

Preface

Why This Book?

Despite enormous changes within higher education systems globally within the past 30 years or so, the core work of universities remains the teaching of advanced knowledge. For a significant proportion of universities it also involves the generation of new knowledge through research. Although governance of one kind or other is essential to any organisation, the special nature of universities' academic work means that some of the governance processes and practices that have evolved within them are unique. For this reason, it is important to distinguish between corporate and academic governance. While more nuanced definitions will be provided in the following chapters, in simple terms corporate governance involves the steering and oversight of strategic, financial and management directions, while academic governance can involve the oversight of teaching and research and the establishment and protection of quality and standards for their conduct. Amongst other matters, academic governance therefore incorporates decision-making within universities around what programs are taught, to whom, who (or what body) should make decisions about those programs, and how we know those programs are of academic merit and are at an appropriate academic standard (Amaral et al. 2003; Kaplan 2006). The place and role of practising academics and students within academic governance is of central importance.

Universities practice both forms of governance but not always in the same ways. In many but not all universities within Anglophone nations, corporate governance is undertaken by an overarching governing body or council, and academic governance by the academic board (also known as the academic senate or faculty senate). However, these bodies also vary significantly from university to university, and from nation to nation, in terms of roles, membership, responsibilities and reporting relationships. Some of these differences will be discussed throughout the course of this book. It should also be noted that despite the apparently clear-cut nature of these definitions, within contemporary universities worldwide boundaries between decision-making bodies are blurred and contested (Middlehurst 2013).

This is what makes university governance such an interesting area of research and practice.

The existence of an academic board, or equivalent, in the form of a committee structure specifically responsible for academic governance—establishing and overseeing the conduct and quality of academic and research programs, and other related matters—is one of the distinguishing characteristics of universities. Notwithstanding groups responsible for audits of quality management systems, there is generally no equivalent governance structure within manufacturing or service companies, for example, and although many large law firms do have governing boards comprising senior partners, those boards are not generally responsible for ensuring the quality of the legal services so provided (Shattock 2006). This need to both ensure and publicly assure the quality of the academic programs and the teaching and research undertaken within universities has contributed significantly to the development and implementation of their governance processes and practices, in whatever form they take. Academic governance is fundamental to the changing role of universities in an increasingly marketised and deregulated education sector (Simons et al. 2013) and it represents an important window through which broader changes to what universities do and how they work can be seen and understood (Rowlands 2015a). Academic governance therefore plays a key role in not only how universities are governed, led and managed but also in how they can and should be defined. However, university councils and academic boards are far from the only players in university governance. Vice-chancellors, also known as principals, rectors or presidents, and their direct reports, are the sites of executive leadership within contemporary universities and the undisputed locus of power. Although in principle the implementation of leadership and management responsibilities can be separated from the strategic oversight undertaken by governance bodies, in practice these are sites of significant power struggles and much overlap in function (Rowlands 2013).

In recent years a great deal of attention has been given to university governance, with much of the published international literature on academic governance in particular focusing on challenges associated with the functioning of contemporary academic boards or their equivalent (see, for example Birnbaum 1989, 2004; Duderstadt 2004; Marginson and Considine 2000; Shattock 2006; Tierney and Minor 2003). More recent empirical research from the United States of America (US), Canada and Australia has explored what academic boards say they do and how they are structured (see Pennock et al. 2015; Vilkinas and Peters 2014) and what academic decisions are made by whom (Apkarian et al. 2014). However, although this and other literature commonly extols the benefits of academic leaders and university managers working together to implement academic governance (Shattock 2013; Taylor 2013) there can also be a tendency to underplay the impact of power on those relationships and its role in preventing or limiting the extent to which shared governance in its numerous guises can be effectively implemented (Rowlands 2015b). This book responds to this gap by drawing on desktop data from the United Kingdom (UK), the US and Australia on academic board structure and function, detailed case study data on three Australian academic boards collected

between 2010 and 2012, and preliminary findings from case study data on three US academic senates collected in early 2016, to highlight the impact of power relations on academic governance processes, practices and effectiveness and to suggest practical ways of moving forward within the exigencies of contemporary university life. There is a particular focus on academic boards within academic governance processes and practices given the primary role they play; however some attention is also given to other, broader aspects of academic governance. It also acknowledges and discusses the implications for academic governance of the blurring of boundaries between academic leaders and university executives (Bleiklie 2012; Coates et al. 2011; Musselin 2013; Teichler et al. 2013) as academics face increasing pressures to take up management positions within their respective institutions (Blackmore 2009). In so doing, the book argues for ways of thinking about academic governance that recognise these changes at the same time as acknowledging the importance of retaining the academic and student voice within academic governance.

A Note About Terminology

The writing of a book which considers academic governance across a number of Anglophone nations is, in many ways, a fraught process not least because of enormous differences in terminology or nomenclature. While in the US the university governing body is commonly described as the board of trustees or board of regents, in the UK and Australia it is more commonly (but not only) described as the university council. The supreme academic governing body is commonly known as the academic senate or faculty senate in the US, but in Australia and parts of Canada is more likely to be known as the academic board. Both academic senates and academic boards are commonly found in the UK. The senior leader of the university is generally described as the president in the US and Canada but is more likely to be known as the vice-chancellor in Australia and the UK, except in Scotland where he or she most commonly has the title of principal. While university academics are known as faculty in the US, in Australia and parts of Europe a faculty is generally an organisational grouping that might elsewhere be known as a large school or college. Moreover, academic staff in Australia means those who teach and/or research but in some US universities this term might be used to describe those who provide support services to faculty and students. In the US, the term administration can encompass the most senior managers of the university but elsewhere might refer only to more junior non-academic staff with those of more senior ranks being known as senior managers or executives. Moreover, the same title can be used in two universities for quite different purposes. For example, a chancellor might be the chairperson of the university council or governing body in one university but might hold the office the vice-chancellor or president in another. In at least one Australian university the senate is the name of the governing body,

not the academic board equivalent, for example. However, there are many more variations than I have listed here.

Thus, many different terms are used to describe senior positions and governance bodies across Anglophone nations, and the same name or title can mean different things in different contexts.

It is therefore necessary to establish a single set of nomenclature for use in this volume. Except in context specific instances where local terminology is more appropriate, within this book the university corporate governing body will be known as the council; the most senior university leader will be known as the vice-chancellor and the most senior academic governing body will be known as the academic board. Academics will mean those who teach and/or research. Senior managers or executives will describe the most senior administrators within the university, including (but led by) the vice-chancellor.

Structure of This Book

This book comprises three parts, the first of which addresses ‘Academic governance in context’. Chapter 1 addresses the histories, similarities and differences in university sectors across Anglophone nations, focusing in particular on the UK, the US and Australia. External and internal structural and policy factors, especially the near-universal new public management or managerialism, serve as drivers and shapers of internal governance processes, including for academic governance. The changing nature of university governance, including within those three nation states, therefore becomes the subject of Chap. 2. Chapter 3 follows with a discussion of what academic governance is and how it has changed and is changing; the roles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom; and student participation. Chapter 4 draws on publicly available data from the UK, US and Australia to compare academic board structures and functions across those three nation states. Chapter 5 addresses the theoretical and policy context by considering the relationship between higher education and the state; theories and practices of globalisation, including neoliberalism, managerialism and the knowledge economy; and theories of governance, the state and higher education. The final inclusion within Part I, Chap. 6, considers some of the ways in which internal university governance is understood, starting with traditional modes such as collegial and bureaucratic governance and then extending into newer forms such as network governance.

Part II, ‘Case Studies of Academic Governance in Practice’, draws on case study research undertaken in Australia in relation to three purposively selected academic boards. It presents a detailed analysis of the data in the context of relevant literature in four specific areas: changes in academic boards over time (Chap. 7); academic board strengths and weaknesses (Chap. 8); academic boards and power (Chap. 9); and the academic board and academic quality assurance (Chap. 10).

The final section of the book, Part III, addresses ‘Moving Forward’. Chapter 11 draws from literature and empirical data considered in Chaps. 1–10 to present a

synthesis of the primary issues and challenges facing academic governance within contemporary Anglophone universities. The concluding Chap. 12, builds on these challenges to propose some practical strategies for strengthening academic governance into the future with a particular focus on university academic boards.

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