior to approval by the Academic Board.

In summary, the success of the proposed changes to academic policy development at the University will depend largely on portfolio heads and key members of the Academic Board finding constructive ways to achieve the best possible outcome for the University. Under the proposal changes the Board will retain an important policy initiation, review and approval function, but will work with and rely upon the operational portfolios for the development of policy. Academic policy may be initiated by the Board, or by a portfolio, but should only be developed in consultation between them from the outset. The Board would retain the ability to identify and make preliminary investigations regarding the need for new policy, as well as to conduct preliminary reviews of its existing policies in order to determine the need for revisions.

6. Resourcing & process implications

The proposed changes to the structure and membership of the Academic Board's committees are likely to give rise to a number of resourcing implications and raise practical issues about process that will need to be worked through carefully.

The inclusion of external committee members may involve additional costs and impose additional management requirements on the Board's secretariat. The proposed changes to the functions of the standing committees are likely to increase the intensity of work for committee Chairs in particular, and consideration may need to be given to compensating faculties for the time of standing committee Chairs.

The proposed Academic Standards & Policy Committee will have broad ranging responsibilities and is likely to require additional resources if it is to perform its proposed roles effectively. If the Academic Board is to have a role in course life-cycle oversight, then there may be a need for additional IT capacity to capture and report on course-related information beyond the data currently recorded in FlexSIS.

The introduction of requirements for new course proposals and changes to admissions criteria to be discussed by SEG committees prior to consideration by the Academic Board, along with the proposal for external assessors for new course proposals, are likely to impact negatively on timelines for course approvals. The proposed processes for the development of Academic Board initiated policies in the portfolios will have implications for liaison and administration between Secretariat staff and staff in the relevant portfolios to ensure that the development of policy is kept on schedule.

It is also likely that individual portfolios may require additional resources, or that existing resources may need to be redeployed, in order to ensure that the portfolios are able to support their SEG committees as well as undertake the extensive policy development work that will be required of them.

All of these issues will be addressed thoroughly in an implementation plan if the Board accepts the broad thrust of the reform proposal.

Appendix Functions of the existing Academic Board Committees

Academic Staffing Committee

Advises the Academic Board about resolutions, policy and procedures relating to academic staffing at the University.

Undergraduate Studies Committee

Advises the Academic Board about resolutions, policy and procedures relating to undergraduate study at the University and acts as the Academic Board's agent in determining undergraduate matters in accordance with the resolutions of the Senate: Delegations of Authority: Academic Functions.

Admissions Sub-Committee

Advises the Undergraduate Studies Committee about resolutions, policy and procedures relating to admissions to undergraduate award courses at the University of Sydney.

Graduate Studies Committee

Advises the Academic Board about resolutions, policy and procedures relating to postgraduate coursework at the University.

Learning and Teaching Committee

Advises the Academic Board about resolutions, policy and procedures relating to the effective learning, teaching, examination and assessment processes within the University and works with the faculties and other organisational units in fostering a strong and dynamic learning and teaching culture across the University's spectrum of undergraduate, postgraduate and continuing education courses.

Research and Research Training Committee

Advises the Academic Board about resolutions, policy and procedures relating to research and research training at the University.

Postgraduate Awards Sub-Committee

Advises the Research and Research Training Committee about policy and procedures relating to the award of Australian Postgraduate Awards and University of Sydney Postgraduate Awards and takes decisions in accordance with the resolutions of the Senate: Delegations of Authority: Academic Functions.

PhD Award Sub-Committee

Advises the Research and Research Training Committee about resolutions, policy and procedures relating to the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and takes decisions in accordance with the resolutions of the Senate and the Academic Board relating to the Examination Process for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.