

Roundtable Notes

04. Academic governance

The Leadership Foundation in conjunction with other sector bodies offers a programme of Roundtable events. The events provide an opportunity for small numbers of participants (governors, governance professionals and senior managers) to discuss topical or emerging issues relating to the governance of higher education institutions (HEIs).

At each event, participants share and exchange views under the strict application of the Chatham House rule. None of the discussion is attributed to either an individual or an institution. To facilitate the wider dissemination of some of the key points discussed at each Roundtable, a summary note is released following each event.

Rationale for discussing Academic governance

The Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) had added a new requirement to an institution's annual assurance return. The governing body (GB) is now expected to confirm they had received assurances as to the quality of students' experience and the standards of the university's academic awards. As a consequence, GBs need to consider what assurances they require in order to 'sign-off' on the institution's Academic governance.

Academic governance

Scope

The HE Code of Governance is explicit in stating that 'the GB receives assurance that Academic governance is effective by working with the Senate/Academic Board or equivalent as specified in its governing instruments in order to maintain quality'. Further, the governing body should approve the institution's academic strategy, exercise oversight of all major academic partnerships and seek assurance that student complaints are effectively addressed.

Academic governance covers a wide span of activities, including teaching, research, knowledge exchange and international engagement. It is both complex and complicated, and GBs should give sufficient time and attention to the subject.

Assessing Academic governance

In assessing the institution's Academic governance, the governing body can draw on the following sources of information:

- Numerical data: for example, the results of the National Student Survey, and institutional data showing student retention and attainment.
- Reports: typically, annual reports prepared by Senate/Academic Board, external examiners' reports, reviews by accreditation bodies.
- Engagement with people: meetings with senior staff and students, including at a range of 'soft-events'. For example, graduation events, and in specialist art and design institutions graduate shows.

The diversity of institutions in the sector, suggests the precise configuration of what information is required by the GB for the purposes of assurance, with vary by institution, and reflect the characteristics of the institution and how its Academic governance is managed. Typically, the governing body will wish to be assured that the institution's Academic governance is sound, and there is an on-going process of improvement.

If the GB is unable or unwilling to trust the information it receives about the institution's Academic governance, this suggests there is a more profound issue that needs to be addressed.

Discussion

Participants were invited to consider three questions:

- What information regarding Academic governance does the GB currently receive?
- In what form does the GB receive information about the institution's Academic governance?
- In respect of gaining assurance as to the institution's Academic governance was anything done differently this year?

One institution, who had recently experience a large turnover of its GB members, had introduced a regular programme of one-hour briefings for governors. The briefings took place immediate before each scheduled meeting of the GB, and were focused on academic matters and the operation of the institution. The sessions had been well received by new members. The GB also received an annual report from Senate, as well as regular reports from Senate at each of its meetings. The regular reports from Senate did not usually receive a lot of attention at the GB.

The GB of another institution had received a report listing all the reports it had received over the preceding two years on Academic governance. The report has also been used to prompt the GB to consider 'where it wished to go to'.

In passing it was noted that a November date for GBs to sign-off on Academic governance had been unhelpful, coming as it did when demands on the GB's time and that of governance teams was already high.

There was a general acceptance that further work on how GBs gain assurance on Academic governance needed to occur. Further refinement of the processes used by institutions was anticipated ahead of next year's submission to HEFCE.

It was important that the rationale for the GB receiving information was clearly understood by all parties within the institution, and the content of any reports to the GB were clearly and concisely written. The use of 'academic' language and acronyms should be avoided.

Another institution has set-up a task and finish group to determine what information the GB needed in order to be assured as to the institution's Academic governance.

A fundamental question raised by one participant was 'how do we know we have done Academic governance well?' In response, the importance of using the three sources of information highlighted earlier, and triangulating data was emphasised. Reviews – by both internal staff not connected with the specific aspect or area of the institution being examined, and external reviewers – were judged to be particularly important. Equally, the use of audit committees, and risk assessment could play an important part.

Governors from several institutions had observed, or were continuing to observe, the work of the Senate/ Academic Board.

It was noted that the reports received by the GB tended to historic, looking-backwards, rather than forwards. What was the best practice in looking forwards? Action plans for improving, say, the student experience could play an important role in this regard.

It was noted that while GBs should not as a rule, become concerned about individual courses, they could reasonably be expected to consider broader questions about the institution's academic portfolio. In this regard, and more generally, it was important to recognise that most higher education institutions (HEIs) were charities, which meant GBs could not ignore academic matters.

Committees of the GB had potentially more time to examine the detail of specific areas of the institution's activity, as well as reducing the pressure on meetings of the GB. One institution has established an Academic governance committee, which was a sub-committee of the GB.

The role of a higher education (HE) governor was compared with non-executive directors (NED) for private sector companies. The role of NEDs could be summed-up as 'nose in; fingers out'. The same comment might apply to HE governors.

Looking to the future

A number of matters were flagged:

- There was potentially a big gulf between the workings of the Senate/Academic Board and the GB.
- With changing responsibilities and a more uncertain operating environment was the model of typically 4/5 meetings of the GB each year still appropriate?
- Had the time come when the division between academic and corporate governance (the bicameral structure) was no longer appropriate, and needed revision?
- To what extent had GBs when involved in the development of the institution's submission to be part of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)?
- It is not clear what institutions expect of their governors (trustees)? This needed further clarification.
- Where are the gaps in the training and development of governors in respect of Academic governance? What should be covered in a governor's induction?
- The provision of model templates for reports from Senate/Academic Board to the GB could help ensure key information was received by the GB.
- The use of scenarios, illustrating potential breakdowns in the relationship between Senate/Academic Board and the GB, could assist in improving the understanding about how such instances might be resolved.
- The culture of the institution had a strong bearing on what information, and its form, the GB received.
- An important question was to consider how students are embedded in Academic governance.

Further information

- 1 [The Higher Education Code of Governance](#). See Element 4 pp.20-21.
2. The Leadership Foundation's briefing note (04) explores the relationship between [academic governance and quality](#).
3. For newly appointed governors the Getting to Grips guide, [Being a New Governor](#), discusses the nature of academic governance. See pp.16-18.

Additional information

The Leadership Foundation in conjunction with Committee of University Chairs has published an Illustrative Practice Note (03) on [Academic governance](#).

For further information on Governance and our upcoming events visit www.lfhe.ac.uk/governance