



Guidance Note: *Academic Leadership*

Beta version 1.0 (18 June 2019)

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 leadership?

Academic leadership is central to the educational purpose of higher education providers and, as discussed later in this Note, its importance is reflected in its prominence throughout the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (HES Framework). TEQSA sees 'academic leadership' in higher education providers as a subset of the overall institutional or corporate leadership of the provider, differentiated mainly by its focus on 'academic matters' in particular. For the purposes of this Note, 'academic matters' include teaching, learning, research, scholarship and related matters.

For regulatory purposes, TEQSA sees academic leadership as a complex system of interrelated and interdependent elements that, together, support leadership of academic matters. Before considering the elements of successful academic leadership, it is helpful to consider its intended outcomes.

TEQSA identifies the following (non-exhaustive) list of important potential outcomes arising from successful academic leadership:

- agreed institutional directions on academic matters within a provider (e.g. policy frameworks, institutional academic benchmarks such as desired grade standards, admission criteria)
- established continuity of academic cultures and values within the provider (e.g. commitments to scholarship, academic freedom and improvement)
- consistent adherence to agreed academic directions and policies (e.g. acceptance of institutional academic directions and consistency in application of policies)
- positive student learning experiences and quality academic outcomes
- academic influence and innovation through dissemination of ideas about higher education, whether within a provider, across the sector or more generally (e.g. in the literature)



- intended academic positioning of the provider in its sector (e.g. at the forefront of distance learning, an overt commitment to professional education, specialisation in innovative technology or creativity)¹.

¹ This outcome is a potential corollary of successful academic leadership that looks outside of the provider. It is included here for completeness. It is not generally of regulatory significance, unless a provider's claims are inaccurate or misleading (see HES Framework at Part A 7.2.1).



The elements of the academic leadership system that assist in realising such outcomes include:

- organisational leadership structures (e.g. as shown on an organisational chart)
- defined leadership roles and accountabilities (e.g. as set out in board leadership charters such as an academic board, individual position descriptions for leadership roles [such as Deans, for example] and academic staffing policies)
- particular enabling organisational functions and processes (e.g. academic planning, academic quality assurance, policy development processes)
- periodic reflection and thought leadership by academic leaders and leadership groups about academic directions
- leadership within academic disciplines (e.g. in teaching, research, HDR supervision, mentoring, scholarship)
- individual leadership (e.g. through personal academic achievements and related contributions).

In large part, these elements of institutional academic leadership rely on corresponding enabling management functions to bring the direction-setting aspects of leadership to fruition. Some observers find it helpful to conceive of leadership as the ‘what’ that is to be achieved, as distinct from enabling management/executive functions, which can be seen as the ‘how’ of achieving desired outcomes.

In summary, TEQSA sees academic leadership as the system of interdependent elements that together allow a provider to achieve (or at least support) and monitor its intended academic outcomes.

A presupposition of this definition is that providers have a clear view on the intended academic outcomes they are seeking.

Particular features of higher education

Higher education traditionally enshrines several distinct characteristics that may need to be accommodated in various ways by a provider’s model of academic leadership (and are reflected in the HES Framework), as set out below.

Collegiality: Higher education is characterised by a reliance on bringing a diversity of views and perspectives to academic decision making. This is typified, for example, by academic boards, faculty boards, course advisory committees and communities of scholars, which provide mechanisms to bring a diversity of academic opinion to bear on an issue. A reliance on peer review is another way that diverse perspectives are utilised.

Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech: Higher education is also characterised by a great deal of freedom in what individual academics or teams choose to be involved with in their academic pursuits, e.g. through research and scholarship. Such freedom is acknowledged in the HES Framework; the governing body is required to take steps to ensure that academic freedom is upheld and protected (6.1.4). Likewise, the governing body must ensure that freedom of speech is upheld and protected (6.1.4).

Individual Competence and Autonomy: The academic workforce is generally highly qualified (a higher degree is typical) and individuals are typically highly skilled and experienced in their particular field/discipline. As a result, academics are well placed to decide how to deal with their academic endeavours, at least in relation to their discipline (e.g. via their research, scholarship, teaching and professional development). Academics are also likely to identify with communities outside of the provider as strongly as they do within (e.g. as part of a



national or international scholarly community). This too, needs to be considered by a provider's model of academic leadership.

Multiple Leadership Models: Higher education is characterised by a range of different leadership models, as addressed in the HES Framework. There are corporate leadership approaches as may be typified in any organisation via its governing board. However, academic leadership traditionally holds a privileged and significant position in higher education providers. This may lead to tensions between corporate and academic directions and such tensions must be managed. Corporate leadership is typically supported by a model of executive leadership (e.g. a Vice-Chancellor, CEO, Executive Dean or equivalent), which may bring other perspectives to academic leadership initiatives. Because of the expert nature of staff within disciplines, much of what academic staff do may be determined locally or even individually, potentially with varying regard to institutional leadership and executive models. This tendency may be exaggerated according to the extent of research culture within a provider, where individual researchers have considerable standing as experts in their field and may favour a model that emphasises self-determination. A provider will be expected to manage its particular flavour of leadership models. Ideally, a provider will realise a constructive synergy among the various types of leadership, leading to a well-developed and continuing culture of academic integrity, innovation, scholarly activity and creativity within the provider.

Diversity of Leadership Models and Culture: TEQSA recognises that the sector is characterised by a variety of approaches to the delivery of higher education, which may include differences in employment conditions. For example, providers whose staff are employed under the Education Services (Post-Secondary Education) Award 2010 are unable to formally employ staff at Academic Level D (Associate Professor) and above. This potentially affects the notion and categorisation of 'senior' staff roles across different types of providers.

Relevant Standards in the HES Framework

The processes/outcomes of academic leadership permeate most aspects and levels of the HES Framework. Some Standards address academic leadership directly (e.g. academic governance), while others imply underpinning academic leadership, such as through institutional academic policy development and consistent implementation of those policies.

All aspects of Student Participation and Attainment (1.0) are subject to academic policies derived from academic leadership, including Admissions (1.1), Credit and Recognition of Prior Learning (1.2), Orientation and Progression (1.3), Learning Outcomes and Assessment (1.4) and the issuance of credible Qualifications and Certification (1.5). Similarly, academic leadership is fundamental to all aspects of Teaching (3.0) through the design of courses (3.1), academic staffing [both collective and individual] (3.2), and provision of learning resources and educational support (3.3). The standards for staffing make particular reference to academic leadership; requiring the academic staff in each course of study to have 'the level and extent of academic oversight and teaching capacity needed to lead students in intellectual inquiry suited to the nature and level of expected learning outcomes' (3.2.2). Academic leadership is also crucial to research training (4.0), both at an individual level and through research policies, including creation of an appropriate learning environment for research training (4.2.2).

At the institutional level, academic leadership is pivotal to the design and development of effective quality assurance systems (5.0) encompassing course approvals (5.1), academic integrity (5.2), monitoring and improvement (5.3) and relationships with other parties (5.4). Peak direction and oversight of academic leadership is enshrined in the requirements for



academic governance (6.3) including, in particular, setting institutional benchmarks for academic quality and outcomes (6.3.1b) and establishing and maintaining academic leadership at an institutional level (6.3.1c). The corporate governing body has critical roles in academic leadership, including taking academic advice to inform its corporate decisions (6.1.3a), creating and protecting a culture of freedom of intellectual inquiry (6.1.4), setting educational directions (6.2.1b) and ensuring that mechanisms for competent academic governance and leadership have been implemented and are effective in maintaining the quality of the education that is offered (6.2.1f).

Intent of the Standards

The general intent of the Standards related to academic leadership is to ensure that higher education providers have all of the elements of an academic leadership system in place and that this leadership system will, collectively and in concert, be effective in achieving the provider's intended academic outcomes; whether at an institutional level, in individual academic disciplines and in the quality of student experiences, and educational outcomes for graduates. The monitoring, reporting and quality assurance elements of the Standards provide the means for providers to determine, at an institutional level, whether their chosen academic leadership system is indeed effective.

Because of the central role of academic leadership in a higher education provider, most structures, roles and individuals are likely to be involved in some way, whether in setting directions and/or in delivering outcomes. The Standards of the HES Framework are largely outcome focused and tend, with some notable exceptions (such as the attributes of teaching staff), to focus on the outcomes of academic leadership, rather than the behaviour of 'leaders' who perform leadership roles.

Typical expectations of leadership roles include strategic thinking, 'standard setting', team building, innovation, reflection, policy leadership, peer review, consensus, mentoring and leadership of scholarly activities such as research, disciplinary scholarship, the scholarship of teaching and learning and professional development. Leadership behaviours include leadership by example and guidance and direction (e.g. academic supervision), especially within academic units such as schools or departments.

Risks to quality

Given the pervasive and critical nature of academic leadership in higher education, failures in the leadership system may have far reaching effects on the quality of education. Because of the importance of academic leadership to a provider's success, TEQSA has included the concept of academic governance/leadership as one of the indicators in its Risk Framework, which is subject to annual risk assessments. TEQSA has found that effective academic leadership in each of a provider's fields of education (and disciplines within fields) to be one of the critical factors that determines whether a provider or prospective provider is able to maintain compliance with the HES Framework relating to academic quality. The Standards relating to academic governance and academic leadership are commonly referenced by TEQSA in adverse registration and accreditation decisions².

Effective academic leaders will be experienced in a wide range of academic issues, bringing their expertise and judgement to such matters as academic policy development and review, as well as being leaders in their disciplines. Without this leadership, there are major risks to

² See TEQSA Assessment Insights September 2018



effective academic governance and academic standards that could result in decisions made having an adverse effect on the quality of education and on student experiences. As noted in the TEQSA Guidance Note on Academic Governance, academic leadership is important for setting academic benchmarks, developing policy frameworks, scrutinising and approving courses of study, ensuring the meaningfulness of academic grades, and determining admission requirements. An absence of academic leadership places all these at risk, with potentially serious implications for the institution and its students

There is a significant risk that, without effective academic leadership across all levels, there will be an inadequate policy framework, resulting in unclear expectations for staff and students; that high level decisions may be made without taking account of the impact on the quality of the courses being offered; that issues of equity and maintenance of standards are not addressed; and that engagement in scholarship by staff and students will either not develop or decline. A further and major risk from this will be the negative impact on learning outcomes for students.

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 leadership.

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 will expect a provider to be able to demonstrate an effective³ academic leadership system. The provider will need to show that the system operates effectively in providing senior academic leadership within the fields of education taught, as well as in research and research training, if applicable. The provider will also need to demonstrate that overarching leadership mechanisms are in place at the institutional level (corporate governance, academic governance and quality assurance) to provide academic oversight and monitoring at that level, as required under the HES Framework.

TEQSA will also look closely at the membership of corporate and academic governing bodies to determine whether they include competent academic leaders, including external appointments, who are able to contribute to the overall leadership of the institution above the level of individual disciplines. TEQSA will need to be satisfied that the leadership structures

³ Achieving the types of outcomes listed earlier in this Note, referenced against the relevant Standards of the HES Framework.



and roles that support academic leadership are accompanied by a comprehensive academic policy framework that addresses the academic matters encompassed by the HES Framework and codifies academic effectiveness. TEQSA will also want to see that policy frameworks and other leadership systems, such as the roles of key academic decision-making bodies, are subject to regular monitoring and review.

At the course level, TEQSA will need to see that academic leadership underpins judgments about the courses and curricula to be offered; the development of those courses and curricula; the students to be admitted to the courses; academic staff to be employed; the deployment of these staff to best effect; the development of learning resources and systems; the appropriate academic policy framework and its implementation; student assessment; the leading, supervision and development of staff; the monitoring and improvement of the quality of courses; how stakeholders will be assured of academic standards; and the development of an environment of scholarship and (where applicable) research.

TEQSA will look to see that nominated academic leaders, whether in disciplinary or institutional leadership roles, are experienced academics who are recognised leaders in their fields of study (e.g. through publications, research and scholarship) and, where they hold institutional roles, bring to the provider a breadth of academic leadership experience at a level that can function across disciplines (e.g. as demonstrated in previous overarching appointments such as academic leadership at faculty, school or institutional level) and cover the range of academic leadership activities encompassed by the HES Framework at institutional level. At least one senior academic leader (at least associate professor or equivalent) must be in place for each field of education taught (and for disciplines within that field as well, if the disciplines are recognised as non-cognate). TEQSA's observations of leadership at a disciplinary level will be informed by its annual risk analyses, particularly of academic governance/leadership. This will be informed by the likely continuity of disciplinary leadership arrangements.

TEQSA will also look for evidence that academic decisions are informed by external academic leadership (e.g. external appointees to boards, external appointees to course advisory committees) and that academic decisions are subject to effective academic scrutiny. TEQSA will need to be satisfied in particular that the requirements for academic leadership in staffing arrangements are appropriate for the level of study being undertaken (Staffing 3.2.1 – 3.2.4). TEQSA accepts that some aspects of academic leadership may be 'outsourced' through, for example, advisory boards or the like, and welcomes such external input in accord with the HES Framework, particularly where such mechanisms can demonstrate continuity of academic leadership.

TEQSA acknowledges that there are a variety of business models operating in the sector, along with considerable variation in the scale of providers and the nature of their particular missions. TEQSA welcomes models of academic leadership that meet the requirements of the HES Framework in different ways according to the circumstances of individual providers, provided the chosen model achieves strength and continuity of leadership consistent with the requirements of the HES Framework. TEQSA will not accept that leadership as a whole can be outsourced, either institutionally or within disciplines. A sustainable and effective core of academic leadership within the provider is regarded as essential and will need to be evident to TEQSA.

For applicants seeking initial registration, TEQSA accepts that all elements of a leadership system may not yet be in place. However, TEQSA will need to see that all elements of an effective academic leadership system have been addressed in planning. Where leadership appointments have not yet been made, TEQSA will need sufficient detail on the elements of the system, the position descriptions for leadership roles (e.g. discipline leaders) and outlines of leadership structures (e.g. charter and membership categories an academic board or equivalent) to evaluate the likely effectiveness of academic leadership. Where academic leadership has been required at the time of an application (such as in presenting a



course design or planning the academic leadership system), TEQSA will expect to see that such matters have been overseen and scrutinised by senior-level academics with extensive experience of both academic leadership and the disciplines involved. These academics may be part of a temporary arrangement (e.g. an interim course advisory committee) or the inaugural staffing arrangement of the proposed provider, or a mix of both.

As noted earlier in this document, TEQSA does not seek to prescribe in detail how a particular provider might go about setting up its academic leadership mechanisms, but TEQSA will wish to see that the outcomes and processes that are required by the HES Framework, at various levels of the organisation, are met in any chosen arrangements. In reviewing the effectiveness of academic leadership, TEQSA may draw on the observed outcomes of academic leadership through feedback from staff and students, together with the outcomes and responses to periodic organisational reviews.

Resources and references

Higher Education Private Providers Quality Network (HEPP-QN) (2019), *Higher Education Private Provider Quality Network (HEPP-QN) Academic Leadership Statement*, <https://research.avondale.edu.au/admin_conferences/16/>.

Scott, G., Coates, H., & Anderson, M. (2008), *Learning leaders in times of change: Academic Leadership Capabilities for Australian Higher Education*, <http://research.acer.edu.au/higher_education/3>.

Southwell, D., and Morgan, W. (2009), *Leadership and the impact of academic staff development and leadership development on student learning outcomes in higher education: A review of the literature*, <http://www.academia.edu/602074/Leadership_and_the_impact_of_academic_staff_development_and_leadership_development_on_student_learning_outcomes_in_higher_education_A_review_of_the>.

Risk Assessment Framework (Version 2.3) *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency* <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/risk-assessment-framework>
Assessment Insights (12th September 2018) Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/assessment-insights>

Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers (2019) www.education.gov.au/review-university-freedom-speech

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 June 2019 | Made available as beta version for consultation. |