

Thematic Analysis:

**The Role of Academic Boards
in University Governance**

Anthony H. Dooley

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES QUALITY AGENCY



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PREFACE

The Academic Senate or Board is a traditional feature of universities in Australia and many other countries, the embodiment of bicameral governance, but the continued relevance and even existence of the Academic Board is under challenge. Academic Boards have multifaceted responsibilities and questions can be asked over the extent to which academic boards, as currently constituted, are able to perform their quality assurance functions effectively. As I and others have noted, the Board's role in academic quality assurance is often taken for granted or blurred by the presence of new structures for academic quality assurance.

More searchingly, others point to tensions between the deliberative role of the Board and the responsibilities of executive managers for shaping institutional strategy and responding to the external environment (e.g. Marginson and Considine 2000; Woodhouse and Baird 2007). The leaders of Academic Boards across Australian universities continue to ponder these questions and ways in which to ensure Boards are enabled to be 'the voice of the academy' (Winchester 2007).

This publication aims to stimulate discussion and debate on the role and function of Academic Boards and how they should best be structured, managed and equipped to provide effective academic governance in higher education institutions. It has been written by Professor Anthony Dooley, chair of the Academic Board at the University of New South Wales and a long-time champion of the value of an effective Board.

Professor Dooley has divided his text into two sections. Section One provides an analysis of the findings of AUQA quality audits in respect of Academic Boards, assessed against the statement of Board purposes and functions agreed in 2005 by the Australian National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates. His analysis reveals the extent to which AUQA audits, perhaps not surprisingly, have emphasised the Board's quality assurance functions over its strategic advisory activities. In Section Two, Professor Dooley offers a more personal view of the challenges and key areas of focus for good Academic Board governance. In his view, an effective Academic Board must provide a genuine forum for participation and debate, and if it does so, the Board can be a powerful source of strategic and policy advice.

Not everyone will agree with Professor Dooley's view that the 'Board should be the engine room of the university', and even those who do may acknowledge that this is not what is happening on most university campuses today. Indeed, Dooley's comments about the role of Boards in strategic discussion are in part a response to recent suggestions by David Woodhouse and myself that Academic Boards, as currently constituted, lack the knowledge and focus to contribute in some areas (Woodhouse and Baird 2007). That is not to say that Boards do not make important contributions to many areas of academic policy. Rather, our comments point to a need for Boards to distinguish between advising as a committee of experts and expressing the views, not necessarily expert, of a collective academic citizenry.

It is our hope that this document, together with other recent analyses of AUQA audit findings in respect of Academic Boards (Baird 2007; Winchester 2007) will encourage internal reflection on these questions within and among Australian universities.

AUQA extends grateful thanks to Professor Dooley for accepting our invitation to prepare both the thematic analysis of audit reports and advice from his own experience as chair of an Academic Board. I would like to thank Magnolia Flora for editing, designing and typesetting this publication.

Jeanette Baird

Series Editor

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The role of Academic Boards in University Governance

Anthony H. Dooley

Universities have evolved from medieval communities of scholars, through the ivory towers of the Oxbridge of yesteryear to today's large scale business model. The tension between their traditional character, where reasoned argument holds sway and issues are debated thoroughly until there is scholarly consensus, and the modern imperatives of efficiency and accountability for the bottom line of the budget is palpable in most modern campuses. While most coal-face academics hold fast to the notion that academic governance should hold equal (or more than equal) sway with financial management, those in senior management sometimes come to regard 'due academic process' as a barrier to prudent fiduciary running of what is effectively a substantial corporation.

Nowhere is this tension more keenly felt than at the level of the university Academic Board. A form of this body exists in every Australian university, and is usually enshrined in the act of parliament that establishes the university. Its title varies: it is usually called variously 'Academic Board', 'Academic Senate', 'Senate', or 'Academic Council'. This body is referred to here as 'the Board'. It is the peak academic body within a university.

Despite the fact that academic governance is a crucial part of the character of a university (Shattock 2002 endnote), the Board has been rather overlooked in Australian government statements and policy on universities. Baird (2007), after a discussion of external guidance for Council members, concludes:

For academic board members, there are far fewer external reference points to assist in the transfer of good practice. Even though universities are heavily dependent on academic boards for quality assurance in the core areas of teaching and research—on paper, at least—discussion of the roles of academic boards is not widespread. This state of affairs is the more surprising if we accept that academic boards have a continuing role in ensuring the health of the quality conventions that make the whole enterprise of learning and discovery work—verifiable valid research and expert peer review, open processes of inquiry and public debate, and scholarly integrity. The time is now ripe for a broadly based conversation about the continuing rationale for academic boards and ways of improving their operations for good institutional governance.¹

This paper responds to Baird's challenge. It consists of two sections. In Section One, the author provides an analysis and commentary on what AUQA reports say about Academic Boards. In Section Two, drawing upon the author's experience in chairing the Board at the University of New South Wales for the past three years and in organising and attending national meetings, this paper presents some suggestions on the continuing rationale for Boards, and how they can best function in today's universities.

In October 2005, the University of New South Wales hosted the National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates (NCCABS), where an agreed national statement

of purpose and functions for Boards was drafted, and subsequently approved by all Boards nationally.² That document is attached as Appendix A, as it has served as a structural guide for the analysis.

Section One: AUQA Thematic Analysis

AUQA reports have consistently identified the central importance of academic governance within Australian universities. With the completion of the first cycle of audits, it is of considerable interest to track the views on Academic Boards expressed by the various audit panels in the period from the first audits in 2002 to the present (July 2007).³

Section One of this paper undertakes a longitudinal study of AUQA audits, asking:

- Is there a consistent interpretation of the role of the Board?
- What do AUQA audit reports generally consider to be the strengths of the Boards?
- What areas are generally in need of improvement?
- Are there aspects of the Boards' roles and contributions which have not been discussed by AUQA?

NCCABS (see Appendix A) identified the roles of the Board under four main headings: Governance; Maintenance of Academic Standards; Communication within the Institution; and Relationships with External Stakeholders. This framework is used for the analysis of the comments in AUQA audit reports.

Overall, AUQA panels have been parsimonious with *Commendations* involving Boards: of the many hundreds of Commendations in all audit reports to September 2006, only five Commendations specifically mentioned Boards: the University of Queensland was commended for its long-standing school review process, and the University of Sydney was commended for its recently introduced reviews of faculties. In addition, the University of Technology Sydney was commended for use of a Quality Management Framework and James Cook University for 'sustaining an appropriate balance between consistency and flexibility in the processes used to accredit and review course proposals...' It is interesting to note that these Commendations all specifically concern the Board's role as a body of accreditation and review. The University of Western Sydney received a Commendation for its 'strong corporate and academic governance under the leadership of the Board of Trustees and Academic Senate.'⁴

There are just six *Affirmations*: in AUQA terminology, an Affirmation is in fact a recommendation that the panel finds is already being addressed. Three of these Affirmations also pertain to accreditation and review: that Bond University enhance its procedures for approval and monitoring of academic programs; that Melbourne College of Divinity establish an Academic Audit Committee; and that James Cook University's Board put in place mechanisms to ensure that the formal review of all courses is completed within the first five-year cycle. The decision by the Australian College of Theology to combine its three Academic Boards into one, and to streamline its committee structure is similarly the subject of an Affirmation, as part of a 'more robust and centralised approach to quality assurance...' The University of Western Sydney Senate's decision to review assessment practices as a priority also received an Affirmation.

The fifth Affirmation is from the Audit Report for Deakin University and affirms 'Deakin's intention to review outcomes from the review of Academic Board and establish it

as the principal academic authority within the university'. The AUQA audit took place after a comprehensive review by the University of the Board's functions, and this Affirmation underlined the importance of the University following through with the recommendations of its review.

AUQA audit panels have, however, been more prepared to make *Recommendations* concerning Boards. There is a total of 31 separate Recommendations concerning Boards and their processes. Of these, the vast majority (20) are concerned with maintenance of academic standards, effective implementation of policy, and accreditation and review. Ten other Recommendations pertain to governance issues: either clarification of the role of the Board within the organisation or clarification of roles and responsibilities of members of the Board. The remaining Recommendation is around intra-university communication. These Recommendations are discussed in more detail below.

The mere categorisation of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations given above clearly does not tell the whole story: a wealth of detail is retrieved by delving deeper into the texts of the audit reports. However, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn which are supported by the more detailed analysis that follows.

- A major concern of AUQA audit reports has been the role of Boards in reviewing standards, particularly around learning and teaching, but also around research and overseas programs: audit panels question the extent to which policy is implemented and systematically monitored.
- AUQA is concerned that the role of the Board within the governance structure of the organisation should be clear; in particular the Board's relationship with Council and with faculty boards (or equivalents). AUQA is concerned that adequate measures for academic governance are in place and that the relationship between academic and fiduciary governance is clear.
- There is concern that individual Board members should be clear about their roles.
- The role of the Board in communication within the organisation and with external stakeholders has been noted in some cases, but has not been a consistent theme in audit reports.
- The role of student members of the Board has received little attention, despite the evident importance of student involvement in academic governance.
- The role of the Chair of the Board as a member of Council has not received a great deal of attention from AUQA, although it is a key role within the institution.

The next sub-sections contain a more detailed analysis of the Recommendations and of the texts of individual audit reports. Recommendations are reported under the headings identified in NCCABS in Appendix A.

Governance

From the 1990s, universities began restructuring their academic governance arrangements and made major consequential changes to their Boards. At the risk of considerable over-

simplification, older universities had often inherited professorial boards; with the expansion of numbers of the professoriate, these had become unwieldy. Younger universities, often emerging from a background as a technical college, had not had the same kind of academic governance and were therefore seeking to establish it *ab initio*. Each of these situations creates its own kind of problems, but the desired result is common: evolution to a body, founded on consultation, collegiality and broad-based representation which can serve as the principal policy-making and advisory body on all matters relating to and affecting the university's teaching, research and educational programs. It is against this background that AUQA audit panels examine the roles of Boards during quality audits of universities and other self-accrediting institutions.

AUQA audit reports generally emphasise the role of the Board as the 'principal academic body' within the institution. Often these words are from the act of parliament which establishes the Board. In a few cases (University of Adelaide 2003; Deakin University 2005; Australian College of Theology 2007) the AUQA audit followed soon after a review and restructure of the Board: such restructures have generally been viewed favourably by the AUQA audit panels.

AUQA audit panels have been at pains to make sure that the relationship of the Board with Council and the Executive is clear: for instance, in the AUQA Audit Report of Bond University (2005) the university is recommended to 'ensure its governance and management processes enable academic representatives to play a substantive role on the academic affairs of the university'; in another Audit Report, Central Queensland University (2006) Council is exhorted to 'develop strategies to ensure it is able to inform and balance its fiduciary governance responsibilities with its academic governance responsibilities'⁵ by 'a robust information exchange relationship with its Academic Board'.⁶ In the Charles Sturt University Audit Report (2004) the relationship with Council was questioned, and it was suggested that clarification was needed around the extent to which 'CSU wishes Academic Senate to operate as lead body in the formation of academic plans and policies and in monitoring their implementation'.⁷ In the AUQA Audit Report for the University of Newcastle (2003) it was recommended that 'Senior Executive Group provide clarity to the University about the respective roles of the Academic Senate and the Portfolio Committees'⁸: the latter had recently been established to ensure the independence of the Senate from line management. In AUQA's Audit Report for Queensland University of Technology (QUT) (2005), the relationship between the University Academic Board and the newly established QUT Blueprint objectives was needed 'with the purpose of ensuring that University Academic Board provides strategic leadership on academic issues'.⁹ In AUQA's Audit Report for Southern Cross University (2003), it is recommended that the Executive move forward with the stated intention to involve the Chair of the Academic Board in academic planning with the University Executive. The audit of the University of Western Australia in 2003 suggested the need to clarify the relationship between the Academic Board and the Academic Council 'in terms of their respective responsibilities and purpose'.¹⁰ The Melbourne College of Divinity (2005) had just established a single Academic Board, and there were issues around ensuring its status was clear. The AUQA Audit Report of Murdoch University (2006) recommended that the University identified the role that the Academic Council's

Research and Development Board would play within the academic governance and management of the University. Reporting on the AUQA audit of Monash University (2006), the audit panel commented:

As part of its continuous improvement AB will need to reaffirm its role in regard to its main responsibility for the supervision of the academic direction of the University...¹¹

Overall, then, it can be concluded that AUQA is interested in a clear institutional view of academic governance, with delineation of lines of responsibility between Board, Council and executive.

A second set of comments under the heading of governance concerns the role of individual Board members. Some AUQA audit panels have been concerned to know whether Board members understand the role and whether there is an induction process. In the AUQA Audit Report of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) for example, there was a Recommendation that the University 'strengthen the induction and training program for members of Council and University Academic Board and that QUT works with the Student Guild to ensure that the induction process has a major focus on the students' needs.'¹² At the University of the Sunshine Coast, while students expressed satisfaction that their input is listened to the panel found, 'there is opportunity to ensure that students are adequately supported to fully participate in committees through appropriate induction...'¹³ Aside from the latter, there has been little comment on the role of student members of Academic Boards, an issue identified as important in NCCABS. This is not to say that students have been ignored in AUQA's audit reports, but merely to make the point that their roles as members of the Board have not been singled out.

In the AUQA Audit Report of the University of Melbourne, commenting that the Board's membership profile does not reflect the University's academic staff profile, for example in terms of gender and seniority, the audit panel recommended '...that the responsibilities and membership of the University Academic Board be reviewed against the Board's Terms of Reference to ensure that the Board can effectively comply with these.'¹⁴ Overall, however, there has not been systematic commentary in audit reports on either of the two issues of: (i) whether the Board is (or should be) truly representative of the staff profile, or (ii) the extent to which the membership of the Board is aligned with its stated terms of reference in order to allow it to meet its goals. Given that most Boards see a major part of their mission as representing the academic voice, these two issues are linked.

In most universities, the chair of the Academic Board plays a key role on the Council, as a vehicle for communication of academic issues to the governing body. This role also has received no commentary from AUQA audit panels, although there are a couple of references to the role of the chair of the Board on the executive committee in aligning academic governance and executive management (University of New England 2004 and Southern Cross University 2003). The audit of the University of Queensland found that: 'The President of the AB is an ex officio member of the Executive, and the Panel ascertained that there is an effective partnership between Academic Board and the Executive.'¹⁵ In the 2006 Audit Report of Flinders University of South Australia, AUQA comments that:

Although not a member of VCC, the current chair of Academic Senate attends VCC meetings from time to time. The Audit Panel considers that full membership could enhance communication between the two key decision-making bodies.¹⁶

The AUQA audit panel goes on to note that a time allowance of ten per cent for the chair of Senate is ‘small in comparison to time allocations in many other universities’.¹⁷

Maintenance of Academic Standards

‘Academic quality assurance’ in its broadest sense is seen by many people, including AUQA audit panels, as a major function of the Board. This is manifest both in development of policy to ensure high standards are met by learning and teaching programs and in research, but also in ensuring that institutional academic policy is implemented. The latter has been somewhat of a preoccupation of the AUQA audit panels, since Boards’ roles as forums for collegial discussion are often at odds with their perceived roles as policemen. Furthermore, Boards are often not equipped with sufficiently strong ‘teeth’ to ensure that their policies are being adhered to: this issue is often raised in audit reports. Indeed, the rather few Commendations and Affirmations in respect of Boards are mostly around robust review processes which the institution has a strong commitment to implement.

The Recommendations around quality assurance usually concern course approvals and delivery, for both local and offshore offerings. There is often ambiguity about who in the institution should be responsible for quality assurance. For example, in the 2003 AUQA Audit Report of the Australian Maritime College, it is noted:

There were also conflicting views about the respective roles of QMAG and the Academic Board in reviewing and improving academic quality assurance policies and practices.¹⁸

The University of Adelaide’s Academic Board is exhorted to:

...strengthen its ability to maintain an oversight of the teaching activities of the university and, in particular, assure the quality of teaching and learning activities.¹⁹

and the audit report also recommends that:

Faculty Boards develop, as a priority, effective mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of University policy and, in conjunction with Academic Board, academic quality and standards.²⁰

The Deakin University Audit Report states bluntly: ‘A core responsibility of the various committees of the Board is oversight of the quality assurance mechanisms of the University’, and members of Deakin’s Board are asked to develop an improved understanding of their important quality assurance roles.²¹ Similar comments are made by the AUQA audit panel to Griffith University with respect to its Program Committee. The University of Canberra is asked to review its Academic Board membership and involve

the Board earlier, in the light of increased devolution of academic quality assurance standards. It is recommended that the Senate of Charles Sturt University reconsider the various mechanisms it has in place for assuring the quality of teaching and learning. In the University of Technology, Sydney Audit Report, AUQA complements the Board on its Quality Management Framework, but then follows with a Recommendation that the Board 'play a stronger role in advising on quality improvement across all aspects of teaching and learning, including offshore programs.'²² In the Audit Report for the University of the Sunshine Coast (2007):

It was not always apparent to the Audit Panel, however, on the evidence provided, that full consideration of program accreditation and course approval proposals by faculty learning and teaching committees had occurred prior to deliberation by the Academic Board.²³

In the Monash University Audit Report (2006), the Board's main responsibilities to Council are seen as: 'supervision and direction of the academic affairs of the university, including the maintenance of high standards in teaching and research...'²⁴ which is contrasted with the observation that 'AB members saw the Board's main role as serving as a conduit for communication between the academic community and management and as a disseminator of information through the deans.'²⁵

The issue of monitoring of offshore programs is a recurring theme in audit reports—the Swinburne University of Technology Audit Report says that:

Presently lacking at SUT is a systematic means of assuring the equivalence of academic standards of its on-campus and off-shore courses. Academic Board has also failed to be sufficiently involved in the approval and accreditation of courses offered through at least one of its off-shore partners.²⁶

The audit panel at the University of New England (UNE) observed in their report of UNE that the 'Academic Board has not always been sufficiently rigorous in ensuring that its policies have been effective in respect of some of the University's newer, innovative activities such as articulation agreements and offshore teaching partnerships.'²⁷ The RMIT University Audit Report notes that:

...sharing responsibility must be within the context of definite, formal accountabilities given to designated officers. A particular illustration of where this is not occurring is in the oversight of off-shore programs...²⁸

Some guidance on good practice is given in the Monash University Audit Report, where the panel comments that that the integration of the campuses in Malaysia and South Africa is facilitated by having two representatives from these two bodies on Academic Board, and also by the fact that their Academic Advisory bodies report to the Education Committee.

Some audit panels have been able to break their comments on quality assurance into two parts: development of appropriate policy; and monitoring its implementation. These

are both seen as key roles of Boards, although the weight of commentary has been on the former. The ability of a Board to monitor compliance with its own policy, and to take decisive action when it finds non-compliance, is an issue that occupies the mind of many people associated with academic governance, not only AUQA audit panels! In practice, many institutions expect others (deans, heads of school) to implement the policies which Boards make. This may lead to conflicting roles within the organisation. Even at the University of Sydney, where the Board was commended for the effectiveness of the Phase One review of faculties, the AUQA Audit Report expresses reservations about reliance upon these five-year reviews as a primary means for monitoring compliance with Board policies, stating: 'Policies ought to have built-in systems for ensuring compliance and ongoing monitoring of the same. Review ought to be a separate issue, focusing on periodic assessment of the effectiveness of the systems for ensuring compliance.'²⁹

The AUQA panel auditing the University of Ballarat recommended that: '...once the proposed changes to the five-yearly course review process have been further considered by Academic Board, and agreement has been reached, the Board ensures that they are implemented'.³⁰ A similar recommendation was made by the audit panel for James Cook University. In the Curtin University Audit Report, the panel notes: 'The main way in which a failure of policy implementation is discovered is through the occurrence of an error' and recommends 'That Curtin ensure, with appropriate monitoring, that policies are implemented by divisions, schools etc.'³¹

There are also comments in AUQA audit reports, though less frequently, about the actual development of policy. At the University of New England it is noted that 'policy environment at the University could be improved',³² and there are some concrete Recommendations for new policies around transnational courses. The panel for the University of New South Wales recommended that the University improve its Guide for Submission of Academic Proposals to ensure that programs are properly aligned with the University's strategic priorities. The Southern Cross University Academic Board is exhorted to 'accelerate[s] the approval of plans for the embedding of graduate attributes across the curriculum',³³ and in the James Cook University Audit Report it is noted with approval that 'due attention is being paid to the development of graduate attributes at a University-wide level', although the comment is also made that 'This kind of monitoring is now fairly standard in Australian universities.'³⁴ The Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education Audit Report states that, 'The Academic Committee needs to take a stronger role in ensuring the standards of courses and their equivalence to comparable qualifications from other HE institutions'.³⁵

The last issue, that the Board should be an instrument for benchmarking standards across the sector, seems to the author to be an interesting suggestion which has not received much attention in AUQA audit reports. The author observes that the academic membership of most Boards has a great awareness of national and international standards pertaining in their discipline; many of them have taught at a range of institutions. There is great potential to build upon this character, and for Board-to-Board communication on issues such as admission standards, examination practices, plagiarism policy, standards for thesis examination and many other areas. To some extent, this happens in New South Wales,

where the chairs of Boards meet approximately once a quarter and discuss current issues. However, cross-institutional benchmarking is not systematic.

Communication within the Institution

The combined wisdom of Board Presidents is that communication should be a key institutional role for the Board. However, this aspect has not received nearly as much airtime from audit panels as has the quality assurance role of Boards. It could be argued that this is a reasonable situation: quality assurance is close to the central mission of AUQA. On the other hand, good quality assurance within an institution is at least facilitated by good internal communication within the institution; and it can be argued that the two go hand-in-hand (at least when they are backed up by strong institutional values).

Two of AUQA's Recommendations address this point: the University of Ballarat was recommended to consider ways in which the Academic Board could play a part in improving the intra-University communication and discussion of broad educational issues (both internal and external), and in the Charles Sturt University Audit Report, it was recommended that the University 'clarify for all staff the intended role to be played by Academic Senate in fostering collegial discussion and debate and in leading academic policy development and monitoring.'³⁶

The actual texts of the audit reports yield some more information on the attitudes of audit panels. In the University of Adelaide Audit Report, the panel expects that the Academic Board '...would take on an increasingly strong role in facilitating communication between the senior executive of the University, the heads of academic units and the professoriate.'³⁷ The University of Melbourne Audit Report (2006) states:

The climate of surveys among staff ... show a low level of satisfaction with the dissemination of information to the departments on University affairs, which is an aspect of communication that falls in part to the UAB to deliver. UAB has identified a need to improve the communication with the wider community, and some initiatives have been taken in that regard.³⁸

For Charles Darwin University, the Audit Report was perhaps, more stringent:

...the Performance Portfolio stated that "issues such as academic structures...are outside the domain of the Board" (PF 27). The Panel investigated this and found that the AB expects to be able to comment on changes, but nonetheless it reinforces the view that the Board itself does not play a significant role in academic affairs.³⁹

In the University of Sydney Audit Report, a positive note:

The Academic Board operates an 'Academic Forum', which now meets at least once per semester to discuss matters of interest... All members of the University community are invited to participate. Such fora help keep the wider University community apprised of current issues and are valued by staff.⁴⁰

An issue of the balance of size was recognised at the University of Wollongong, where the audit panel reports that:

The University has decided to retain a fairly large Academic Senate of 85 members so that it may continue to function as the primary mechanism for communication within the academic University community. Having made this decision, the Senate will also need to consider how to respond to criticism in its survey that the size of the Senate and the volume of paperwork constrain its potential as a forum for academic discussion and debate.⁴¹

It is clear from these comments that many AUQA audit panels consider that the Board has a role to play as an important vehicle for communication within the institution, and that when this is not happening, the issue needs to be addressed.

Relationships with External Stakeholders

In general, AUQA audit reports have focused on relationships between the Board and various external learning and teaching activities of the universities. There is a Recommendation in the University of Newcastle Audit Report about ‘better articulation arrangements especially regarding community colleges’, and in the Swinburne University of Technology Audit Report, there are comments about the Board being “‘insufficiently involved’ with one of its off-shore partners.’ For dual-sector institutions, there has been commentary on articulation between Vocational Education and Training and higher education: for example, the recent Audit Report of Victoria University commends the creation of a single Education and Research Board which is integrated across the two sectors, and recommends that the University ‘rapidly develop systems to routinely track the number and proportion of students articulating...’⁴²

However, there has been scant comment in AUQA audit reports for cycle one audits on other issues identified by NCCABS in giving informed commentary on Government policy; policies that regulate academic relations with stakeholders; recruiting; State and Territory education authorities; conditions for scholarships and prizes; engagement with the graduate community and alumni; monitoring equity and diversity programs; and introduction and deletion of courses (for example in response to national strategic priorities). The author believes that there is a case for future AUQA audit panels to ask whether Boards are fulfilling a role in these areas as well as in quality assurance of programs.

Conclusion

AUQA audits have tended to concentrate on two major aspects of Board activities. They have regarded Boards as upholders of institutional standards, and have displayed concern about the extent to which Boards can enforce their policy: the tension between a community of scholars and the meeting of an enforced standard is one which is felt in many aspects of university governance, particularly when the standard is imposed from outside. AUQA audit panels have been assiduous in commenting upon this.

The role of Boards in institutional governance, and their performance as part of the tripartite relationship between Council, senior management and academic governance has been critically examined.

However, one of the real potential advantages offered by a model of academic governance involving such a body as an Academic Board is the possibility of involving many academics in the process of collective, yet focused and strategic governance. To the author, it appears that this aspect of Board activities has not systematically been commented upon in AUQA audit reports. To the extent that AUQA's comments may guide institutional policy development, this is a pity.

The Board can also play a key role in defining the relationship with the wider community; in bringing issues from outside into the university and also in communicating university values and ideas to the wider community. Neither of these roles appears to have been a major preoccupation of AUQA audit reports.

It is sometimes argued that collegial discussions can slow the inexorable march of progress necessary for the survival of the university into a glorious new millennium and that, therefore, Academic Boards can be done away with and replaced. Where this is done, the nature of a university changes radically away from the ideal of a community of scholars: policy is implemented by fiat and performance measures rather than the traditional shared understanding of the institutional and disciplinary values and respect for peers, which have driven the development of a resilient academic culture over many centuries.

Section Two amplifies and extends some of these comments, and sets out some ways in which Academic Boards can function well, and how universities can support them in their role.

Section Two: Why Have a Board, and How to Make it Work

Attend any gathering of academics, and you will hear horror stories of Academic Board meetings: ‘I remember the time when the Board debated for four hours whether Associate Professors should be referred to as *Professor* in university correspondence...’ is one of my favourites. No doubt it is an important issue, but not, perhaps, one to be debated by a room full of people with axes to grind. These stories tend to linger in the collective mind, and are re-told over many years. I am not sure how often they actually happened, even in the ‘bad old days’. No doubt such debates still happen, but my observation is that they are the exception rather than the rule.

During the late 1990s and early years of the millennium, there were predictions about the growing irrelevance of Boards. Marginson and Considine (2000) wrote that the Board exercised a ‘shadow form of collegiality’ and that senior academics tended to avoid involvement in their activities.⁴³ However, these predictions have not come to pass, and most universities have acted to define more carefully the roles of their Academic Boards, at least partly under the impetus of AUQA’s audit reports.

An interesting case study of the reinvention of the Academic Board at the Victoria University of Wellington by Luanna Meyer⁴⁴ was published recently. The article traces how this New Zealand University restructured its Board:

...(to) locate common ground for understanding and deliberation, in order to accommodate the processes that define and challenge a modern university. Neither collegial participation nor effective management can be sacrificed, but both will need to evolve towards a model respectful of today’s universities...⁴⁵

Woodhouse and Baird (2007) provocatively suggest that Academic Boards might be an anachronism, that Board members ‘lack the contextual knowledge, policy skills and focus of the senior management group...’ and that the Board’s role in quality assurance of teaching might adequately be addressed by having a small group of ‘acknowledged leaders in learning and teaching [from] across the institution’.⁴⁶ Most Boards contain deans, who are leaders acknowledged by the institution’s human resources procedures; and elected members, who are elected by their colleagues as suitable for Board membership. In my view, if the proposal were realised, the choice of acknowledged leaders would almost certainly be entirely in the hands of the executive, and the Board would lose that independence which is so crucial to its function.

Woodhouse and Baird (2007) further claim that Boards ‘accord primacy in any discipline to academics in that discipline’, suggesting that this is a weakness or failing. The author argues to the contrary — the academics in a given discipline usually *do* know what they are talking about: the Board’s role is to test their motives by rigorous academic debate. It is difficult to ‘pull the wool over the eyes’ of a room full of sceptical colleagues. Furthermore, the acknowledged leaders in learning and teaching should be already on the Board and its committees. They are trained by the process of serving on these committees

and their working groups. It is precisely cross-institutional organisms like the Board that enable them to develop and be recognised. It is in the fertile interchange between the Board members (who I assert *do* have a great deal of contextual knowledge and experience in policy formulation) and senior management, that well-tested, accepted and implementable academic policy is conceived.

The reality is that modern Academic Boards deal with a huge spread of crucial institutional policy, usually in a thorough, transparent, and business-like fashion. This can be seen from the annual report or the work plan of any Academic Board. The Board should be the engine room of the university, where day-to-day issues are translated into sound institutional policy, with buy-in from the academic community at large. It should be a key interface between Council, the Executive and the Academic Community. At best, it can be a key contributor to institutional strategy. And it does this while being rooted in the fine traditions of scholarship and academic discourse!

Anyone who has had the privilege of becoming a chair of an Academic Board, while being aware of this in theory, confronts certain uncomfortable realities, which are characterised here under the following headings: Role of the Board; Process; Policy; Institutional Memory; and Quality Assurance. These are discussed in turn.

ROLE OF THE BOARD

Most Boards tend to see themselves as custodians of policy, process, quality control and institutional memory. They also see themselves as a key place where issues affecting academic life can be discussed, and, if necessary, challenged. However, there is not always unanimity across institutions about what Boards should do. Members of Council from the business sector may have a rather hazy idea about the Board as the 'compliance unit'. Indeed, the whole concept of a Board where there is free debate on institutional policy is rather distant from what happens in commercial businesses. It is important for any Board to be very clear about its role, and then to promulgate this clarity through the organisation, especially to Council members. Some universities have a regular schedule of invitations for Council members to attend Board meetings. Reaching the academic staff and the executive is equally important.

PROCESS

Principal amongst process issues is the feeling on behalf of those in executive positions (e.g. deans) that the Board is there to frustrate the progress of their schemes, countered by the feeling of those in the non-executive positions that the deans are about to compromise every academic standard in their pursuit of the unholy dollar. Fortunately, this is only a caricature, and reality is not so stark! Yet the very heart and reputation of the institution is built on that certainty that its processes are fair, transparent and above board. It is the author's advice to a would-be Board chair that abandoning process in particular special cases is something not to be toyed with lightly: but questioning whether processes are implementing the policy which they underpin, and whether alternative processes can deliver the same outcomes more efficiently or with less friction is at the heart of what a

good Board will be doing. This, however, is best done without the imperative of a special case being pushed by a particular party.

POLICY

Then there is the problem that, after careful consideration, the Board might adopt well-constructed policy, but has only indirect power to ensure that it is implemented. This is probably one of the most common areas of difficulty for a Board, and one which underlies many of the AUQA Recommendations discussed above.

Whereas one knows theoretically that if a program is in breach of Board policy, we should be able to argue at Council that all teaching in the program should be suspended until the breach is fixed, it would be a brave chair of the Board who took this path. More commonly, one talks to the Dean or the deputy vice-chancellor and either the program becomes compliant or the policy is amended.

Ideally, the institution should recognise the value of the Board and respect its decisions. For this to occur systematically, the vice-chancellor and the deputy vice-chancellors and Deans who are in charge of implementation need to believe that the Board policies are sound and to support them. They need to be continually made aware of the reasons behind existing policies and actively involved in reviewing them. In this model, the rationale for all policy needs to be continually re-explained, as management can change frequently in the current higher education sector.

INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

In fact, many of those responsible for implementing institutional policy are ignorant of it, or invent novel interpretations of it. Indeed, Board presidents themselves have terms of two or three years (some with renewal). It can be a steep learning curve for someone who is expected instantaneously to become the font of all knowledge on academic policy! In some universities, however, there is a bulk of policy accumulated over many years, much of which is more honoured in the breach than in the observance. This is clearly an undesirable situation, which should be addressed.

It is therefore important for policy to be clear and unambiguous, accessible, accompanied by good rationale, and regularly reviewed. These things are all eminently achievable if there are sufficient support staff and information technology resources at the Board's disposal.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

It is in this area where 'business meets academia'. As noted above, one of the most common questions asked by AUQA panels is: 'But how do you know that they are implementing Board policy?' or 'How do you know that the standard of your courses is as high as you say?'

Many universities expect deans and heads of school to implement Board policies and, to a greater or lesser extent, have key performance indicators to show whether this is being done. But these are established and monitored by the vice-chancellor, who does not necessarily share the information with the Board.

Some Boards conduct regular reviews of faculties or of disciplines: one that the author has looked at in some detail, and which seems to work well, is that at the University of Sydney. There, the Board sets up review panels, with some external members, to work collaboratively with each faculty to produce a report with an action plan for improvement. Like AUQA, the aim is to help faculties to identify how to improve. So far, the University of Sydney has run two iterations of the plan. Apparently, the first one was met with resistance, but that the second one was welcomed by faculties who saw positive outcomes from the first effort. It may not be that the University of Sydney can answer the question, 'How do you know that the plan is being adhered to?'...until the next review. There is benefit in setting up regular Board reviews of this type, though without doubt, it requires considerable time and resources.

If a Board becomes obsessed with policy, process and compliance issues such as those discussed above, it will lose institutional respect and relevance. The antidote to the fact that time and energy must be spent on these necessary, but arguably more rebarbative, roles of the Board is for it to devote part of its time to positive activities which are institution-building. This can be described as quality improvement. Indeed, the author has found it useful in his Annual Report of Activities, to use three headings of *Improvement*, *Policy* and *Compliance*.

The topic of improvement also presents challenges for any would-be Board chair. In the author's view, these challenges revolve around issues of how to:

- i. maintain good collective yet focused strategic discussion
- ii. develop outcomes into meaningful institutional initiatives
- iii. ensure that the Board is open and transparent, yet effective
- iv. maintain credibility within the university as a central and valuable part of institutional governance
- v. maintain cordial and effective relationships with 'competitor' institutions.

COLLECTIVE YET FOCUSED DISCUSSIONS

If a Board is to operate in the traditions of a community of scholars, it should not feel itself constrained by the views of the vice-chancellor and Senior Management: no topic should be 'off limits'. Yet most modern academics are sufficiently pragmatic and time-poor not to want to spend hours discussing something which has no chance of ever being realised. A key to good discussion at Board is to have good, practical and realisable topics for discussion, and to clearly focus the discussions towards concrete outcomes, which one hopes are not totally diametrically opposed to the chosen path of management.

It has been extremely useful at the University of New South Wales to have 'hot topics' on the agenda. A half hour of each two-hour meeting is devoted to the month's topic, which is chosen because it is important for the institution, but is generally not being debated elsewhere. Any member of the Board may propose a hot topic: the proponent must write a couple of (hopefully provocative) paragraphs about it and introduce the topic at the meeting. The combined wisdom of 65 thoughtful academics and students usually produces some interesting ideas, and a challenge for the chair and the institution to take on. If the hot topic's conclusion is opposed to current management strategy, it is still not

a bad thing to debate it: growth often occurs by difference of opinion. This active role in discussing relevant issues also assists the Board to achieve its compliance and policy work on a distinctly more positive note.

DEVELOP INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

If the Board's deliberations and discussions result in positive institutional improvements, all parties support them. Unfortunately, there is not always universal buy-in from parts of the university which have not been part of the Board's debate. A key role of the chair of a well-functioning and supported Board would be to be able to take new initiatives developed at the Board to management and negotiate an implementation strategy. Of course, this may be hard, as there is often not an allocated budget for Board initiatives. But a skilful chair must try to find the proper way to effect sensible changes. This can be particularly easy if the changes mean lower expenditure and greater efficiencies. Board chairs should not be hesitant to suggest policy improvements, and to use their deep institutional knowledge and connections to develop implementation plans.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT YET EFFECTIVE

Striking the balance between openness and transparency on the one hand, and the necessity for the institution to move decisively on the other, is at the core of the Board's business. Academics are highly committed people, but with multiple professional allegiances: to the institution, to their own discipline, to their students, and to their own research programs. They are generally not afraid to speak out, lucid and intelligent enough find ways around most situations which frustrate them. Thus an open and transparent debate on some issue can take unexpected turns. The author has sometimes seen managers assert that they can get the Board to rubber stamp some policy: 'I'll get this issue approved at the board' shouldn't work in any company board, and it certainly doesn't at university Academic Boards. On the other hand, a room full of motivated academics discussing an issue will give it thorough consideration, and may produce new and interesting angles. There is a crucial time in the development of a policy initiative when it is appropriate to take it to a Board discussion. It must be clear in its direction, but not so defined that there is not room for reasoned input and modification. It is a part of the chair's job to ensure that the Board sees issues at this moment. This requires a good information flow on of issues within the organisation. In an ideal institution, there should be transparent mechanisms for issues of academic governance to be transferred between the 'executive' and the 'academic' stream, in both directions as appropriate.

CREDIBILITY WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

In order for the Board to remain a credible organisation within the university, it is necessary for it to have a clear mission and to communicate how it is fulfilling that mission to all parts of the university who deal with it. Key stakeholders are Council, the vice-chancellor and deputy/pro vice-chancellors, deans and heads of school, academic staff, and of course the student body. Ultimately, the Board is judged upon whether it is adding value to the institution in the estimation of these and other interested parties.

Each Board member should have some stake in such communication, and their induction should provide ideas and help for them to communicate within their own sphere of influence. The Board should do whatever it can to facilitate this.

CORDIAL AND EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH 'COMPETITORS'

Whereas government policy often sees the higher education sector as a competitive market, the author's experience is of a great deal of commonality and a desire for cooperation with his counterparts from other universities. Academic Boards face very similar issues across the sector. By discussions, and sharing policy and information on institutional governance and standards, the quality of all parties' education and research is improved. As mentioned at the end of Section One, and also in NCCABS, the role of the Board in national benchmarking of educational standards, policy and research performance is one for which the author believes it is well equipped but under-utilised. See Moodie (2004)⁴⁷ for some amplification of this point.

The role of an Academic Board in a higher educational institution does not have an exact analogue in a purely commercial organisation. Boards have grown from traditional origins, and are well adapted as a means of governance, to the nature of the academic workforce and to the academic endeavour in general. In a university which recognises and supports the Board, it can play a crucial role in strategic management, policy development and implementation, and communication.

APPENDIX A:

THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF ACADEMIC BOARDS AND SENATES

**A Policy paper formulated
at the National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates
held at the University of New South Wales
October 13–14th 2005**

In October 2005, the University of New South Wales hosted the National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates. A draft of the following document was produced: this has been successively refined, with commentary from all Chairs of Boards across Australia. Thirty-six of the 38 Chairs attended the meeting, and all Chairs had the opportunity to have input to the final version.

I would like to thank all involved for a collegial process, which has yielded what may be regarded as a national statement of function and purpose for Australian Academic Boards.

Professor A. H. Dooley
President, Academic Board
University of New South Wales

Preamble: Every Australian University has a body, known variously as Academic Board, Academic Senate, Senate, or Academic Council. This body, referred to in this document as 'the Board', is the peak academic body within the University. It is distinct from the University's principal governing body, which is known variously as the Council, the Senate, the Board of Trustees. The latter body is referred to as 'the Council' in this document.

In 2000, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs approved a set of national Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes. The Government's National Governance protocols, introduced in 2003, dealt with the role of the Council. Neither of these documents provides sufficient basis to delineate the role of the Board within the University.

Subsequent reviews of University Governance, for example, the 2002 Victorian Review of University Governance, have concentrated on the role of Council in commercial activities, and have largely overlooked issues of academic governance.

The purpose of the present document is to formulate an agreed national statement of purpose and functions for Boards. The document seeks to delineate the relationship between the Board and the Council, and between University Senior Executive and the Board.

It is important that Governments should recognise the significance of the Boards' roles, especially as upholders of academic values and standards. There may be value in the creation of a peak body with formal recognition, provided its relationship with the AVCC is carefully delineated.

Mission of the Board: The Board is the principal policy-making and advisory body on all matters relating to and affecting a university's teaching, research and educational programs. It is also responsible for assuring academic quality including academic freedom, academic integrity, assessment, admissions, and research conduct.

The Board model of academic governance is founded upon consultation, collegiality and broad-based representation, and had its origins in the historical tradition of a university as a community of scholars.

The Board is composed primarily of academics, who are representative of the diversity of the academic diversity in the university, but includes also students and may include professional staff. It is independent of, but shares membership with, senior executive, senior management and Council. It is a representative body of colleagues engaged in the compliance and innovation processes of the university.

The Board provides an important venue for student involvement in academic decision-making.

The Board upholds the voice and the interests of the Academy in a tripartite relationship of the Academic Board and Council; the Vice-Chancellor and Senior Executive; and the academic community. The Board has a well-defined role in governance, both as a policy making body and as an advisory body, on all academic matters, including academic activities, policies and strategic planning.

Free and open debate fosters moral authority within the academic community, and the Board provides a forum to facilitate debate and information flow on a range of educational and university sector issues, across the senior executive and the wider academic community. Boards provide cross-functional mechanisms to address and resolve complex problems that cut across academic and administrative policy.

Chair of the Board: University Academic Boards are presided over by an individual, variously entitled Chair, President or Presiding Member. In this document: that person is referred to here as Chair of the Board. While many University Acts or Statutes allow the Vice Chancellor or designated Deputy/Pro-Vice-Chancellor to be Chair of the Board, most universities in practice have an elected Chair. Most also have one or two Deputy Chairs. It is desirable, and almost universal, that the Chair is on the University Council. Frequent and full communication between the Chair, Deputy Chairs and Vice-Chancellor is necessary to implement the Board's mission. Ideally, this should be recognised by formal communication mechanisms.

Practice: In an institution where the Board is contributing well to fulfilling these aims, one would expect to find the following features.

Governance:

- There should be a well-defined statement which clarifies roles and delegations of the Board, the Council and the Executive. This should establish a shared governance role; distinguish between the Board's role in governance and the function of management; guarantee independence of the Board; ensure that it has a regular reporting relationship to Council; ensure good, evidence-based advice to the Council and Executive on academic matters; and include clear and consistent terms of reference concerning which matters are dealt with by the Board. Generally, the Board should contribute to setting the institutional agenda rather than merely responding to agendas established elsewhere. The Board should have the power to request reports from or refer matters to Faculties, Schools, Departments and Boards of Studies.
- The Board should play an important role in debating, developing and implementing institutional strategy in a range of academic areas including educational and information technology, international development and community engagement.
- The Board should have an established and effective standing committee structure, typically with memberships beyond the Board itself, to ensure distributed participation throughout

the university. Much of the Board's work will be conducted through these standing committees. The Board should establish effective relationships with its standing committees to achieve change in a timely manner. The relationship between these standing committees and the Council and Senior Executive needs to be clearly defined, particularly if Deputy and Pro-Vice-Chancellors are members of these committees.

- The work of the Board should be aligned with institutional strategic plans and policies, and the Board should play an important role in their formulation and implementation.
- The Board should have a key role in the formulation and approval of policy on and relating to teaching and learning, research and community engagement.
- While Boards do not generally have budgetary responsibility, they may play a key role in assessing the impact of budgetary decisions on academic matters.
- The Board should have in place processes for induction and training of new members, succession planning, and optimising the sharing of institutional knowledge.

Maintenance of Academic Standards:

- The Board and its standing committees carry responsibility for quality in all academic activities, including learning and teaching, research and community engagement. The Board should have a key role in the development and long-term preservation of balanced, clear, shared definitions of academic standards and integrity.
- The Board should have an accountable and transparent framework for implementation and review of policy; for the development and review of academic quality assurance measures; and for facilitating compliance with its policies and procedures. Processes must ensure the integrity of academic programs and research, and be effective, timely, comprehensive and rigorous. Members of the Board and its standing committees should have an understanding of the role of policy and the processes of compliance.
- The Board should play a key role as a forum for students to be involved in the development and evaluation of academic processes.
- The Board should hold authority for approval, accreditation and review of new and existing academic programs, including those offered by commercial entities owned or partially owned by the university. The Board has ultimate oversight of all programs, onshore and offshore, and its processes play a key role in ensuring comparability of standards both within the institution and externally.
- The Board has an important role in the assessment and evaluation of learning and teaching and in learning and in ensuring the quality and in improving teaching and learning practice. The Board should ensure transparency of the performance of particular subjects/courses and how this links to policy implementation, revision and development. This should be done both for examples of best practice, and for areas of difficulty. In fulfilling this role, the Board may use national, institutional or its own academic performance indicators, including the CEQ; student feedback; course evaluations; and external evaluation of courses/subjects. These indicators may relate to assessment modes; academic progress; admissions policy; progression rates; exclusions; appeals; articulation; plagiarism; effectiveness of blended learning; and English entry standards.
- The Board has an important role in debating and establishing research policy, and in encouraging and supporting research. Boards should have a standing committee devoted to research, which deals with a range of issues from research integrity; support for researchers in grant applications; and research student issues, including supervision quality and mentoring.
- Boards should have a role in broad benchmarking with other universities. Boards may conduct regular reviews of Departments, Schools, Faculties or disciplines within the university.

- Boards may play a key role in establishing performance criteria for probation and promotion. Board members may have active involvement in senior academic appointments and promotions.

Communication within the Institution:

- Boards should bring a whole of institution perspective on academic matters and through effective communication, they should maximise efficiency and quality and remove unnecessary duplication. Boards should promulgate essential academic information, and ensure wide input into academic governance, thus assuring a clearer institutional focus. The Board has a key role in identifying and promoting academic priorities for the institution.
- Boards should develop high level strategies and mechanisms for communication including: policy dissemination; transparency and accountability of process; agendas and discussions; actions taken; people involved; predictable milestones and reporting.
- Key communication strategies of the Board can be usefully classified as *vertical* — between the Council, Board and academic community, and *horizontal* — between the Board, Faculties, Schools, other academic units and support units. The former initiates actions both to inform the Council and Vice-Chancellor and to respond to their questions. The latter is crucial in ensuring that the academic community has extensive input into strategy and policy development and other Board matters; and communication with student groups; and in providing a forum for discussion of external issues to inform decision makers in the university community. The Chair of the Board plays a key role in both the vertical and the horizontal communications. The Board should also be represented on the various committees of Council.
- In addition to, or in place of, promulgating agendas and minutes of meetings, the Board should have in place some or all of the following strategies to ensure transparent communication: regular reports; summaries of agendas; minutes etc; an internal bulletin notifying issues for debate and resolutions of the Academic Board; a functional website; a guide to academic policies (academic manual or website).
- The Board should hold professional meetings, where the processes are transparent, ethical and moral; the discussion participatory and robust; the debate vigorous; and the communication designed to have strategic impact both within and outside the university. Board members should have the possibility to question the Vice-Chancellor and senior management on matters of importance.
- There should be a clear definition of the role of elected members of the Board and how they should communicate with their electorates on behalf of the Board.
- The Board should ensure that its committee structure supports communication within the institution and should play a key role in coordination and oversight of its committees. Appropriate cross membership of committees is vital to ensure communication.
- The staff induction process should create awareness of the Board's role within the university.

Relationships with External Stakeholders:

- The relationship of the Board to the wider community is necessarily less direct, as the Chair cannot speak on behalf of the university in the same way as can the Chancellor or the Vice-Chancellor (unless the Chair is the Vice-Chancellor). Nevertheless, it is important for Boards to be engaged with community issues so that they can participate in their timely identification and provide strategic analysis and advice to the university community. Consequently, many Boards are active in discussing and providing comment on contemporary issues in policy, political and public contexts for higher education. They can provide informed commentary on Government policy.

- Boards should have oversight of policies that regulate academic relations with stakeholders such as professional training placement policies; credit transfer and articulation arrangements; schools programs; open foundation programs. Boards should have appropriate structures and quality assurance processes for this type of community engagement.
- Most Boards have involvement with the secondary sector via recruiting. Board Chairs may provide formal advice to external bodies such as Boards of Studies on the Higher School Certificate.
- Boards may determine forms and conditions of awards, scholarships and prizes.
- Boards may be engaged with the graduate community via alumni associations or Board membership of alumni representatives.
- Boards provide substantial input for audits by the Australian Universities Quality Agency.
- Boards usually play an important role in monitoring their universities' equity and diversity policies, and in reporting on the outcomes of their equity and diversity policies.
- Under the new National Strategic Priorities legislation, Boards will need to consult internally and externally regarding introduction and deletion of programs/courses.

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