Academic governance provided by academic boards within the Australian higher education sector

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Academic boards play a key role in the maintenance of quality standards and the provision of strategic leadership on academic issues. The current research investigated the role provided at present to Australian universities through their academic boards. All universities described their academic boards as their principal academic body. The majority of the academic boards said in their terms of reference that they should spend most of their time and energy on activities associated with policy (including approving and implementing policy) and quality assurance. These activities are \textit{internally focused}. Most of the academic boards did not think they should spend time being \textit{externally focused}. External quality audits reported that most concentrated on activities associated with policy (including approving and implementing policy) and quality assurance. These activities are \textit{internally focused}. Most of the academic boards were not seen to be spending time being \textit{externally focused}.

\textbf{Keywords:} academic boards; academic governance

\section*{Introduction}

Universities are facing increasing complexity, both internally and externally (Baird, 2006; Bradshaw & Fredette, 2009a; Feyerherm, 2009; Rowlands, 2011; Salter & Tapper, 2002). They are being challenged by their unstable industrial relations environments, external quality audits, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), increasing incidences of academic misconduct and increased threats to their revenue sources and increased competition. They are facing new demands of ‘heightened requirements for accountability, transparency, and efficiency and growing expectations of partnerships between universities and the private sector, to facilitate knowledge transfer and the commercialisation of research’ (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2009a, p. 123).

These challenges are putting pressures on the key decision-makers within universities, including academic boards who have the key role to play in the maintenance of quality standards and the provision of strategic leadership on academic issues. Thus, research is needed into the form of governance provided at present to Australian universities through their academic boards. Such research is important as universities need to be concerned about the quality of their governance because it may influence government funding and may impact negatively on the university culture if good governance processes are not in place (Baird, 2006). [In the current study, the term academic board has been used to refer to both...]

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Academic Boards and Senates, sometimes also known as Academic Senate or Academic Council.]

This raises the question of whether we should analyse the role of academic boards in terms of what they say they do in their formal documentation, or whether we should study what they actually do? Obviously, we should do both, but in this paper, we are analysing what academic boards say they do, acknowledging that rhetoric has its own practice, and that, as Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) have delineated, it is the relations between the practices, the situations in which they occur, and the audiences they invite, that are important.

Role of academic boards
Most Australian universities have an academic board which is its peak academic body. As Dooley (2007) argued, the board is ‘the principal policy-making and advisory body on all matters relating to and affecting the university’s teaching, research and educational programmes. . . . It is also responsible for assuring academic quality including academic freedom, academic integrity, assessment, admissions, and research conduct’ (p. 25). He has defined the role provided by academic board as one covering policy, process, quality control and institutional memory. He reported that they are responsible for the maintenance of academic standards, communications with their institution and maintaining relationship with external stakeholders. Dooley has, however, raised concerns around their ability to deliver on these responsibilities. Rowlands (2011) argued that ‘academic boards have been disempowered and . . . their role is increasingly focused on quality assurance’ (p. 2). Swansson and Blackman (2009) found that there were considerable problems with the governance of Australian universities.

To overcome some of their potential shortcomings, Dooley (2007) has argued that academic boards need to balance a collegial governance approach with a focused strategic direction. Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) support such an approach. Academic boards also need to have credibility within their institution and to develop policies that are meaningful to their institution’s staff. These are strong and seemingly paradoxical demands placed on academic boards if they are to be effective in ensuring the maintenance of academic standards.

Academic governance
At the heart of a university’s operations is academic governance which is often complex and filled with uncertainty (Boyd, 2009). Carnegie and Tuck (2010) argued that there are three forms of governance, of which academic governance is one; the other two are business governance and corporate governance. The authors defined academic governance (scholarship) as that which encompasses the governance of teaching and learning activities and research. They maintained that these responsibilities normally fall under academic boards. Thus, Carnegie and Tuck (2010) identified the role of academic board through its academic governance as one that results in originality/innovation, quality/impacts and scholarly reputation (see Figure 1). Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) agree with Carnegie and Tuck on originality/innovation by arguing that generative thinking was an important function of academic boards. Blackman, Kennedy, Swansson, and Richardson (2009) have also suggested the importance of creativity and imagination to allow academic boards to improve the way they function, and Gallos (2009) argued that academic boards foster change (see Figure 1).
Bradshaw (2002, p. 476) argued that the governance function is ‘to support the leadership function by reframing, deconstructing, challenging, and testing the robustness, viability, and continued appropriateness of the dominant story. In situations of conflicting story lines within an organisation, the governance function would include mediating between the competing knowledge claims’.

To be able to perform this function, academic boards need to understand the political climate of their university. As Bradshaw and Fredette (2009b) argued, ‘effective governance must be seen as distinct from and, in our opinion, go beyond management and leadership functions’ (p. 142). Bradshaw (2002) indicated that as part of the governance functions, academic boards need to challenge the university’s strategic plan, to scan the environment, to mediate differences across sectors of the university and to understand the university’s political environment (see Figure 1). In their thematic analysis of Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) reports, Stella and Woodhouse (2007) commented on the importance of benchmarking and the extent to which universities varied in their use of it (see Figure 1).

A theoretical framework

The theoretical framework developed in the work of Vilkinas and colleagues (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2001, 2006a, 2006b; Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012) provides a platform to interpret the findings of the previous researchers mentioned above. The theoretical framework is based on the Integrated Competing Values Framework (ICVF). It is a dynamic model that identifies the complex and paradoxical relationship between different behaviours (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2006a). For the purposes of this study, the external and internal dimension will be used. Within the context of academic governance (see Figure 1), it means, for example, that academic boards need to employ a range of inherently contradictory strategies. This can include being internally focused on implementing a new policy, whilst at the same time determining what innovations are needed to meet the changing international student market (external focus).
In Figure 1, the findings/recommendations of the past research are mapped. The framework also illustrates the outcomes that can be expected by concentrating on particular strategies. If, for instance, academic boards focus on originality/innovation and generative thinking as well as scanning their external environments for any changes, their universities will make the necessary changes that are needed to survive in an everchanging environment and also to expand their activities appropriately (see Figure 1). When academic boards engage in strategies that ensure the credibility of their programmes and that focus on their external stakeholders this will lead to competitive positioning by the university (see Figure 1). When, however, the activities of academic boards are internally focused and are mainly concerned with quality assurance, academic standards, generation and adoption of policy, testing the university strategy for appropriateness, using fair and transparent processes and maintaining the institution’s memory, then the results for the university will be about delivering programmes, ensuring quality and their being trust in the functioning of the academic board. Finally, when academic boards focus on high quality communication within their institution and mediate differences that may occur between different faculties or executives, the staff of the university will be able to align their development with the requirements of the academic board’s agenda.

The current study was designed to:

- determine what role academic boards play in their university
- determine what aspects of academic governance academic boards deliver
- identify the focus of academic boards’ activities.

The framework described in Figure 1 will be used to interpret the results and to make predictions about the outcomes of the work of academic boards.

**Research design**

Data were collected from 39 Australian universities. At the time of the data collection, one university did not have an academic board so it was not included in the study.

There were two sources of data: (1) terms of reference of academic boards of each university within the higher education sector (other than the one without an academic board) and (2) the most recent AUQA reports (Round 2) for each university.

The reasons for including each data source are as follows:

- Terms of reference of academic boards for each university within the higher education sector provided information on the role and/or activities that the academic boards should do and what governance activities they should do.
- Most recent AUQA reports for each university provided information on the role and/or activities that the academic boards were seen to do.

**Data analysis**

The two data sources allowed us to triangulate our findings. That is, the AUQA reports informed the project team members on how the various academic boards were seen to operate under each of the categories described in Figure 1. The terms of reference told us what the universities considered their academic boards should be doing. The project team was then able to determine if there were any gaps between what the academic boards said they should be doing and what they were seen to be doing.
Content analysis (Insch, Moore, & Murphy, 1997) was applied to the data collected, using the predetermined categories (for definitions, see Figure 1). Two members of the research team each content analysed a sample of the AUQA reports and a sample of the terms of reference to check that their interpretations were similar. This was to control for reliability.

**Results and discussion**

**Academic boards’ role**

There was no question from our analysis of the terms of reference and the AUQA reports that the academic boards were regarded as the principal academic body of the university. Such a finding is consistent with Dooley’s conclusions from his analysis of the first round of AUQA reports and the data he collected at the national conference of the Chairs of Academic Boards/Senate (Dooley, 2007).

**Governance activities**

The discussion of our results is broken into two parts. First, the findings from the analysis of the terms of reference are discussed. These are the governance activities that academic boards *said they should be doing*. Second, the findings from the analysis of the AUQA reports are discussed. These findings illustrate what governance activities the academic boards are *seen to be doing*.

**Terms of reference results**

An examination of the terms of references of Australian universities was interpreted against this framework. First, the research team noticed that the bulk of the activities had an internal focus (see Figure 2). Each of these internally focused activities is listed in Table 1 along with their perceived levels of necessity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal focus</th>
<th>External focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication (Dooley)</td>
<td>Originality/Innovation (Carnegie and Tuck)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility (Dooley)</td>
<td>Generative thinking (Bradshaw and Fredette)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediate differences (Bradshaw)</td>
<td>Scan environment, including benchmarking (Bradshaw)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair and transparent processes (Dooley)</td>
<td>Reputation (Carnegie and Tuck)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand political climate (Bradshaw)</td>
<td>External relationships (Dooley)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality/Impacts (Carnegie and Tuck; Dooley; Moodie; Rowlands)</td>
<td>Seen to do a little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopt policy (Dooley)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic standards (Dooley)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional memory (Dooley)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test strategy (Bradshaw)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Mapping of results onto a governance framework.
Table 1. Identification of the governance variables found in the terms of reference and the AUQA reports for the Australian higher education sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Terms of reference</th>
<th>AUQA reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication by high standards within the institution</td>
<td>Communicates with academic unity</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forum for academic debate?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility within the institution</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediate differences, such as mediate the competing strategies that emerge from the executive</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand political climate within the institution</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control for quality</td>
<td>Quality assurance</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control entry requirements</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic progress of students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline of students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty reviews</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standards and practices in research and research training</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic standards based on key performance indicators that are established and monitored to ensure compliance</td>
<td>Use of fair and transparent processes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair and transparent processes that are above board are important for the maintenance of the reputation of the university</td>
<td>Academic policies and procedures</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Approval of courses/programmes [accreditation and reaccreditation]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establishment of fellowships, scholarships</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional memory so that previous policies are not ignored</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test strategy by challenging, testing, revisiting and assessing the ongoing merits of university strategy</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with the results that we found. Most of the emphasis in the terms of reference was on the adoption of policy. Thirty-three of the universities said that academic boards’ responsibility was about academic policy and procedures and with 27 of these indicating it was about the approval of programmes, while 14 said it was about the establishment of fellowships, scholarships and the like. Dooley (2007) identified the adoption policy and its associated activities as an important function of academic boards.

The next activity that was mentioned frequently in Australian universities’ terms of reference was to do with controlling for the quality of their programmes. Twenty-five of the universities indicated that quality assurance was an important function of academic boards; they also mentioned other activities such as controlling for entry requirements, assessment, academic progress of students and faculty reviews. Carnegie and Tuck (2010) identified this function as an important part of academic governance and Rowlands (2011, 2012) reported that academic boards have increased their focus on quality assurance. Dooley (2007) and Moodie (2004) also argued that quality assurance was an important part of academic governance.

The setting of standards was the next most frequently mentioned activity. In particular, 16 of the universities mentioned that the academic boards were responsible for the setting of standards and practices in research and research training. Dooley (2007) identified such activities as important functions of academic boards.

Seven of the universities said that academic board’s responsibility was to maintain high standards of communication with their university which Dooley (2007) identified as an important function of academic boards. Only one university said that they used fair and transparent processes. Such an approach to academic governments was highlighted by Dooley (2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Terms of reference</th>
<th>AUQA reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set standards for research and research training</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain high standards of communication with their university</td>
<td>Introducing changes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. (Continued).
There was no mention in any of the terms of reference of the following activities:

- **maintenance of institutional memory** so that previous policies are not ignored or replicated, which Dooley (2007) also identified as an important function of academic boards
- **testing of the university strategy** by challenging it, revisiting it and assessing its ongoing merits, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) indicated was one of the roles of academic boards
- **mediation of any differences in competing strategies** that may occur within their university, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) indicated was one of the roles of academic boards
- **maintenance of the credibility of their academic boards**, which Dooley (2007) believed was an important function of these boards
- **awareness of their political climate**, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) considered an important function.

To conclude, an examination of the terms of references for Australian universities indicated that they said they should spend most of their time and energy on activities associated with policy (including approving and implementing policy) and quality assurance. These activities have an **internal** focus (see Figure 2). That is, Australian academic boards are focused on activities within their institution.

Next, the research team examined the activities that had an **external** focus (see Table 1). There was very limited emphasis in the terms of reference on being concerned about the reputation of the university. Seven universities indicated they needed to benchmark around student recruitment, student achievement, student retention and the student experience, an activity that Stella and Woodhouse (2007) and Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) indicated needed to be done.

Only two universities said that their academic board’s responsibility was to ensure the reputation of the university’s programmes. Carnegie and Tuck (2010) identified this as an important function of academic boards.

There was little mention in the terms of reference on being innovative or displaying originality, with only one university indicating that its academic board should be involved in activities such as proposing new governance frameworks. Previous researchers (Blackman et al., 2009; Carnegie & Tuck, 2010; Gallos, 2009) have argued this is an important role for academic boards.

There was no mention in any of the terms of reference of academic boards of responsibility for managing external relationships and engaging with external stakeholders, which Dooley (2007) mentioned was important.

An examination of the terms of reference indicated that academic boards concentrated their activities on those that are internally focused and clustered around policy and quality assurance (see Figure 2). So why do Australian academic boards not pursue some of the other activities listed in Figure 2 and why are they so internally focused? Some possible reasons are offered here:

- Australian universities do not consider these other activities to be appropriate for their academic boards.
- They do pursue these activities but they have not been mentioned in their terms of reference.
- They consider their role to be internally focused and the responsibilities for externally driven activities fall outside of the role of academic boards.
By having such a strong internal focus, this means that the academic boards have the potential to have strong input into their universities’ programmes and the quality of these programmes but because they did not pursue communicating with other parts of the university, the academic boards are less likely to ensure that others are aware of the significant role that they play. The lack of an external focus means that the academic boards will not have significant input into the changes that are needed in response to the demands of the external environment nor will they have input into keeping their university competitive. Yet, previous writers (see Figure 1) have argued for having this external focus. As Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) have stressed, academic boards currently tend to take an operational and reactive approach, which tends to concentrate on approvals of proposals, to be internally focused, with short-term thinking and relatively slow, extensively time-consuming consultations. This, then, results in the limited use of a proactive and strategic approach which would focus on analysis and anticipating trends based on environmental scanning and proactive recommendations. The later approach would have both an internal and external focus taking into account external partnerships, being more responsive and nimble, with consultations done in the way that allows the university to take advantage of strategic opportunities. It would also ensure more integration between the various decision-making bodies within the university. Such an approach to governance would be paradoxical in nature which Meyer (2002, p. 549) has described as the universities needing to have ‘the ability to balance the conflicting imperatives of stability and change, central strategic leadership and bottom-up entrepreneurship, individual autonomy, and collective cooperation’. Or, as Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a, p. 129) recommended, ‘boards must move away from a compliance approach to more risk taking, divergent thinking, and critical engagement with meaning and inherent dilemmas’, if they are going to deal with the increasingly complex environment within which they find themselves. Gallos (2009) argued they need to become more proactive rather than reactive and move away from being battlefields for control.

In the next section, the findings from the AUQA reports are discussed. These findings will provide some insights into what they believed academic boards were actually doing. There are limitations with this data, as the AUQA panels were not focused only on academic board activities of the universities they visited. Nevertheless, they do make important comments in their reports on the role of academic boards within the higher education sector.

**AUQA reports**

As mentioned above, the range of governance activities that have previously been identified in the literature (see Figure 1) will be used to interpret our examination of the second round of the AUQA reports. Initially, results for activities with an internal focus will be covered, followed by the results with an external focus.

The research team noticed that the bulk of the activities had an internal focus (see Figure 2). Each of these activities is listed in Table 1, along with the results that we have found. While we recognise that quality assurance has an external focus as well, most of the emphases in the AUQA reports were on internal quality assurance processes. Twenty-eight of the AUQA reports said that academic boards were involved in quality assurance activities. Previous researchers (Carnegie & Tuck, 2010; Dooley, 2007; Moodie, 2004) identified this function as an important part of academic governance and Rowlands (2011, 2012) found that over the last 30 years academic boards are focusing more on quality assurance. The next activity that was mentioned in 16 of the AUQA reports was to do with policy. Dooley (2007) identified the adoption policy and its associated activities as an important function of academic boards.
Three of the AUQA reports made some comment on the fair and transparent processes being employed. Such an approach to academic governance was highlighted by Dooley (2007). There was one mention in the AUQA reports on communication provided by academic boards which Dooley (2007) identified as an important function of academic boards.

There was no mention in any of the AUQA reports of academic boards undertaking each of the following activities:

- maintaining the credibility of academic boards, as identified by Dooley (2007).
- mediating any differences that may occur within their university, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) indicated as one of the roles of academic boards
- maintenance of institutional memory, which Dooley (2007) identified as an important function of academic boards
- understanding the internal political climate, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) identified as an important function of academic boards
- setting academic standards, which Dooley (2007) identified as an important function of academic boards
- testing the university strategy by challenging it, revisiting it and assessing its ongoing merits, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) indicated was one of the roles of academic boards.

For activities with an external focus, there was a mention in three of the AUQA reports of academic boards being responsible for managing external relationships and engaging with external stakeholders. Dooley (2007) mentioned the importance of managing these external relationships. There were also three mentions in the AUQA reports of universities introducing a change; that is being innovative or displaying originality which several previous researchers (Blackman et al., 2009; Carnegie & Tuck, 2010; Gallos, 2009) identified as an important function of academic boards.

There was no mention in any of the AUQA reports that academic boards did:

- engage in generative thinking, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) indicated was one of the roles of academic boards
- get involved in activities related to scanning the environment external to their university, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) indicated as one of the roles of academic boards
- benchmark their academic activities and student data, which Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a) and Stella and Woodhouse (2007) indicated needs to be done
- maintain the reputation of their programmes, which Carnegie and Tuck (2010) recommended was a role for academic boards.

To conclude, an examination of the AUQA reports for Australian universities indicated that they did concentrate on activities associated with policy (including approving and implementing policy) and quality assurance. These activities are internally focused (see Figure 2). That is, Australian academic boards are focused on activities within their institution. These results parallel those found in the terms of reference. That is, what the universities say they should be doing (according to their terms of reference) are in the main the same as what they are seen to be doing according to the AUQA reports. The results also indicate that most of the universities did not spend time being externally focused.
Previously, Shattock (2006) noted that academic boards have less power than previously and the scope of their responsibility has been reduced.

So why did the AUQA panels not see the relevance of the other activities listed in Table 1 or did not consider that the academic boards were delivering these functions? It could be that:

- the activities were not of interest to the AUQA panels
- the AUQA panels did not consider such activities to be appropriate for academic boards
- the AUQA panels expect academic boards to take an operational and reactive approach, as defined by Bradshaw and Fredette (2009a). Such an approach tends to concentrate on approvals of proposals, to be internally focused, with short-term thinking and relatively slow, extensively time-consuming consultations, rather than using a proactive and strategic approach as described in the section on terms of reference.

Strengths

This is the first study to be undertaken across the Australian higher education sector that has focused on the academic governance provided by its academic boards. The study builds on the extant research. Dooley’s (2007) analysis of the academic board’s role is enriched by adopting the framework to enhance the meanings contained in his recommendations. For example, Dooley’s recommendation cover activities with both an internal and external focus but fail to cover adaptation of governance activities or environmental scans. Not including these latter two activities can put a university at risk of not adapting to their everchanging environment.

The framework also extrapolates the work of Salter and Tapper (2002) who identify the external pressures facing universities. The framework provides a mechanism to better understand the impact of their board’s activities in the context of these pressures and hence offer a clearer pathway to a revised governance approach in this emerging context. For example, Salter and Tapper (2002) argued that universities need to adapt their internal governance to effectively deal with these external pressures. The framework provides an analytical lens to better understand how the governance of a university can adopt a more flexible and comprehensive approach by changing the focus of activities between internal and external as appropriate. Having a focus on internal activities may mean that academic boards are not aware of some of the external pressures on the university such as threats to their revenue sources and increased competition. Having an external focus may mean that the quality of their programmes is neglected.

The study has included data on what the universities say they do compared to what they are seen to do. There were some limitations with each of the data sources. With the terms of reference, two universities had no descriptive statements of their terms of reference, but rather referred to the Acts/Statutes pertaining to the academic board. It is possible that the level of detail and description available in the Acts/Statutes were not directly comparable to the non-statutory documents from the other universities. One university’s terms of reference was privacy protected and no information was available on their academic boards; one university did not have an academic board at the time of the study. We also found that we were comparing at unequal levels; some academic boards had many subcommittees, each of which had its own terms of reference. As we were only comparing academic boards’ terms of reference using the highest level description supplied by each university, we may be missing functions described at the subcommittee level. There may also be significant
discrepancies caused by the approach taken by various universities in describing governance. It was noted that some appeared to be written with a target audience of potential students and some potential board members. With the AUQA reports, some made a direct reference to Teaching and Learning subcommittee functions (of academic board) without referring to their academic board and some did not refer to the role of academic boards. The relevant academic board may be the body appropriate to take responsibility for the recommendation but, of course, it is not necessarily appropriate for AUQA to determine that. Therefore, this study may not have included comments which impact on academic boards.

**Future research**

The next stage of this project will be to examine the agendas and minutes of the academic boards to assess what they are actually doing. In addition, an assessment of their effectiveness and how that is measured would provide information of value to the sector. It would also be useful to conduct interviews with key stakeholders that have a vested interest in Teaching and Learning at their university. For example, such individuals would include, key members of academic boards, DVC/PVC (Academic) and Deans of Teaching and Learning.

**Implications**

On a more practical note, it would be worthwhile to consider how the Chairs of academic boards are appointed/selected. At present, most are there for a relatively short time, which means that there is no gatekeeper of the institution’s memory. In addition, the role of the Chair is further complicated by the fact that their line manager is often a member of the academic board. Such a situation could lead to a conflict of interest for both the Chair and the line manager. There also needs to be professional development of the Chair so that they understand academic governance and the role of academic boards and there needs to be a position description of the Chair and a performance review on a regular basis. It is likely that such a performance review would be undertaken by the University Council, if that is the body to which academic board reports.

There are also practical implications for the membership of academic boards. The number of members of academic boards needs to be carefully considered. Some boards are very large (over 300 members); such sizes are useful for information gathering but not for decision-making. The selection of who should be a member of academic board also needs to be considered in line with the purpose of academic governance within each university and the members of academic board should be given a position description. There should be a professional development programme for the members of academic board so that they understand their responsibilities under academic governance.

Finally, the focus of academic boards needs to be considered. They need to consider whether they will have both an internal and an external focus. They also need to consider whether they will take an integrated approach to governance, such as suggested by Carnegie and Tuck (2010).

**Conclusions**

While we are conscious of some of the limitations of the data collection sources, we nevertheless believe that the findings from this project will be valuable to the Australian
higher education sector. In particular, because academic boards have such a strong internal focus, mainly around programme approvals and quality assurance, this means they may be neglecting some externally focused activities which means that academic boards will not have significant input into the changes that are needed in response to the demands of an ever changing external environment. Nor will they have input into keeping their university competitive. Academic boards currently tend to take an operational and reactive approach with short-term thinking and relatively slow, extensively time-consuming consultations rather than using a proactive and strategic approach, with a focus on analysis and anticipating trends based on environmental scanning and proactive recommendations. The latter approach would have both an internal and external focus taking into account external partnerships, being more responsive and nimble, with consultations done in the way that allows the university to take advantage of strategic opportunities. Such an approach to governance would mean that ‘boards must move away from a compliance approach to more risk taking, divergent thinking, and critical engagement with meaning and inherent dilemmas’ (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2009a, p. 129), if they are going to deal with the increasingly complex environment within which they find themselves.

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