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How to create an effective university committee system

Nita Temmerman 13 August 2022

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Universities are complex organisations whose structure usually comprises a ‘university council’, which represents the governing authority of the university, and a number of committees, which collectively facilitate effective decision-making and management of activities across the institution.

University committees play an important role in supporting strategic planning, quality assurance, policy development, academic programme delivery, the student learning experience and research.

They are also an important means of ensuring institutionally important issues are debated and the views of representative staff within the organisation are heard and contribute to the decision-making process.

This is especially significant as issues raised can be considered from a variety of viewpoints and resulting decisions made based on broad disclosure of concerns as well as alternative points of view.

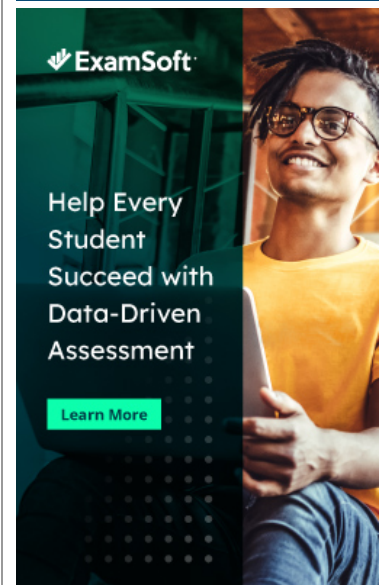
Committees also serve as a constructive way of disseminating information within the institution. Any recommendations emanating from a university committee with staff representation are also more likely to be accepted than if a directive came from an individual authority such as a director or manager.

Academic standards

Academic governance is a fundamental element of a higher education provider’s all-encompassing governance structure. It incorporates the framework of policies, processes and systems relevant to university academic activity.

If it is not effective, it calls into question the whole academic framework for verifying quality and integrity in teaching, learning and scholarship in an institution.

The foremost academic body within the university which is responsible for ensuring high standards in teaching, learning and research are maintained is the ‘academic board’ or ‘academic senate’.



It has a critical role to play in ensuring the comparability of academic standards and is the custodian of quality and standards for all academic programmes. It in turn normally has a small number of standing committees that report to it.

Through its membership, the academic board aims to provide academics and administrators with a voice about decisions that directly affect them, notably the teaching-learning environment. It also provides an important avenue for student involvement in academic decision-making.

Challenges to committees' effectiveness

To many university staff, committees are seen as unnecessary timewasting talkfests for members who have the loudest voices. They have little idea about what their university committees actually achieve and this is made worse when there is no communication flow from the committees to the wider university community.

Unfortunately, university committee structures are not always as effective as they could be.

While there is no hard and fast rule about how a university structures its committee system, there are a number of factors that determine which committees have the best possibility of fulfilling their role as intended.

It is important that each individual committee functions effectively, but also that the committees established by a university function collectively to be effective in supporting the accomplishment of the mission and goals of the university.

The academic board usually has a number of standing committees responsible for: 1) academic quality and standards, 2) education policy and strategy as well as teaching and learning quality, and 3) new curriculum offerings and overall curriculum development.

Whatever structure is adopted, it must support the core academic 'business' of the university and its purpose and successfully deliver on its academic activities.

Where it becomes problematic is when ad hoc and/or advisory committees appear and assume items of work that are the responsibility of the formal standing committees without relevant stakeholders being made aware of their existence.

Further, when these committees tackle academic items that should progress to the academic board but don't, it can result in critical matters not being completed due to a lack of coordination and communication between the groups.

Timely communication

Any decisions arrived at by a university's formal committees should be promptly promulgated, especially to those with operational responsibility who will be most impacted by the decisions.

Follow-ups about subsequent actions taken, challenges encountered, next step suggestions and so forth should be brought back to the relevant committee as a means of closing the loop on items. This provides a useful evidentiary register of progress made against recommendations endorsed by the various committees.

There should be minimal duplication, if any, of the fundamental roles and accountabilities assigned to each standing committee. If there are multiple reporting lines a standing committee is expected to adhere to, they must be clear and practicable.



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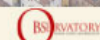
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The committee composition should be manageable and allow for an appropriate mix of members and be cognisant of gender balance. Due regard should be given to inclusion of those who hold an executive position within the university relevant to the remit of the committee, some elected staff members from across the institution and student representation.

It is also important that a formal performance review process occur at least every two to three years and that a less formal annual evaluation becomes part of the final meeting each year.

Such reviews are part of the continuous quality improvement cycle committees should embrace. Further, they provide an opportunity to members to identify and highlight the effectiveness of the committees and offer suggestions for improvement.

Whatever the committee system in place, what is vital is that the various committees effectively work together to ensure and assure continuous quality improvement, engage in timely decision-making, make certain that there is no unnecessary duplication and-or overlaps in memberships and in the various committees' remit, and that they guarantee the proper flow of communication between them and to the broader university community.

Dr Nita Temmerman has held senior university positions including pro vice-chancellor (academic quality and partnerships) and executive dean in Australia. She is an invited accreditation specialist with the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications and international associate with the Center for Learning Innovations and Customized Knowledge Solutions in Dubai. She is chair of two higher education academic boards, and invited professor and consultant to universities in Australia, the Pacific region, Southeast Asia and the Middle East.



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