# Guidance note: Academic governance

*Version 3.0 (7 July 2023)*

> *Providers should note that Guidance Notes are intended to provide guidance only. The definitive instruments for regulatory purposes remain the TEQSA Act and the Higher Education Standards Framework, as amended from time to time.*

# 1.     What is academic governance?

For the purpose of the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* (Threshold Standards), academic governance is a subset of the overall governance of a higher education provider (provider). Academic governance is concerned with the integrity and quality of the core higher education activities of teaching, student learning, research (including research training) and scholarship. It refers to the framework that regulates a provider's academic decisions and quality assurance, incorporating policies, processes, definitions of roles, relationships, specifications of delegations, systems, strategies and resources that ensure academic quality and continuous improvement.[1]

Academic governance that is robust and high functioning is a primary contributor to establishing a reputation as a quality provider through self-assurance of academic and research integrity, and delivering expected outcomes for students. Academic governance is also important to ensure a provider's activities adhere to its institutional policy obligations, and that all qualifications awarded reflect the requirements within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). At many providers, the responsibility of overseeing academic governance, rests with an academic board.

## Academic governance and self-assurance

Academic governance plays a key role in a provider's monitoring and management of academic risk (see guidance note Monitoring, Review and Improvement).

In identifying and responding to academic risk, self-assurance needs to be embedded in the business-as-usual operations of providers. This should have strong oversight by the primary body responsible for academic governance, typically an academic board. This is because effective self-assurance is key to protecting the integrity of a provider's core higher education activities.

For strong self-assurance it is recommended that an academic board (or equivalent entity) hold responsibility for carrying out a cyclical program of self-assurance. This program should enable it to identify and respond to episodic and routine risks.

Further it is recommended that good record-keeping underpin a provider's self-assurance. For regulatory assessments, auditable records arising from self-assurance can be used to

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[1] e.g., For the purposes of this guidance note, academic governance is in context of the requirement placed on registered higher education providers as determined by the TEQSA Act and other Commonwealth law, such as the *Higher Education Standards Framework 2021*, *Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000*, and the *Australian Qualifications Framework*.

demonstrate it is occurring and effective. Such records may include, but are not limited to: relevant evidence collected and reports developed, as well as records of the academic board's (or equivalent's) discussions and decisions.

## Relationship between corporate and academic governance

A degree of separation between corporate governance and academic governance is recommended. The extent of separation and the associated structural arrangements can vary across providers. However, generally the collective oversight of the academic community is exercised through an academic board, sometimes in cooperation with a variety of other structures (e.g., faculty boards, teaching and learning committees or course advisory committees). The academic board will typically share information with the governing body to support its assurance activities.

Irrespective of the unique arrangements of providers, important interdependencies exist between the corporate and academic functions. These should be captured in a provider's governance framework and processes, to ensure coherency and meet the requirements of the Threshold Standards.

# 2.    What TEQSA will look for

The Threshold Standards places requirements on a provider's processes and practices regarding academic governance. These include the following standards and criteria from the Threshold Standards:

| Part A: Standards for higher education providers | Key considerations |
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| 2.3: Wellbeing and Safety | • Academic board oversight of any risk to students, inclusive of matters relating to wellbeing and safety.<br>• Self-assurance of curriculum and assessment design, monitoring student progression, especially for vunerable cohorts. |
| 3.1: Course Design | • Academic governance quality assures and/or approves courses of study that are compliant with the Threshold Standards, AQF and professional association accreditation requirements. |
| 3.2: Staffing | • There is sufficient academic oversight of scholarship and staff qualifications.<br>• Sufficient oversight of casual staff |
| 4.1 and 4.2 (if applicable): Research and Research Training | • Academic governance ensures research and research training are conducted and monitored in accordance with institutional and sector research codes. |
| 5.1 to 5.4: Institutional Quality Assurance | • Systematic monitoring at all levels ensures delivery of  high quality courses, and research and research training (if applicable) at all delivery sites, and across modes and cohorts. |
| 6.1: Corporate Governance | • Academic governance is closely linked to corporate governance. |

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| 6.2: Corporate Monitoring and Accountability | • Policies, systems, processes demonstrate the ability to identify risk, self-assure and continuously improve. |
| 6.3: Academic Governance | • Academic board can evidence its self-assurance and improvement activities are successful.<br>• Corporate governance assures itself of effective and sustainable operations. |
| 7.2 and 7.3: Information for Prospective Students and Current Students and Information Management | • Information management and dissemination ensures all students have access to relevant information on a large variety of topics pertinent to them, such as relevant course information, policies and how they can participate in academic governance. |
| **Part B: Criteria for higher education providers** | **Key considerations** |
| B1.1.2, B1.2.6, B1.3.9 Scholarship | There is requisite support for scholarship, with this informing teaching. |
| B1.3.11: Capacity of academic governance | Sufficient capacity to provide systematic and effective academic governance. |

Academic governance arrangements should also have oversight and monitoring of other standards, including those relating to:

- 2.1 facilities and infrastructure

- 2.2 diversity and equity

- 3.3 learning resources and educational support

- 4.1 research, and

- 4.2 research training.

The effectiveness of a provider's academic governance also has an impact on assessments of applications for changes in provider categories (Part B1 – Criteria for Higher Education Provider Categories) and self-accrediting authority (Part B2 – Criteria for Seeking Authority for Self-Accreditation of Courses of Study), and for course accreditation.

When reviewing academic governance arrangements, TEQSA will determine whether a provider's mechanisms for academic governance meet the requirements of the Threshold Standards. In so doing, TEQSA requires sufficient evidence about the provider's academic governance arrangements and structures to demonstrate effective and systematic quality assurance, with expected student outcomes achieved. This may include evidence that demonstrates:

- there is sufficient academic capability to provide effective leadership and competent scrutiny and advice

- whether the structure of academic governance is consistent with the scope and scale of the provider's operations and the level of academic activity involved (e.g., bachelor's degree level vs. higher degree by research)

- links between academic and corporate governance. TEQSA will expect the provider to demonstrate that its 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

- there are provisions to ensure crucial input to considerations of strategic and operational planning by all relevant boards and committees

- the adequacy of academic governance and other academic quality assurance systems in self-monitoring to ensure effective operation, referencing best practice on factors such as, but not limited to, risk management, effective delegations, continuous improvement plans and monitoring the effectiveness of its academic policy framework

- that students have an opportunity to participate in academic governance

- the level of institutional monitoring and review (Domain 5), which is a key feature of academic governance in support of a culture of continuous improvement (see the Monitoring, Review and Improvement Guidance Note).

# 3.    Identified issues

In the absence of a robust and high functioning system of academic governance, it is difficult for a provider to:

- assure itself and TEQSA of the quality of its educational activities

- provide adequate oversight and support of academic scholarship activities

- provide institutional academic leadership to maintain expected outcomes for students and the reputation of the provider (e.g., through setting benchmarks, policy frameworks, scrutinising and approving courses of study, ensuring the appropriateness of academic grades, determining admission requirements, and adhering to professional accreditation standards)

- have effective monitoring, review, and improvement of course quality, institutional benchmarks, and quality assurance arrangements, resulting in limited or no improvement action

- adhere to an adequate policy framework, resulting in inconsistent expectations of both staff and students regarding academic quality

- ensure equivalency in student outcomes and the student experience

- make appropriate corporate decisions due to insufficient or ineffectual academic advice and/or a lack of awareness of academic issues and risks

- have vigilance and good judgement when monitoring academic and research integrity.

# Related resources

- Guidance Note: Corporate Governance (under review)

- Guidance Note: Academic and Research Integrity (under development)

- Guidance Note: Course Design (under development)

- Guidance Note: Learning Resources and Educational Support (under development)

- Guidance Note: Learning Outcomes and Assessment (under development)

- Guidance Note: Student Grievances and Complaints (under development)

- Guidance Note: Monitoring, Review and Improvement (under development)

- Guidance Note: Research and Research Training

| Version | Date | Key changes |
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| 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. |
| 3.0 | 7 July 2023 | Major revision |