

Roundtable Notes

09. The role of governing bodies and 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.

The context

The evolution of the national system of quality assurance for higher education was outlined, together with changes embodied in recently adopted approach. The new system aims to focus on institutions at highest risk. Further, in England, a focus on monitoring data for the purposes of quality assurance was expected to accompany the establishment and operation of the Office for Students (OfS).

In December 2016, the introduction of a new assurance requirement covering academic governance for English higher education institutions was a significant milestone. Henceforth, governing bodies were expected to formally seek assurance as to institution's academic quality and standards.

Accompanying the new requirements placed on institutions, at the request of three national funding bodies the LF and the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) undertake research on academic governance. Findings from the research included:

- Some governing bodies did not have a good understanding of academic governance
- Governing bodies were on a 'journey of development' in how they established assurance about the institution's academic governance
- The interface between 'corporate' and 'academic' governance was not always well developed, and frequently relied on the minutes of Senate being received by the governing body.
- Governing bodies often found themselves receiving a large volume of material about academic governance as part of the internal assurance process.
- The material presented to the governing body was not always written in an accessible form or language. The material frequently failed to address key issues. eg. where does the institution have strengths, and where might the institution be vulnerable?

Discussion

Enhancing governors' understanding of academic governance

Practical actions offered which could enhance governors' understanding of academic governance and improve information flows included:

- Enabling governors to have better understanding of their responsibilities, by ensuring academic governance was covered in the induction programme for new governors
- Joint sessions of the governing body and Senate
- Informal briefings sessions for governors allowing them to gain information outside of the formal meetings of the governing body
- Ensuring the minutes of Senate are accompanied by a cover sheet drawing attention to the key issues that the governing body should pay attention to
- Appointing to the governing body lay governors with a background in higher education
- The governing body receiving a summary of the external examiners' reports received by the institution
- Use of a student forum to allow governors to meet with students and gain information

The scope of academic governance

Academic governance covers all aspects teaching and research (and perhaps parts of knowledge exchange). It is important that the governing body receives information covering all of these areas of the institution's work.

Triangulation of data

The triangulation of data sources – eg. Information received from the institution's executive, from students and through external reports – is an important mechanism for establishing the robustness of the information received by the governing body. A higher level of confidence could be placed on information when all the sources are reinforcing, when compared to where they diverge.

A changing operating environment

The operating environment for higher education is changing. The establishment and operation of the OfS, in England, whose role was very different than that of the Higher Education Council for England (Hefce) is expected to bring change.

One outcome is that more information about institutions and their academic performance is expected to be placed in the public domain.

Students

Representatives of the student body have the potential to play a crucial role in the assurance of academic governance. Institutions should consider:

- Ensuring all student governors received an appropriate induction on academic governance prior to taking-up their role
- Making sure all students joining student committees (e.g. of senate or the governing body) receive training on their role and responsibilities
- Finding opportunities for governors to meet with students outside of the formal meetings of the governing body

Does quality within the institution vary?

Is there variation in academic quality and performance across academic departments. Are the standards 'level' across the institution? Does, for example, the proportion of first class degrees vary significantly between departments? If, so what is the reason?

What happens if quality varies across the institution?

Institutions should have an agreed internal quality assurance framework, setting out clearly what actions will be taken by the institution if there are issues in a particular area of the institution with respect to academic quality This might be evidenced by, for example, the data from the National Student Survey and other externally validated sources. In passing it was noted that 'academic freedom' did not mean that institutions should tolerate weak performance.

Academic governance and governing bodies today

The experience of the governors and the involvement of their governing body in academic governance shows marked variation. In some instances, discussion at the governing body is restricted, in other cases more extensive. Key to determining where along this spectrum of engagement an institution is positioned is the attitude of the head of the institution. In some cases, the head is resistant to a more open discussion on academic governance, in other cases a fuller discussion takes place. These comments, highlight that the system of governance for higher education institutions can be characterised by

three inter-related elements: the governing body, senate (and its committees) and the head of institution. All three elements play important roles in determining whether the system of governance is effective. If one of components is not aligned with the work of the other two, or is ineffective, the system will be less effective than it could be.

Looking to the future

Anecdotal evidence suggests many of the recently appointed heads of institution are more open than their predecessors to having an informed discussion on academic governance at the governing body. In part this may reflect a changing operating context faced by institutions. For example, the [2017 end-of-cycle data published](#) by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) showed a significant number of institutions had found it difficult to

achieve their planned student numbers in the last one or two years. Placed alongside the Westminster government's cap on undergraduate fees, this means some institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to manage their finances. At the same time, there is a growing tendency for chairs of governing bodies, on behalf of the governing body, to be more assertive in discharging their responsibilities. Collectively, these elements indicate that the historic demarcation of 'academic' and 'corporate' governance, as embodied by the bicameral system of senates and governing bodies, is becoming increasingly blurred. The changing operating environment and accompanying levels of risk are forcing governing bodies need to take greater interest in the core business of the institution, and its academic governance.

Further information

- 1 The LF in conjunction with CUC has published an Illustrative Practice Note (03) on [academic governance](#).
- 2 Extensive resources on the topic of academic governance, which were commissioned the three UK funding bodies in England, Ireland and Wales, and developed following the research carried out by the Leadership Foundation & CUC are available at <https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/governance-new/academic-governance/index.cfm>