



TEQSA Guidance Note: Academic Governance

Overview

Academic governance is concerned with the integrity and quality of the core higher education activities of teaching, research and scholarship (AUQA, Good Practice for NSAs).

An effective and robust system of academic governance is an essential component of every higher education provider's overarching governance structure. It provides the framework for establishing and sustaining quality and integrity in higher education provision and ensuring quality learning outcomes for students.

This Guidance Note provides TEQSA's interpretation of academic governance in the Threshold Standards in their entirety, with particular regard to specific standards and accepted (and demonstrated) practice within the Australian higher education sector. It should be read in conjunction with other Guidance Notes, in particular those relating to corporate governance; academic leadership; scholarship; and academic quality assurance.

Specific provider registration standards particularly relevant to academic governance are:

- ▶ **Standard 3.1:** The higher education provider has a corporate governing body that has responsibility for oversight of all of the higher education provider's higher education operations, including conferral of its higher education awards, and to which management is accountable.
- ▶ **Standard 3.3:** The higher education provider's corporate governance arrangements demonstrate a clear distinction between governance and management responsibilities.
- ▶ **Standard 3.7:** The higher education provider's corporate governing body protects the academic integrity and quality of the higher education provider's higher education programs through academic governance arrangements that provide a clear and discernible separation between corporate and academic governance, including a properly constituted academic board and course advisory committees.
- ▶ **Standard 3.8:** The higher education provider's corporate and academic governance arrangements demonstrate:
 - the effective development, implementation and review of policies for all aspects of the higher education provider's academic activities including delivery of the higher education provider's courses of study by other entities
 - the maintenance of academic standards, with appropriate mechanisms for external input, in accordance with international conventions for good academic practice, and
 - effective quality assurance arrangements for all the higher education provider's higher education operations, encompassing systematic, monitoring, review and improvement.

This Guidance Note refers to the current Provider Registration Standards which are part of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2011. It will be revised when the new higher education standards come into operation.

Points of Guidance

Governance frameworks in higher education

Corporate governance is the overarching framework of rules, relationships, systems and processes within and by which authority is exercised and controlled in high education providers, in order to achieve their objectives and meet the Threshold Standards.

The core roles and responsibilities of the three principal bodies responsible for institutional governance are:

- ▶ **Corporate governing body** – setting overall strategic directions and the policies and processes necessary to achieve institutional objectives. It is ultimately responsible (to shareholders and/or stakeholders) for both corporate and academic outcomes. A separate Guidance Note has been prepared on corporate governance.
- ▶ **Academic governing body** – setting and overseeing the policies and processes necessary to achieve intended academic outcomes (quality and integrity) consistent with the provider's overall strategic directions. Setting academic standards and monitoring academic outcomes. Its ultimate responsibility and accountability is to the corporate governing body for academic outcomes.
- ▶ **Executive management** (vice-chancellor/chief executive officer and other senior executives and managers, including executive deans/deans/academic directors and heads of schools/departments) – implementing policies, programs and processes, including through decisions about staffing, budgets, infrastructure, etc. Its ultimate responsibility and accountability is to the corporate governing body for effective implementation of both corporate and academic objectives.

The functions of these elements of the governance system are interdependent and overlapping to some degree but, as the Threshold Standards require, there needs to be separation of, and clarity about, their principal roles and functions to ensure that governance is effective.

This separation is best, or preferably, achieved by formal delegations and/or authorisations from the corporate governing body which has overarching responsibility for all higher education operations. At the very least, there needs to be some clear, documented statement of roles and responsibilities, formally adopted by the corporate governing body.

Notwithstanding the requirements of the Threshold Standards that there be a 'clear and discernible separation between corporate and academic governance' and 'a clear distinction between governance and management', there is an equally clear need for effective communication, cooperation and collaboration between the three principal components of institutional governance: that is, there are shared responsibilities necessitating a balance between separation and cooperation.

The depth and effectiveness of governance is (or can be) strengthened by having committees with properly delegated decision-making authority and/or advisory roles supporting the roles of each of the principal governing bodies. In fact, in relation to academic governance, the Threshold Standards refer to 'a properly constituted academic board *and* course advisory committees'.

What is academic governance?

Academic governance is a central component of governance in any higher education provider. The term refers not just to the academic board but encompasses a broad range of stakeholders from senior academics to students. Governance consists of the complete system through which the policies, processes, definitions of roles, relationships, systems, strategies and resources that ensure academic standards and continuous improvement in academic activities are initially approved and referred to the corporate governing body and subsequently monitored. It is concerned with all matters relating to the integrity and quality of the core higher education activities of teaching and learning, scholarship and (where relevant) research and should have a substantial role in ensuring the protection and promotion of academic freedom, even though ultimate responsibility for it rests with the corporate governing body.

Effective academic governance ensures that a provider's academic standards are developed and maintained, the academic framework and underpinning policies and processes are in place, and that all staff and students are aware of, and operate within these parameters. Executive management is responsible for the implementation of the academic policies and processes.

TEQSA recognises diversity and the need to support innovation in the higher education sector. Consequently, TEQSA acknowledges that academic governance might vary in nature and form across different providers and that, for example, providers with self-accrediting authority will be completing their own course accreditations but other providers will not. However, provided the basic academic governance framework soundly and effectively supports academic quality and integrity, including freedom of expression, appropriate levels of scholarship and quality outcomes for students, it will be recognised as meeting the relevant Threshold Standards.

Where does academic governance reside?

Academic governance functions are required by the Threshold Standards to be delegated to an academic board or equivalent academic governing body so that, as referred to above, there is 'a clear and discernible separation between corporate and academic governance'. The Standards also require a 'clear distinction between governance and management responsibilities'.

The corporate governing body should set the terms of reference and membership of the academic board and establish the broad policies, standards and principles within which the academic board is to operate. The academic board scopes and maintains the academic standards and operations at all levels of the provider and generally will establish other committees responsible to it for particular aspects of academic governance such as curriculum development committees, course review committees and the like. What committees are established, for what purposes and with what powers will vary among providers depending, among other things, on their size and the scope of their higher education course offerings and the scope of the power of the academic board to further delegate its powers.

Although senior managers might (appropriately) be members of the academic board and/or committees, it is they, not the boards or committees, who are responsible for implementation of academic policies and processes at the operational level: academic boards guide and steer, academic managers are responsible for ensuring that the guidance is translated into action.

Academic governance processes ensure, for example, that teaching and learning frameworks are in place, staff are employed with the appropriate qualifications, and academic policy is implemented and monitored effectively and regularly updated. Within a culture of continuous improvement, the academic board – as the body responsible for the maintenance of academic standards – also oversees a range of academic processes, including oversight of admission

standards, recognition of prior learning and credit transfer policies; alignment of course assessment processes to academic standards; and fair and reasonable student grievance processes.

Academic governance in practice

Effective academic governance in a higher education provider typically has a range of characteristics and includes oversight of a variety of activities. These include:

Characteristics:

- ▶ An academic board or similar academic governing body with clearly defined terms of reference, roles and reporting lines.
- ▶ A number of permanent and/or temporary committees with specific delegated responsibilities e.g. Course Advisory Committee, Teaching and Learning Committee, Student Appeals and Complaints Committee.
- ▶ Strong academic leaders across the provider.
- ▶ Appropriately qualified academic staff that are active in scholarship in their disciplines and in the broader agenda of the provider.
- ▶ Clear communication protocols across the provider to ensure clarity about academic operations and compliance with academic policy.
- ▶ Staff and students who are aware of their responsibilities for maintaining academic integrity.

Activities:

- ▶ Development and oversight of strong academic quality assurance processes which support the teaching and learning agenda of the provider, including meeting external requirements such as professional accreditation, professional standards, Threshold Standards and the Australian Qualifications Framework.
- ▶ Development and oversight of integrated academic policies and procedures that are regularly reviewed for currency and adequacy.
- ▶ Development and oversight of a teaching and learning plan, or similar, providing a road map for scholarship and pedagogical approaches across the provider.
- ▶ Ensuring effective course design and approval processes and that established courses are monitored, reviewed and updated on a regular basis.
- ▶ Regular monitoring of student performance and learning outcomes in relation to quality teaching and learning and processes to ensure that poor outcomes are appropriately addressed and providing advice to the governing body.
- ▶ Regular use (and updating) of valid delegations by the academic board to any sub-committees or other bodies or senior academic leaders in the academic governance structure.
- ▶ Active support and oversight of scholarly activities to support staff scholarship.
- ▶ Development and oversight of a timely and relevant professional development strategy.
- ▶ Oversight of appropriate academic and student support services.

- ▶ Regular monitoring and review of the effectiveness of the academic board and its standing committees, for example, through annual reporting against work plan objectives and cyclical external reviews.
- ▶ Ensuring effective processes for induction and training of members of the academic board and its sub-committees.
- ▶ Oversight and reporting of academic risk to the corporate governing body.
- ▶ Ensuring appropriate academic standards are set and upheld.
- ▶ Ensuring that relevant information is provided to decision makers in a timely manner.

Role of Academic Board

The academic board (or similar body) is the academic governing body within a provider's institutional governance framework, and generally has oversight and responsibility for all academic decision-making processes to assure the quality of each course of study leading to a higher education award, in accordance with Provider Registration Standard 1.3.

The key roles of academic boards or equivalent committees include: governance of academic standards and quality; contributing to the development of academic strategy relating to the teaching and learning plan, academic policy, and oversight of all academic operations; the promotion of scholarship and the provision of a contribution to academic leadership at all levels; ensuring academic freedom and integrity; oversight of course development approval and review (including monitoring and use of student feedback in course renewal and improvement activities); and, management of academic quality systems.

The academic board should include a balance of members appropriate to the size and structure of the provider that allows for expert, collegial and well-informed consideration of academic matters. Ideally this should include senior officers and academic leaders of the institution and elected staff and student members who can provide a range of relevant perspectives, voices and expertise. Adding external members can provide wider perspectives and expertise that might be especially valuable to both small and relatively new providers.

It is also important that all members of boards and committees are 'active' participants in discussions and decisions to harness the skills and expertise of all members of the board to significant effect. The board can also provide an important mechanism for student involvement in academic decision-making.

The academic board should deliberate and make key decisions on the building and maintenance of scholarship and management and monitoring of the provider's teaching and learning agenda. Detailed minutes of meetings should be kept. The academic board and academic leadership group should report regularly on academic activities to the corporate governing body which has ultimate responsibility for all aspects of a provider's higher education activities and operations.

Often academic boards, through their terms of reference, are able to delegate responsibilities for various academic governance activities to the senior academic leaders and/or other bodies, and receive regular reports on critical matters. Advisory committees such as Course Advisory Committees can provide valuable depth to academic governance. Some committees, such as Student Complaints Committees, may also have delegated decision-making powers.

While they may advise, it is not the role of academic governing bodies to make resourcing or other management decisions, or to give directions to management. However, it is important that

processes and systems are in place so that resourcing and other relevant academic management issues that impact on academic integrity and academic standards (such as, for example, the number of part-time versus full-time academic staff) can be raised and discussed through academic governance arrangements. A common understanding of the provider's academic policies and plans and academic decision-making processes will help ensure alignment of corporate and academic governance.

Activities of the Academic Board:

▶ Academic Policy, Processes and Procedures

Academic boards are usually responsible for academic standards and the development and maintenance of all academic policies, processes and procedures within a higher education provider. This includes the approval of new policies and a regular cycle of review and amendment of all academic policies over time, including the removal of policies that are no longer effective or relevant.

Importantly, governance arrangements should include the provision of feedback to academic boards about the impact of the implementation of academic policies, processes and procedures on areas such as student performance and teaching and learning outcomes. Where necessary, governance arrangements should also include processes for ensuring that feedback results in corrective action.

▶ Academic Leadership

The academic board, course advisory committees and senior academic staff are responsible for providing strong academic leadership within a higher education provider, including the development and maintenance of all academic standards. Academic leadership should be directly involved in the development of all academic operations and this includes creating avenues for staff to have input into the development of a provider's academic framework and activities.

More guidance is available in the **Academic Leadership Guidance Note**.

▶ Academic Quality Assurance

The academic board should be responsible for the oversight of academic quality assurance. Continuous improvement across the provider's academic operations should be embedded in all academic practices, including the regular consideration of comparative data on course performance, to provide evidence of improvement in academic outcomes over time. The Threshold Standards highlight the academic board's responsibility 'for the decision making process to assure the quality of each course of study leading to a higher education award that the applicant may be accredited to award'.

The academic board should also review its own operations and effectiveness on a regular basis, ideally with cyclical external reviews and with the oversight of the provider's governing body.

Some additional aspects relating to academic quality assurance are picked up under the headings relating to the maintenance of academic standards and the protections of academic integrity below.

Further guidance on academic quality assurance can be found in the **Academic Quality Assurance Guidance Note**.

▶ **Developing scholarship**

Academic boards and their sub-committees are responsible for oversight and leading the development of scholarship (including disciplinary and teaching and learning scholarship) across the provider's higher education academic operations. The aim should be to ensure sustained and engaged scholarship which is inclusive of staff operating in part-time and sessional academic positions as well as full-time academic staff. Developing scholarship includes the development of quality approaches to teaching and developing teaching and learning pedagogies across a range of delivery modes.

Further guidance on scholarship can be found in the **Scholarship Guidance Note**.

▶ **Staff professional development**

Since it is vital to ensuring the quality of teaching and learning and the practice of scholarship, academic boards should provide input into the development of an academic staff professional development strategy although it is ultimately a management responsibility. The gaps in the academic skills of staff need to be considered and mentoring and other professional development activities encouraged. The effectiveness of these activities is important in strengthening the professional academic skills in the provider's workforce.

▶ **Maintenance of Academic Standards**

A provider can adhere to a set of academic standards as befits their strategic aspirations and teaching and learning agenda. However, under the TEQSA Act, all elements of the Threshold Standards need to be met at all times.

Other relevant academic standards that providers may need to consider include those which are discipline-, industry- or profession-specific (for example, professional accounting standards, nursing and midwifery registration standards or teacher registration standards) or level-specific, such as the Foundation Course Standards or, if they are involved in research, the Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research.

The provider's academic governance framework should monitor the ongoing maintenance of relevant standards.

▶ **Protection of Academic Integrity**

Academic governance arrangements should ensure that policies, procedures and processes are in place to monitor and protect the academic integrity of the student experience and that they include comprehensive processes to enforce protection against plagiarism and cheating.

Academic governance also needs to ensure that assessment processes and moderation practices are subject to scrutiny and review and that the academic processes which support these activities (including review mechanisms) are understood by both staff and students.

▶ **Relationship between Academic Board and Senior Leadership Group**

While the academic board provides academic leadership and oversees the academic governance and academic quality assurance of a provider's academic operations, the senior academic leadership is responsible for the day-to-day management of academic operations and for the implementation of academic policies and procedures once they have

been approved by the academic board. The extent of this separation of roles will depend on the size and scale of the provider and the academic governance arrangements in place.

Things to consider

When developing institutional practices and processes to support academic governance, providers may consider:

- ▶ Do the academic governance arrangements have the capacity to provide academic leadership in the development and maintenance of academic standards?
- ▶ Do members of the academic governing body attend meetings regularly and actively participate in academic governance processes or discussions?
- ▶ Is there scope for the academic governing body to delegate tasks to permanent and/or project-specific sub-committees (e.g. a Curriculum Review Committee to oversee the cyclical review of existing courses of study or the development of new courses)?
- ▶ Are records of discussion kept reflecting approval of policies and principles and the monitoring of academic processes?
- ▶ Is there evidence of academic quality assurance activity?
- ▶ Is there evidence of consistent reporting to the academic board and that academic activity is being monitored over time, that data is being used and outputs analysed?
- ▶ Is there evidence of the implementation of new processes or changes being made to curricula or unit outlines, for example, in response to course review, analysis and conclusions?
- ▶ Does the corporate governing body receive, consider and respond to reports from the academic governing body (for example, by re-shaping overarching policies and plans or re-distributing resources etc.)
- ▶ Is there evidence of strong oversight and a connection between the academic board and the academic frameworks and operations of the provider?

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TEQSA Contact

For further information about or to discuss *academic governance* please contact your case manager in the first instance.