

Creating the foundations of a high functioning national system

The Missing Link: Academic Boards

Within the broader context of Australia's higher education system, Academic Boards claim a distinct and pivotal role. The governance and operations of universities are defined and regulated by various state-based legislative acts and while the specifics can vary from one state or territory to another, a common feature is the establishment and positioning of Academic Boards. The autonomy of universities, their power to independently determine educational content and pedagogy is a vital aspect of the Australian higher education sector. Academic Boards stand sentinel to the quality assurance of this autonomy. They offer invaluable expertise, support, and critical oversight, serving as an essential pillar for the institution's governance.

Creating the Foundations of a High-Functioning National System & Strengthening Institutional Governance

The foundation of any successful higher education system lies in its ability to establish strong institutional governance. The Accord places emphasis on this, suggesting a transparent, strategic delivery process underpinned by unwavering commitment to staff and student well-being and experience. However, a notable omission from the Accord's text is the explicit mention of Academic Boards.

Expertise in University Councils

While the Accord highlights the significance of University Councils in shaping institutional cultures and the importance of expertise in teaching and research within these councils, it does not touch upon the role of Academic Boards. Academic Boards are guardians of academic quality assurance and play a pivotal role in ensuring that universities maintain their educational integrity. Their omission from the Accord creates a gap in the governance framework, as these boards serve as essential links between academic staff, students, and the executive leadership of universities. At many Australian Institutions, the Chair of the Academic Board is a member of the University council, providing critical academic perspectives, which the Accord acknowledges need further strengthening. The Academic Board's importance is further recognised by TEQSA as a fundamental mechanism for quality assurance.

Enhanced Role of Students & The Role Academic Boards Play

The Accord rightfully recognises students as more than passive recipients of education. It promotes the idea of students as integral stakeholders and champions their active participation in decision-making processes. However, it is Academic Boards that often provide the framework where student voices are formally heard, as both partners in decision making and where their concerns addressed. Ignoring the role of Academic Boards may mean overlooking an already established avenue for student involvement and feedback.

Immediate Actions & The Potential Role of Academic Boards

The immediate actions proposed by the Accord—such as improving university governance, championing universities as stellar employers, emphasising student and staff safety, and revising the membership of governing bodies are supported. But without incorporating the insights and expertise of Academic Boards, these actions might lack depth. Given their central role in academic governance, these boards, and harnessing of their collective expertise could play an integral role in a new national governance system, enabling a dynamic development with the governance space of the University sector.

Getting the Balance of Skills Right & The Interplay with Academic Boards

The Accord underscores the need for an intertwined relationship between academia and industry to ensure curriculum relevance. It emphasises industry engagement, recognition of professional bodies, and the influence of emerging technologies. Yet, it is Academic Boards that often oversee curriculum design, ensuring its alignment with industry requirements while upholding academic standards. Their absence from the Accord's narrative is a missed opportunity to seamlessly bridge the gap between academia and industry.

Preserving Universities' Transformative Role

While co-creation of curricula with industry partners brings value, it should not dim the broader and critical role of Universities, guided by their Academic Boards, to enlighten, challenge norms, and shape a sustainable future. Universities are agents of education, knowledge production and societal change. They foster innovative thinking, drive transformative research, and promote strategic education – their impact transcending any single industry or profession. As pluralistic institutions, universities hold vast knowledge reservoirs and facilitate societal debates for long-term planning, unhindered by the pressure for immediate returns. As outlined by the UNESCO Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda ¹, their prestige and trustworthiness enable them to propose robust solutions that promote sustainability. Furthermore, they have a responsibility to not only provide students with the skills they need for existing job opportunities but also to prepare them for emerging roles of the future. Academic Boards serve a crucial role here, offering their expertise and often playing a key consultative role, facilitating discussion between the executive and academia, students, and the wider society.

This submission seeks to underscore the pivotal role of Academic Boards in Australia's higher education sector, advocating for their integral place within institutional governance. The omission of Academic Boards in the Accord's text is highlighted as a significant oversight, given their crucial role in maintaining academic quality and facilitating dialogue across the academic community. The submission asserts that recognising and integrating Academic Boards is vital for fostering a robust, transformative national education system.

1. ¹ Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability. Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda, 2022 UNESCO.