



# Reviewing Academic Governance in higher education: a framework

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# 01 Introduction

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This Framework sets out some key factors for the consideration of academic governance effectiveness and is intended as a tool to support higher education institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Corporations (FECs) delivering higher education in their own effectiveness reviews. It draws on work by the Leadership Foundation and Committee of University Chairs (CUC).

The Framework has been developed to guide managers and governing bodies as they seek to review the effectiveness of academic governance. The guidance is contextualised for higher education institutions but the general principles may help FECs seeking to review the governance of their higher education provision. Members of governing bodies in all higher education providers need to have confidence in academic governance given that they now have a specific duty to provide academic assurance - an assurance which requires members to rely on the institution's academic governance arrangements.

The theoretical Framework developed by the Leadership Foundation to underpin reviews of overall higher education governance was used since this appears to be reasonable basis for considering a subset of overall governance. The three elements of the Framework are enablers (the processes), working relationships and behaviours, and the outcomes of an effective set of academic governance arrangements. The Framework also considers various levels of review.

The factors identified in the Framework are non-prescriptive and can be tailored to individual institutions and the focus of the review which they are undertaking. As a 'map' the Framework is only intended to clarify the many inter-related factors involved in academic governance effectiveness of higher education and to be an aid for review and discussion, rather than an audit for compliance purposes or for use as a 'box ticking' exercise. ■

# 02 Defining Academic Governance effectiveness

The assessment of what constitutes effective academic governance of higher education is complex and will vary from institution to institution depending on history, constitution, mission, and values.

Quality within 'publicly-funded' institutions delivering higher education in the UK is generally considered to be high and arrangements relatively well developed. Nonetheless problems in individual institutions do continue to occur and some critics of current arrangements exist. These typically adopt two contrasting views: those who think recent arrangements are unduly influenced by current thinking on governance in other sectors and may threaten the traditional benefits of collegiality in governance; and those who conversely take the view that governing bodies do not provide sufficient challenge to the executive within institutions. It follows that any attempt to assess robustly the effectiveness of individual arrangements may be challenging in that widely differing views of what constitutes effectiveness may be involved.

The key is less to adopt some defined framework that works for others, but rather to be clear and consistent across the institution with an approach that is well articulated, understood, accepted, and consistently deployed. For many institutions with well embedded academic governance processes considering what the various participants do and how they do it is far more relevant for consideration during effectiveness reviews.

## Enablers – Process and Structures

This area for review looks at how the main processes work. The processes and structures used provide the foundations for effective academic governance: they are the building blocks on which academic governance rests (for example, a structure that is fit for purpose). Without these enablers in place it is highly unlikely that academic governance would be effective. However, the enablers, by themselves, do not ensure effectiveness, but rather create necessary conditions for effectiveness. The framework categorises these enablers into six different types of factor, which is in turn further divided into specific issues for institutions to consider. Although often popular with Academic Board<sup>1</sup> members, the results from reviewing enablers may say little about achievements and value.

## Relationships and Behaviours

This area of review looks at how the main academic governance responsibilities have been discharged and how the system ensures that key policies are implemented, and includes associated issues such as the effectiveness of communication between key committees and other parts of the institutional structure. This may involve a compliance check on meeting regulatory requirements. It also considers the behaviours within the institution that enable effective academic governance. Although issues such as the importance of the relationship between the academic board chair and the other key academics is well recognised, many other aspects of what happens inside the institution are important in determining effectiveness. There are obvious potential sensitivities here, but when things 'go wrong' in academic governance they often do so because of the people and the associated behaviours.

Throughout this document Academic Board is used to describe the body charged with oversight of academic issues and quality – in some institutions this might be Senate, in others the Academic Committee. It also incorporates the work of that body's committees and sub committees.

## Outcomes of effective Academic Governance

This area of review looks at whether the academic governance system has been making the correct decisions, advice or recommendations over time, and requires an assessment of results and outcomes and whether enhancements have occurred. The outcomes of effective academic governance are those factors that demonstrate ultimate effectiveness, including the extent to which academic governance 'adds value'. In this sense, the real value of academic governance arrangements lies in what they deliver in practice. Few institutions will select all possible outcomes as indicators of effectiveness at any one time; rather it is likely that specific outcomes will be identified over time in relation to institutional priorities, and necessary actions to make enhancements will be identified through the processes themselves. In some institutions, particularly some HEIs, the informal benefits of academic governance (maintaining collegiality, participation etc) have substantial importance, and therefore it is important to consider whether these benefits have been obtained as well as the more formal outcomes.

This area of evaluation is closely linked to the achievement of institutional strategy. This reviews the contribution of the academic governance system to enhancing institutional performance and the added value provided through its activities. This is also likely to involve looking ahead and to identify key future challenges that the academic governance system needs to address. ■

# 03 Levels of Review

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In carrying out their own reviews, as well as considering the specific areas for review, institutions will also need to consider the extent or level of review. Four levels have been considered, and these can be combined, but the more levels involved, then the more resources needed to complete the review.

■ Compliance with external requirements:

- Usually a paper based audit.
- May be required by funders.
- Meets minimum standards but doesn't address issues of board effectiveness.
- Useful as an annual monitoring process.

■ Meeting internal objectives and requirements:

- Answers the question: are we doing what we said we would do?
- Value depends on the plans and objectives set and the performance data collected.
- If modest, the process may say little about potential governance effectiveness.

■ The opinions and satisfaction of committee members:

- Often a survey of committee members or discussions with the chair.
- Potentially valuable in raising issues, but member satisfaction may not be the best measure of good practice or maximising the value of academic governance to the HEI/FEC.

■ Good practice in comparable organisations:

- Comparison of performance of academic governance system by benchmarking, analysis against relevant guidelines, views of external experts, etc.
- Potentially valuable but obtaining data and selecting relevant comparators may be difficult. ■

# 04 Framework for Review

A list of all the factors which make up the theoretical framework categorised by the main elements and including detailed issues for consideration during reviews are shown below. This version of the Framework also indicates those elements that governing bodies may wish to focus on to get the assurance they need on academic governance. Of course, higher education and further education providers are free to adapt the framework as they see fit and tailor the content to the requirements of their specific review.

Element of effective academic governance	Factor	Issues for consideration	Governing Body sub set
Enabler	Commitment to effective governance	1. There is a genuine, well understood, and shared commitment by both the governing body, the academic community, and the executive to ensure effective academic governance.	G
		2. The quality of interaction between the Academic Board chair, Academic Board members, and the Academic Board secretary/clerk enables effective governance to occur.	
		3. The roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of the Academic Board and its committees are clearly defined and understood by the academic community and the executive.	
		4. The Academic Board secretariat/clerk provides timely, informed and suitably independent professional advice and support to the Academic Board.	
		5. The Academic Board and its committees regularly review their own performance and demonstrate a commitment to continuously improving their effectiveness.	G
		6. The Academic Board body periodically assesses the cost/benefit ratio of academic governance arrangements.	
		7. There is a mutual understanding of each other's role and responsibilities between the Board of Governors/Council and the Academic Board.	G
		8. The Academic Board's decision-making structure (including its committees) is regularly reviewed and assessed to ensure it is fit for purpose.	
		9. There is a clear system of delegated authority with appropriate reporting mechanisms to the Academic Board.	G
		10. The arrangements for the Academic Board and its committees (such as number of meetings, timing, location, duration, and administration) are regularly reviewed and assessed to ensure they allow for adequate discussion and attendance.	
		11. The various constituent elements of the academic community are all properly represented and involved in the work of the Academic Board.	
		12. The governing body has an effective relationship with the senate or academic board.	G

Element of effective academic governance	Factor	Issues for consideration	Governing Body sub set
Enabler	Effective governance structures and processes	13. The Academic Board understands and oversees the institution's full portfolio of activities, including its subjects, courses, partnerships, and areas of research.	G
		14. There are mechanisms in place for the Academic Board to be confident as to the institutional processes for: a. Maintaining the standards of teaching and learning. b. Developing and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. c. Ensuring the quality and effectiveness of research. d. Ensuring the effectiveness and quality of knowledge transfer.	G
		15. There are mechanisms in place to enable the Academic Board to be informed of the assessments of quality by outside agencies.	G
		16. There are mechanisms for Academic Board to consider comparative academic performance and standards across the institution (including partners) and in comparison, with other institutions.	G
		17. There are mechanisms in place for the Academic Board to be assured of the quality of the entire student experience.	G
		18. The Academic Board actively ensures it has assurance on the standards of the institutions academic awards.	G
		19. There are mechanisms in place to ensure that all members are effectively inducted, developed and supported in their work on the Academic Board and its Committees.	
		20. There are mechanisms in place to allow the Academic Board to consider the key academic risks facing the institution and steps taken to manage those risks.	
		21. The size, mix of skills and experience, and diversity of Academic Board membership is appropriate to discharge its roles and responsibilities.	
		22. The full range of students are actively involved in academic governance	G

Element of effective academic governance	Factor	Issues for consideration	Governing Body sub set
Enabler	Effective membership	23. The recruitment, development and succession planning of Academic Board members are effectively managed.	
		24. Sufficient time is available to all members of the Academic Board and its Committees to properly discharge their responsibilities.	
		25. Decisions that require the exercise of academic judgement are made by staff who are qualified to make such judgements.	
		26. Academic Board members are motivated, attend regularly and actively participate in discussion.	
		27. Academic Board discussions are focussed on key issues and consistently add value.	
		28. The contribution of all members (including the chair) is regularly reviewed using processes agreed by the Academic Board.	
Enabler	Commitment to organisational vision, culture and values	29. The Academic Board demonstrates an understanding of and commitment to the institutions vision, ethos, and culture.	G
		30. The Academic Board is active in supporting and promoting core values such as academic freedom, commitment to students, and the importance of research.	
		31. The Academic Board demonstrates an active implementation of the values of collegiality, respect, openness, transparency and honesty.	
Enabler	Effective strategic development and performance measurement	32. The Academic Board is actively involved in the formulation, approval, and review of all elements of academic strategy.	
		33. The Academic Board actively measures and monitors institutional academic performance, using agreed and accepted KPIs, which are stretching and attainable. (see Appendix for possible indicators: each Academic Board will make its own decision about which indicators to focus on).	G
		34. The Academic Board regularly reviews comparative performance with relevant peers through processes such as benchmarking.	
		35. The Academic Board receives reports on regular performance reviews of all academic departments and services are undertaken, and where necessary recommendations arising from the reviews are implemented.	
		36. The Academic Board gets assurance that there is an appropriate system of staff development in place.	G

Element of effective academic governance	Factor	Issues for consideration	Governing Body sub set
Enabler	Effective information and communication	37. The Academic Board gets assurance from time to time that the learning and research environments are fit for purpose.	
		38. The Academic Board delivers a comprehensive and comprehensible annual report to the Governing Body.	G
		39. Reliable and up-to-date information is provided to the Academic Board to ensure that it is fully informed about its legal and regulatory responsibilities.	
		40. The whole Academic community understands and is engaged with the work of the Academic Board.	
		41. There is effective communication to and from the Academic Board with key stakeholders, including key partners.	
		42. Academic Board assures itself that student complaints are reviewed, and where appropriate, action is taken.	
Enabler	Future governance	43. The Academic Board conducts its affairs in a way that is responsive to changing circumstances.	
		44. The Academic Board is well informed about likely changes in the external and technological environment and any major implications for academic offer of the institution that may result.	
Working relationships /behaviour	45. Academic Board meetings and business are conducted and chaired in a way which encourages the active involvement of all members (staff and students) in discussions and decision-making.		
	46. The approach, style, and contribution of the head of the organisation support effective Academic Board meetings.		G
	47. The approach, style, and contribution of the secretariat/clerk support effective Academic Board meetings.		
	48. All Academic Board members are actively involved in discussion and demonstrate a shared purpose and commitment.		
	49. All Academic Board members understand and maintain the distinction between academic governance and management.		
	50. In practice, working relationships between Academic Board members and the organisation's executive are good, and a positive atmosphere exists to support effective academic governance.		G
	51. The need for constructive challenge by the Academic body is understood and accepted by both governing body members and the executive, and is undertaken both appropriately and effectively.		

Element of effective academic governance	Factor	Issues for consideration	Governing Body sub set
Outcomes of an effective Academic Governance		52. Outcomes agreed as part of the strategic plan are regularly assessed to ensure they are on track to being achieved.	G
		53. Students are experiencing the outcomes expected from their education.	G
		54. Agreed standards of institutional reputation and quality are being achieved.	G
		55. Required standards of accountability and legal/regulatory compliance are being achieved.	G
		56. Defined quality levels for the student experience, including related academic and service provision, are being achieved.	G
		57. Enhancements to provision identified through review processes are delivered.	
		58. Academic risks are well-managed and institutional reputation is protected.	G
		59. Enhanced institutional leadership through effective governance is being achieved.	
		60. External and internal stakeholders have a high degree of confidence in the organisation and its governance.	
		61. The Academic community are engaged in the development and long-term reputation of the institution.	

# 05 Performance Indicators

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The choice of key performance indicators (KPIs) will be dependent on the mission and strategy of the institution. Institutions will usually want a focussed set of KPIs that integrate with other key processes. Governors will usually want KPIs to be analysed over a period, say 3 years and aggregated to a high level, although from time to time may wish to consider certain elements in more detail. So, for example, a report on student academic performance might occasionally be broken down by different demographic groups – age, gender, ethnicity, mode of study, socio economics etc.

The areas that the Performance Indicators could cover are:

- Academic profile
  - Average entry tariff
  - TEF Score
  - REF Score
- National Student Survey scores
  - Course satisfaction is the percentage of final-year students satisfied with overall quality
  - The teaching quality score is the percentage of final-year students satisfied with the teaching they received
  - The feedback score is the percentage of final-years satisfied with feedback and assessment by lecturers
- Postgraduate Research Experience Survey scores
  - Staff-student ratio
  - A value-added score which might compare students' individual degree results with their entry qualifications
  - The percentage of graduates who find graduate-level jobs, or are studying further, within six months of graduation
- Market position
  - Application rates
  - Market share of applications
  - Enquiry rates
  - Web site hits
  - Open day attendance
- Regional engagement
- Widening participation e.g. extent of Student Diversity
- Non-continuation rates (including projected outcomes)
- Numbers of PhDs awarded
- Rate of PhD completion
- Number of 1st class and 2:1 degrees awarded
- Amount of research grants and contracts obtained ■

# 06 Annexes

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## Annex A: Funding body assurance specifications: England, Northern Ireland, Wales

England (HEFCE Circular Letter 25/2016, 22 August 2016)

### Assurance statements about the student academic experience, student outcomes and degree standards

We have discussed the following wording for the assurance statements on quality (for submission on 1 December 2016) with the Committee of University Chairs, the Association of Colleges, and the Heads of University Administration. The assurance statements are as follows:

As a governor and on behalf of the governing body, I confirm that for the 2015-16 academic year and up to the date of signing the return:

- The governing body has received and discussed a report and accompanying action plan relating to the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and student outcomes. This included evidence from the provider's own periodic review processes, which fully involve students and include embedded external peer or professional review.
- The methodologies used as a basis to improve the student academic experience and student outcomes are, to the best of our knowledge, robust and appropriate. For providers with degree awarding powers:
- The standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately set and maintained.

For providers without degree awarding powers:

- The standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately maintained.

The subsequent submission, due on 1 December 2017 and relating to activity during the 2016-17 academic year, will also include the following additional assurance statement:

- The governing body has received a report that confirms that the provider continues to meet the standards of Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines (2015)

Northern Ireland (Department for the Economy, Higher Education Policy & Finance Division letter, 23 August 2016)

Following discussions the following wording for the assurance statements on quality (for submission on 1 December 2016) with the Committee of University Chairs (CUC), the Association of Colleges (AoC), and the Heads of University Administration (AHUA). The assurance statements are as follows: As a governor and on behalf of the governing body, I confirm that for the 2015-16 academic year and up to the date of signing the return:

- The governing body has received and discussed a report and accompanying action plan relating to the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and student outcomes. This included evidence from the provider's own periodic review processes which fully involve students and have embedded within them external peer or professional review.
- The methodologies used as a basis to improve the student academic experience and student outcomes are, to the best of our knowledge, robust and appropriate.

For providers with degree awarding powers:

- The standard of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately set and maintained.

For providers without degree awarding powers:

- The standard of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately maintained.

The subsequent submission due on 1 December 2017 and relating to activity during the 2016-17 academic year, will also include the following additional assurance statement:

- The governing body has received a report that confirms that the provider continues to meet the standards of Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines (2015).

Wales (HEFCW Circular W17/07 HE, Annex A, 3 April 2017)

## Annex B: Leadership Foundation Project Team

The project team for this work comprised:

- **Andy Shenstone**, Director of Consultancy and Business Development, Leadership Foundation
- **Aaron Porter**, Associate Director of Governance, Leadership Foundation

### Leadership Foundation Associates

- **Paul Greaves** is chair of an alternative provider of higher education; consultant in university governance and regulation; and former head of assurance and chief auditor at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce).
- **John Rushforth** is the secretary to the Committee of University Chairs (CUC).
- **Julie Tolley** is an independent consultant, Further Matters Ltd, and a former further education vice-principal.

An academic advisor panel guided the work of the team and comprised:

- **Professor Ruth Farwell CBE DL** is a former vice-chancellor and chief executive of Buckinghamshire New University.
- **Dr Stephen Jackson** is a former director of quality assurance at the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).
- **Professor Paul White OBE DL** is a former deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Sheffield. ■

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