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Five Dysfunctions of Academic Governance and What to Do About Them

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Raising the topic of "academic governance" can provoke the sort of giggles induced by "military intelligence" or "bureaucratic initiative". Academics are notoriously bad at running things, just as the military mind tends to deal poorly with ambiguity, and bureaucrats are seldom noted for their initiative.

But the concept of academic governance is what we are talking about here, not academics running things, even running universities. Theses days the executive leadership runs the university, overseen by a Board of Directors or Senate. Academic governance complements their work, keeping the university on mission, protecting its culture, guarding academic standards, and keeping academics engaged with their institution. It is a different type of governance. According to TEQSA, Australia's higher education regulator "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". More succinctly Don Markwell writes that good academic governance means a "resolute focus on academic quality assurance". Many of the recent problems in our universities have been attributed to weak academic governance. And some spectacular university leadership disasters of recent times have had lack of understanding of academic governance is one of their key elements. (I'm using university here as shorthand for higher education institutions - my own institution Alphacrucis is a new University College on a path to accreditation as an Australian university).

Academic governance has been an important element of the historic competitive advantage that universities have held over other knowledge organisations. Universities have survived for over a thousand years and continue to attract many of the best and brightest as staff and students. Understanding what makes good and bad academic governance can be useful beyond universities - and some of the lessons transferable to other sorts of knowledge organisations. Arts organisations face similar challenges of keeping the organisation on mission, its culture healthy, and its creatives engaged. So do many other not-for-profit social

organisation. So too does the innovative IT startup organisation. So too an economic consulting firm run by non-economists. In these sorts of organisation where mission drift and employee engagement are major challenges something like academic governance can helpfully complement boards of directors which are often dominated by those with law and finance backgrounds.

Academic governance is subtly different from other sorts of governance and much neglected in the governance literature. Directors of an organisation have clear legal obligations and much has rightly been written about these. Understanding of these obligations has been rising in the director community, partly because of organisations like the AICD. By contrast the legal obligations and moral responsibilities of members of university academic boards are diffuse, some coming from the State Acts of Parliament under which most Australian universities are established, and some coming from the regulator TEQSA. University policy documents typically set out how members are appointed or elected, to whom the board reports, and other operational matters but they seldom set out principles to guide academic governance or responsibilities of members. In my experience even these limited number of concrete responsibilities are poorly understood by members of academic boards, let alone the overarching principles of good academic governance.

The work of academic governance is also hard. Mission, culture, and academic quality that academic governance guards are harder to measure than financial performance which is central to other types of governance. Measures of these have been constructed, but they remain partial and imperfect. Measures also tend to be lagged – picking up the effects of long past actions. This means that those involved in academic governance need to rely on personal observation and exercise professional judgement more than in other types of governance.

Some of the most important and transferable academic governance lessons can be summarised in five typical dysfunctions of university academic boards

1) **Composition.** Who sits on the academic board? Who chairs it? A desire for the board to be inclusive often means so many members that it is hard for the board to function well, even with a skilled chair. Another failing is appointment and election that processes don't deliver and appropriately diverse group of the most experienced and respected academics to the board. Of course these people may not want to be part

of the board - they are usually busy people who may see a dysfunctional board is a waste of time - a real red flag for university. A healthy board will include some of the university's executive leadership, some elected members and external members, and representatives of undergraduate, postgraduate coursework and research students. However, even when we have the right people on the board the wrong chair can compromise its operation. It should not be senior executives. Nor should it be someone who is too keen to use chairing the board as a steppingstone to executive leadership in the institution - they may be too beholden either in reality or appearance to the executive leadership. Ideally the chair should be an academic with governance experience, a person of integrity who is respected by their peers, with a constructive relationship with the executive leadership, and a good communicator. There are times when this role is best filled by an experienced academic leader from outside the institution.

2) **Agenda**. The role of the academic board is to guard standards and academic culture. One of the most common dysfunctions of university academic boards is an agenda packed with motions to approve various new and amended courses and programs, each with a voluminous documentation, leaving no time for considering weightier matters and larger risks to standards and culture. In dysfunctional boards the actions that generate the largest risks to standards and culture never make it to the agenda of the academic board. In recent Australian university experience this has been the case with admission standards, academic programs of commercial entities, and offshore programs. In some cases appropriate policies were in place but the board lacked the information and resources to check that they have been followed. Any policy that has academic quality and culture implications should be on the academic board's agenda - sometimes it is changes to finance and HR policies that cause more damage to academic standards and culture than changes to explicitly academic policies. Such policies should be the joint property of the executive and the academic board. The agenda of a healthy board should also include regular general reviews of academic standards and culture as well as scrutiny of programs and policies - such reviews pick up risks that slip through other business - perhaps because there is an accumulation of small effects of changes that are below the threshold for the rejection of any particular change by the board.
3) **Academic board as a rubber stamp.** In this type of dysfunctional academic board, which reflects wider dysfunction in the institution, members of the board know that

their job is to approve whatever the executive leadership proposes, and not ask any larger questions about quality and culture. Names and numbers of dissenters are noted by the executive, and their access to information and career prospects suffer. As well as pressure from the top for the board to be a rubber stamp, what Don Markwell describes as a mutual protection racket can evolve - where a subtle understanding evolves among members that my proposed new course will be waved through without scrutiny if yours is waved through. A false collegiality is championed by the racketeers. In such dysfunctional boards real scrutiny of defective proposals (as opposed to polite minor corrections) leads to payback – sometimes in the form of rejection of good proposals from the member who had the temerity to criticise the defective proposal. These sorts of sham academic governance are worse than none at all. How can they be overcome? External members and external reviews of the board can help, but if the problem is intimidation from powerful executive members then it is unlikely to be solved by external members or reviewers chosen by those executive members. The best hope is probably members, with curiosity and integrity, especially student representatives, who are prepared to speak up.

4) **Academic board as the opposition.** In many universities the academic board has become a platform for disgruntled staff and those opposed to the executive, and they make it their business to be as unhelpful and disruptive as they can. Political agendas overwhelm the proper standards and culture role of the board. While participating in such a board is satisfying for certain types of individual, and occasional battles won, these oppositional academic boards rarely win the war with the executive, for the executive in the end has the power. Boards have to engage constructively with the Executive if they are to discharge their responsibilities for academic standards and culture.
5) **Academic disengagement from the board.** Too much of the above dysfunctions quickly lead to an exodus of the best people from the board as well as a growing cynicism among academics about the board. Academics feel that their expertise is disrespected by the Executive and the Board of Directors, and they become less and less cooperative with them. An “us and them mentality” prevails. Sadly this is the case into many Australian universities, and surely there is no better way of re-engaging academic staff with the mission of the institution then to revitalise academic governance.

So, it is important for universities to get academic governance right, and there are lessons beyond the university sector for organisations where employee voice, and culture and standards matter.

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