Guidance Note: *Academic Governance*

Version 2.3 (11 October 2017)

Providers should note that Guidance Notes are intended to provide guidance only. They are not definitive or binding documents. Nor are they prescriptive. The definitive instruments for regulatory purposes remain the TEQSA Act and the Higher Education Standards Framework as amended from time to time.

What is academic governance?

Academic governance is the framework of policies, structures, relationships, systems and processes that collectively provide leadership to and oversight of a higher education provider's academic activities (teaching, learning and scholarship, and research and research training if applicable) at an institutional level. The collective oversight of the academic community is usually exercised through a single body (e.g. an academic board, with or without sub-committees) and/or a variety of other structures (e.g. faculty boards, teaching and learning committees or course advisory committees)[1].

Traditional functions of academic governance include rigorous scrutiny and peer review of academic activities, carried out independently and separately from the staff who are directly involved in those activities. They also include the provision of academically-informed advice to assist corporate decision making and monitoring, e.g. for institutional approval of a course of study or analyses of the progress of student cohorts. The nature of academic governance presupposes that it will incorporate academic expertise and experience sufficient to provide leadership, judgement and scrutiny at the level of academic activity concerned.

A degree of separation between corporate governance and academic governance has been a long-standing tradition of academic governance, at least in universities. Irrespective of the structural arrangements for academic governance in a particular provider and the extent of separation of functions, there is some interdependency between these functions and executive management. Maintenance of some links between academic and corporate governance is necessary to address this interdependence, to achieve coherency of governance overall and to meet the requirements of the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (HES Framework). Notwithstanding these links, the need for competent independent academic governance remains a critical feature of the governance arrangements, and the roles of management and academic governance need to be defined and distinct.

The standing of a provider's academic governance practices is seen by many as key to maintaining and sustaining a provider's educational reputation. Prominent among the practices of the provider that are reflected in its reputation are the academic benchmarks

[1] Note that the HES Framework does not specify any particular form or structure for academic governance (e.g. by specifying an academic board); rather the focus is on the outcomes of academic governance irrespective of the structures and processes adopted by a provider.

('academic standards') that are set and monitored by the provider through its academic governance processes.

Relevant Standards in the HES Framework

The principal Standards in the HES Framework that are concerned with academic governance are in Part A, Section 6.3. These link directly to the Standards for corporate governance (Sections 6.1-6.2) through reporting arrangements to the governing body, the provision of academic advice to the governing body and in supporting the overall institutional accountability processes for quality assurance of higher education. The Standards for academic governance draw on the outcomes of institutional quality assurance systems (Sections 5.1-5.4) to deal with academic monitoring at a more overarching level. There are also links to Section 7.2 and Standard 7.3.3 relating to information dissemination and management. Academic governance links to and embraces the Standards for research and research training (Sections 4.1-4.2), if applicable to the provider. Academic governance arrangements may also consider issues dealt with in a number of other standards, including those relating to:

- facilities and infrastructure
- diversity and equity
- wellbeing and safety
- staffing (especially staff qualifications), and
- learning resources and educational support.

The effectiveness of a provider's capability of academic governance also has a direct bearing on applications to TEQSA for self-accrediting authority (Part B2 – Criteria for Seeking Authority for Self-Accreditation of Courses of Study) and for course accreditation.

Intent of the Standards

The overall intent of the Standards (as reflected in 6.3.1) is to establish a system of academic governance that will provide competent academic oversight and monitoring of all academic activities at the institutional level. This overarching arrangement encompasses but extends beyond local monitoring of an individual course or unit of study, e.g. by subject coordinators, up to the institutional level. The system will include:

- approving and (in the cases of providers with self-accrediting authority) accrediting courses
- setting (or providing advice on setting) the provider's institutional academic benchmarks (colloquially known as 'academic standards', such as success rates, required staff qualifications, etc.)
- developing and reviewing the academic policies that guide all academic activities
- providing competent institutional academic leadership
- offering academic advice to corporate decision making, and
- allowing for student participation in academic governance (6.3.3).

Standard 6.3.2 adds largely self-explanatory elaboration to the scope of 'academic oversight'. This Standard also draws in part, at a more overarching level, on the Standards for institutional quality assurance (Domain 5). All in all, the academic governance system is central to a provider's capacity to assure itself that its higher education operations are functioning well and as intended. Some of that assurance will arise directly from the

academic governance system itself (e.g. reports and analyses of student success) while other aspects of academic governance may have a more distributed impact, e.g. through the institutional policy frameworks that guide individual academic activities. An institution may strengthen its setting of internal 'standards' through external referencing such as peer review and benchmarking.

Risks to Quality

The concern of the academic governance Standards, and of TEQSA, is that a provider's higher education activities are reputable, of high quality, comply with institutional policy requirements, deliver expected outcomes for students and that all qualifications awarded are credible for the level of qualification involved. An effective and robust system of academic governance is an essential component of every higher education provider's overarching governance structures and processes. The system provides the framework for establishing, monitoring and sustaining quality and integrity in higher education provision, and ensuring quality learning experiences and outcomes for students.

In the absence of a competent system of academic governance it is difficult or impossible for a provider to assure itself of the quality of its educational activities and to provide institutional academic leadership (e.g. through setting benchmarks, policy frameworks, scrutinising and approving courses of study, ensuring the meaningfulness of academic grades, determining admission requirements). This will inevitably lead to poor outcomes for students and consequent damage to the reputation of higher education.

An inadequate policy framework also leads to unclear expectations and requirements for both staff and students with predictable consequences, such as inconsistencies in student experiences and drifting quality of processes and outcomes that should be consistent, such as the credibility of qualifications awarded. Inappropriate corporate decision making may result from insufficient or incompetent academic advice or a lack of awareness of academic issues (e.g. if the governing body makes academic decisions without sufficient academic input), with attendant risks to students and corporate/reputational risks. Insufficient vigilance and monitoring of academic and research integrity will inevitably lead to some lapses, with likely reputational fall out for the provider and/or the Australian higher education sector. The academic governance system also provides a locus of ownership for reviews of:

- courses
- institutional benchmarks
- academic achievement, and
- quality assurance arrangements.

These reviews may otherwise be fragmentary and lack the ownership necessary to advance improvement actions arising from reviews.

What TEQSA will look for

This part of the guidance note covers the full extent of the Standards, and corresponding evidence that TEQSA may require, in relation to academic governance.

For new applicants seeking initial registration and course accreditation, TEQSA will require evidence to be provided in relation to all relevant Standards.

For existing providers, the scope of Standards to be assessed and the evidence required may vary. This is consistent with the regulatory principles in the TEQSA Act, under which TEQSA has discretion to vary the scope of its assessments and the related evidence required. In exercising this discretion, TEQSA will be guided by the provider's regulatory history, its risk profile and its track record in delivering high quality higher education.

TEQSA's case managers will discuss with providers the scope of assessments and evidence required well ahead of the due date for submitting an application.

The evidence required for particular types of application is available from the Application Guides on the TEQSA website.

Providers are required to comply with the Standards at all times, not just at the time of application, and TEQSA may seek evidence of compliance at other times if a risk of non-compliance is identified.

TEQSA needs to see the arrangements for academic governance in sufficient detail to form a view on whether the academic governance mechanisms appear capable of credibly fulfilling the requirements of the HES Framework at an institutional level. TEQSA will look for evidence of relevant and sufficient collective academic capability to provide effective leadership and competent scrutiny and advice (see Standard 6.3.1). TEQSA will also consider whether the arrangements are consistent with the scope and scale of the provider's operations and the level of academic activity involved (e.g. bachelor degree level versus higher degree by research). TEQSA will want to see the internal academic benchmarks ('academic standards') adopted by a provider, its analysis of how it is tracking against those benchmarks (6.3.1b, 6.3.2e), knowledge of trends, and any improvements achieved.

TEQSA needs to be satisfied that the provider's mechanisms for course approval provide rigorous scrutiny of proposed courses by credible and experienced observers, that the findings of such scrutiny are considered thoroughly, and that the oversight mechanisms are sufficiently independent of those who are involved in delivery of the courses of study. All courses must undergo periodic review, and those charged with academic governance responsibility must exercise oversight of the outcomes of the review cycle, particularly in so far as they bear on the continuing accreditation of a course.

Depending on the scale of the provider and the availability of internal expertise, this may require the use of external experts, e.g. for peer review and practitioner/professional input. The Standards do not require providers to appoint external members to academic approval bodies, however small providers with limited internal academic resources may need this.

The HES Framework expects institutional monitoring and review to be a prominent feature of academic governance in support of a culture of continuous improvement. TEQSA may wish to see a schedule of policy reviews and the improvements achieved (6.3.2a). Evidence of follow up on the findings of past reviews is also important in the case of providers that are already registered. TEQSA will:

- assess any delegations of academic governance authority (6.3.2b, see also 6.2.1f) and require evidence that these are being observed (e.g. in a course approval process)

- consider examples of the provider's course approval process (especially though outputs such as course proposals or course review reports, and evidence of how these were scrutinised) that illustrate its consistency and effectiveness (6.3.2c)[2]
- review records of monitoring and risk analyses in relation to academic integrity (6.3.2d) and
- want to see evidence of scrutiny of proposed innovations (6.3.2f).

TEQSA may also assess the provider's own evaluations of the effectiveness of academic governance and monitoring systems (6.3.2g) and examples of reports to the governing body that demonstrate effective monitoring of higher education activities (6.3.2h). Where and how students have an opportunity to participate in academic governance will need to be demonstrated (6.3.3). A provider's evidence can be strengthened through reports of external referencing that is undertaken to compare and verify internal directions and settings, e.g. through credible peer review processes and/or relevant external benchmarking exercises.

In considering the links between academic and corporate governance, TEQSA will expect the provider to demonstrate that the governance system enables the corporate governing body to arrive at an informed and reliable view of the quality and outcomes of the provider's higher education activities and the adequacy of its academic governance and other academic quality assurance systems, including the effectiveness of the academic policy framework.

Subject to the particular types of structures and processes adopted by a provider, TEQSA may draw on agendas, records and actions arising from various bodies in assessing the scope and effectiveness of a provider's academic governance. This will include reports to and delegations from the corporate governing body and independent reviews of the effectiveness of the academic governance processes that are required of the governing body (see 6.1.3d).

Scope of assessments

If, as a result of looking in detail at the provider's academic governance activities and systems, TEQSA is satisfied that the arrangements for academic governance meet the requirements of the HES Framework and that there is evidence of continuing sustainability and effectiveness, this may allow TEQSA to reduce its evidence requirements for other Standards and/or for subsequent regulatory activities. On the other hand, if concerns are raised in relation to the provider's capabilities in academic governance, this may require TEQSA to probe other areas of the provider's operations in more detail where the provider is not already doing so effectively as part of its own internal monitoring.

[2] For providers without self-accrediting authority, examples may be drawn from course accreditation applications.

Resources and references

Australian Universities Quality Agency (2010), *Academic governance and quality assurance: good practice for NSAIs*, AUQA Occasional Publication.

Baker, A., Hougaz, L., and Wickert, R. (2013), *Towards maturity: Academic governance in the non-university higher education sector*, ACPET Journal for Private Higher Education, Volume 2, Issue 2.

Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates (2013), *The Purpose and Function of Academic Boards and Senates in Australian Universities*, <www.une.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/72935/PurposeandFunctionofAcademicBoards.pdf>.

Chairs of Academic Boards Forum website, <https://cabfnuhep.wixsite.com/cabf>.

Group of Eight (July 2014), *Policy Note: Courses and Quality Assurance in Australian Higher Education*, <https://www.go8.edu.au/publications/policy-papers >.

Quality Assurance Agency (2014), *UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards*, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Quality-Code-Part-A.pdf>.

TEQSA (2016), *Explanations of terms in Part A of the HES Framework 2015*, <http://www.teqsa.gov.au/explanations-hes-framework-terms>.

Wormell, P., and McCallum P. (November 2013), National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates, *The Purpose and Function of Academic Boards and Senates in Australian Universities*, <http://www.uws.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/710475/Purpose_and_Function_of_Academic_Boards_-_Final_-_March_2014.pdf>.

TEQSA welcomes the diversity of educational delivery across the sector and acknowledges that its Guidance Notes may not encompass all of the circumstances seen in the sector. TEQSA also recognises that the requirements of the HESF can be met in different ways according to the circumstances of the provider. Provided the requirements of the HESF are met, TEQSA will not prescribe how they are met. If in doubt, please consult your TEQSA case manager.

Version #	Date	Key changes
1.0	18 September 2014	
2.0	13 April 2016	Updated for the HESF 2015 and made available as beta version for consultation.
2.1	19 August 2016	Incorporated feedback from consultation, including elaboration on academic approval body membership and periodic course review.
2.2	28 September 2017	Inclusion of Chairs of Academic Boards Forum website to resources.
2.3	11 October 2017	Minor amendment to ‘what will TEQSA look for?” text box.