

Does your academic board work properly?

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Does your academic board work properly?

Nita Temmerman 12 August 2016 Issue No:423

Academic governance is a fundamental element of a higher education provider's all-encompassing governance structure. If it's not effective, it calls into question the whole academic framework for verifying quality and integrity in teaching, learning and scholarship in that institution.

The principal 'body' responsible for advising the corporate and management 'arms' of a higher education provider on all matters associated with the academic functioning of the institution is the 'academic board'.

The academic board is the peak body responsible for assuring academic quality and ensuring academic integrity and high standards in teaching, learning, scholarship and research. Underpinning these functions is the role the academic board has in academic policy development and review. It carries out its significant functions in affiliation with (but independently of) the institution's executive management.

The academic board, through its membership, aims to provide academics with a voice about decisions that directly affect them, notably the teaching-learning environment. It also provides an important venue for student involvement in academic decision-making.

As a higher education provider you want and need your academic board to be strong and high functioning. In my opinion, smaller higher education private providers more so than universities need to guarantee they have active, sound, performing academic boards in place. Why? Because universities are obliged to establish an academic board within an academic governance policy framework and to spell out what amounts to exhaustive details about its functions, membership, standing committees, meeting schedule and the like.

Even though there may be variance among academic boards across the university sector, it would be most uncharacteristic for universities to tolerate a board that does *not* carry out its set purposes satisfactorily. The university academic community and the routine review procedures in place would certainly remind the board of its responsibility.

Smaller private providers of higher education established by persons who have no background or prior experience in education provision are very reliant on their academic board doing what it's meant to do, hearing what it's meant to hear and developing, supporting, overseeing and reviewing robust academic quality assurance processes, policies and procedures.

They have little option but to trust that their board is working and working properly. The success or otherwise of their entire academic operation is dependent on it.

An effective academic board

So what makes for a really effective academic board?

I don't believe there is a single formula, but here are eight starting propositions:

- First and foremost in my opinion, a board is only as good as its members and the member that sets the tone is *the board chair*. The chair must promote and role model respectful communication. The chair must operate collegially and provide ample opportunity for all members to engage in discussion. It does not mean consensus decision-making, but it does mean all members who want to have had their say and know why a certain decision is/was taken. The chair must understand the role of the board and focus attention on protecting academic quality and integrity and discussion on related key academic matters.
- An effective board has a *clearly defined role* and all members know what that is... and is not. An effective board provides an induction programme for its new members. It has appropriate *delegated authority* to approve academic courses, ensure the quality of and continuous improvement in teaching and learning practice and assessment, encourage and support research and establish policy.
- An effective board is the *right size* (for that particular institution). It should not be too small because that can be problematic in ensuring adequate coverage of all matters that come to the board for attention. However, it should not be that big that it is an obstacle to timely decision-making occurring and intimidates some members into silence or non-contribution.
- An effective board should have a *broadly representative, balanced membership* that provides a range of viewpoints and expertise. It's incredibly healthy for there to be divergence of opinion in discussion.
- An effective board *participates in institutional agenda setting*, rather than simply reacting to agendas established elsewhere.
- An effective board does not succumb to pressure (and there will be pressure from time to time from different quarters for the board to act in a particular way). It must be balanced and *act with integrity*, which may sometimes mean taking a path contrary to what the CEO or management of the institution wants. The academic board should not be a rubberstamping body.
- An effective board 'closes the loop' and ensures its decisions are implemented. It is *accountable* and has a clear framework for review of academic policy and procedures and academic quality assurance matters. It takes action when it finds non-compliance.
- An effective board is an important information channel and should *promulgate needed academic information*. It acts as a two-way conduit by letting the academic community know what's going on with academic matters – through its members – and through them it hears what academic issues the academic community is grappling with and needs the board's support with. It also has a mechanism (generally led by the chair) for ensuring effective vertical communication – between the board and the council/board of directors and executive management group.

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