Roundtable Notes

06. Academic governance – second roundtable

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 topic of academic governance has proved to be a very popular area of discussion. This Note records the discussion that took place at a second Roundtable event on academic governance, which was held on the 27 April 2017. A Note of the first Roundtable on academic governance (Roundtable 04) is also available.

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 direction of travel in respect of a increasing focus by GBs on academic governance has been apparent for some time. Element 4 of the Higher Education Code of Good Governance states 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.'

Assessing academic governance

The responsibility placed on the GB leads to the immediate question of what is academic governance? Put simply this covers those areas, describing the purpose and core activities of the institution: learning and teaching, research, knowledge transfer and management of the student journey. In practice these responsibilities are usually devolved to the Senate or Academic Board.

An increasing focus on academic governance, is linked with the changes to assessment of quality assurance (QA).

QA is based on the application of internal processes, supplemented by external involvement. The newly introduced QA arrangements, reflect the view that the previous arrangements were no longer 'fit-for-purpose' and needed updating.

The new requirement placed on English governing bodies by HEFCE in respect of the annual assurance return has raised the question of how does the governing body effectively discharge its responsibilities with regard to academic governance? HEFCE has indicated that governing bodies should expect to have 'received and discussed a report and accompanying action plan relating to the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and student outcomes'.

Discussion

Participants were invited to consider two questions:

1. What assurances with regard to academic governance have GBs sought in current year: what worked well, and what worked less well; and

2. Are there aspects of the process, which might be improved for the forthcoming year?

It was noted that responses in the current year had been hampered by the late date at which guidance on the new assurance requirement had been issued by HEFCE. As a consequence, many institutions had been ill-prepared to meet the new requirement placed on GBs.

Institutions shared their practice during the current year.

In one instance the institution's Senate had recommended a report on academic governance to the GB's Audit and Risk Committee. The Committee had, however, been very uncomfortable in being asked to confirm assurance of area with which it was unfamiliar. Subsequently, following an on-going dialogue with the Committee, an assurance map – detailing the various ways in which academic assurance was provided to the GB had been developed. This would be supported through an increase in the number of interactions by the GB with the institution's academic activities, to allow governors to became more familiar with the area of academic governance.

Whether the composition of the GB includes members with experience of HE was increasingly seen to be of growing importance.

Another institution noted that although it had used its Audit Committee in the current year, the process had not been judged to have been robust or based on a systematic approach. To address the issue for future years the GB had established an Academic Governance Committee, with the power to co-opt members.

As well as expanding the terms of reference of the Audit Committee to incorporate discussion of academic governance, the mechanism of a joint Senate and Board meeting had been used by one institution. Despite this it was felt barriers remained when it came to discussing matters of academic governance between the Senate and Executive on the one hand and the GB on the other. There was also a risk that the GB in asking for assurances about academic governance, was viewed as not trusting the Senate or Executive?

With regard to the report on academic governance received by the GB, it could in some cases be seen by governors as 'a well-written lecture', which did not detail anything other than the QA processes, and failed to evidence clear control process, or what the controls were actually signaling.

QA reports were normally written in a particular language. This did not necessarily help in providing the assurance required. Reports were often process driven, reflecting the previous QA methodology, and frequently written as though their intended audience was the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). This constrained what the report said. What was needed was a dialogue between Senate and the GB, which moved away from the form and language of the reports commonly used.

In one instance, a tense relationship between Senate and the GB was acknowledged. As a consequence, the assurance process had been conducted with a 'light-touch'. For future years, a working group had been established to consider how the process might be improved. Ideally, it would be helpful to 'strip-down' the QA processes to improve their reporting. In parallel, and in order to move things forward, efforts were being made to raise awareness of the importance of academic governance by Senate, which previously had not given the matter sufficient attention.

The academic board for one institution comprises virtually every member of academic staff. This meant the body was ineffective. The strongly embedded culture and associated heritage was difficult to change. Equally, Audit Committee, which lack members with an HE background was not the right place to consider matters relating to academic governance. The institution had responded by looking to introduce a comprehensive assurance framework, allowing the level of assurance to be evidence through a number of different channels and using another of GB's committees to examine academic governance.

There was concern that without great care by the GB, Senate might not feel that it was trusted. Similarly, setting up a special committee of the GB to focus on academic governance, risked privileging a sub-section of Members, and effectively undermining the responsibilities of the full GB in respect to discharging its responsibilities with regard to academic assurance. In a similar vein, there was a risk of placing a lay member (often with a background in HE) on Senate, and expecting that this mechanism would be effective way to assess academic governance. A more effective mechanism was to ensure the GB received regular presentations on the work of the institution's different academic departments.

The benefit of using a wide number of sources in order to gain assurance was noted.

There were mixed views as to the value of using internal audit as a way of gaining assurance on academic governance. Some institutions had found the use of internal audit helpful, while for others it had not proved to be effective. Where internal audit was used, it was important to ensure any findings involving the role and effectiveness of Senate were communicated to, considered and, in appropriate, actioned by Senate.

Assurance of academic governance, was part of the ever-growing responsibilities of GB. This and the pace of change affecting the sector was beginning to raise questions as to whether the traditional model of 4/6 meetings of a GB each year was sufficient.

Early findings from the LF's research into academic assurance

The LF was part-way through undertaking research into academic assurance, using data from some 15/16 institutions to inform the findings. Some of the emerging findings suggested:

1. The cultural and heritage of the institution is an important factor in determining the level of engagement of the GB in academic governance. In practice, there was a very wide spectrum of engagement from relatively significant to minor. With exceptions, as a general statement the levels of engagement were lower for older and more traditional institutions.

2. Changes to composition of the governing body are not a 'silver bullet'. HEIs were giving increasing attention to recruiting new governors with a background in HE, who might therefore assist the GB in assessing academic governance. Such changes, while helpful, were unlikely to sufficient in themselves when it came to matters of assurance. The challenge was to raise the general level of competence of the GB in regard to matters of academic governance.

3. It was important that there being an effective interface between Senate and the GB. Each needed to have a clear understanding of the role and responsibilities of the other, and to engage in a meaningful conversation. More attention need to be given to this aspect of governance.

4. There was a significant risk that the GB could be over-whelmed by the volume of the information it received. What was needed was more of a risk-based approach, focusing on those aspects of academic governance where there were issues that needed to be drawn to the attention of the GB.

5. Significant variability in the quality of the Minutes of meetings of Senate, which were subsequently received by the GB, had been observed. It was unclear whether the Minutes reflected a lack of debate at Senate or simply the style of the Minute taker.

6. Governors should not rely on a single source to basis their judgement of academic governance, but should triangulate data from a number of sources. These might include: (1) publically available data and information, which could also be benchmarked against its peer group; (2) regular internal reports, including those received by the GB from the head of the institution; and (3) a wider range of informal conversations. E.g. with staff and student governors. If the different sources provided a consistent picture, then it was reasonable to place reliance on the assessment. If not, further investigations might be required.

A number of the points highlighted, could be found in the latest research on Shared Governance undertaken by the Association Governing Bodies of Universities and Colleges in America (AGB). The findings from their current research highlighted the needed to ensure that all parties to the system of governance understood each other's role and responsibilities and new governors as well as new members of faculty received an appropriate induction covering the institution's system of governance.

Further information

1   The Higher Education Code of Governance. See Element 4 pp.20-21.

2   A summary of AGB research into Shared Governance can be found on the LF website.

Additional information

The LF in conjunction with Committee of University Chairs has published an Illustrative Practice Note (03) on academic governance.