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Paper

Title: Co-operation at the cusp of academic and corporate governance: establishing and embedding a joint quality committee in a university

Abstract

Cooperation is crucial to anchor and enhance quality within any university. South East Technological University was founded in 2022; two years into its existence, considerable work has been undertaken to develop a supportive quality assurance framework and solid governance structures and processes. This paper will explore a key focus for the architects of the new infrastructure: clearly delineating the remits of the organs of academic and corporate governance whilst ensuring effective collaboration and exchange between those bodies, especially on matters located on the cusp of both. This focus led to the establishment of a new Joint Quality Committee (JQC). Unlike quality committees in the antecedent institutions, JQC reports to both Academic Council and to Governing Body – though reports on the same matters may be through different lenses. JQC's remit encompasses the establishment and implementation of schedules of quality reviews for all areas (academic and service), as well as the scheduling and management of cross-cutting thematic reviews, which have the ancillary benefit of promoting increased engagement and cooperation between stakeholders across the institution. JQC considers aggregated university data and stimulates action by relevant entities, ensuring that linkages and synergies are identified and exploited in doing so. The paper will reflect upon the committee's activity, and on how it is supporting clarity of purpose and greater cohesion in the university's governance. It will set out key themes arising, future plans, and advice for other HEIs.

Background and context to the establishment of SETU

[South East Technological University \(SETU\)](#) was founded on May 1st, 2022. This development arose from a set of recommendations set out in the [Irish National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030](#) and has resulted in the creation of [five technological universities in Ireland to date](#).

The establishment of SETU involved the merger of two former institutes of technology (Institute of Technology Carlow and Waterford Institute of Technology). This followed an extensive, legislated process prior to designation, which included collaborative merger activities, detailed documentation, and an international panel review. SETU, with 18,000 students and 1,500 staff, is the only technological university in the South East region of Ireland (population of approximately 580,000 people) and is multi-campus across three primary locations.

At an early stage, SETU decided to adopt a new design for its Academic Council, which was built upon the experiences of the antecedent institutions but that was also informed by national and international practices and contemporary thinking. This was facilitated through a working group with external (two, one of whom was chair) and internal members. A conceptual framework was developed as part of this process, which is reported on in O'Riordan et al. (2024). An innovative design feature of the new Academic Council is its Joint Quality Committee (JQC), which is a joint committee of both Governing Body and Academic Council. This committee operates at the cusp of both of these governance bodies and this paper explores the evolving work of the committee.

Before presenting information on the committee and its work, this paper examines literature pertaining to university governance. This literature focuses on how governance is shared and undertaken collaboratively in an environment where it may tend to be more broken up into separate domains.

Delivering shared university governance in a distributed environment: a short literature review

The modern university is a multi-faceted organisation that delivers important societal benefits through education and research activities, while also needing to make ends meet financially and further develop and grow. While this pronouncement may be a simplification, it highlights the expansive nature of a university which has to collectively embrace academia and corporate thinking to survive and thrive. Governing in this environment is "complex and contested" (Carnegie and Tuck, 2010: 431) and can present significant challenges to universities.

Traditionally, in the Irish higher education system, university governance is distributed amongst three core groups¹: Governing Body, Academic Council and Executive Management. The first two of these groups are statutory bodies with stated functions (Technological Universities Act, 2018), while the final body reflects established organisational practices across most sectors. The Governing Body is primarily focused on corporate governance, which can be viewed as the system by which organisations are directed and controlled (Cadbury, 1992). Academic governance, which encompasses “decision-making within universities about research and/or teaching” (Rowlands and Ngo, 2018: 1501), is typically the remit of the Academic Council. Finally, business governance, which can be concerned with performance measurement and management, resource utilisation and risk management (Carnegie and Tuck, 2010), vests in the hands of the university Executive Management grouping.

Between these three groups, it is important that there are delineated lines of responsibility (Dooley, 2007) and appropriate separation (O’Riordan et al., 2024). This is essential so that work is not being replicated, that requests are being channelled and addressed appropriately, that outcomes are consistent and to support the integrity of academic processes and standards. This also includes ensuring that commercial/corporate interests do not outweigh academic considerations or have an undue influence in the making of decisions on academic matters (QQI, 2016). While delineation is necessary, the risk of ‘pigeon-holing’ of bodies should be avoided as there may be a tendency for different entities to avoid certain areas that they mistakenly believe are not part of their remit. Vilkinas and Peters (2014) found that Academic Councils had an understandably strong focus on policy and quality assurance, but lacked an external focus including benchmarking with other universities. While Academic Council may rightly have an academic focus, it is important to recognise that it also has a strategic and leadership role (O’Riordan et al, 2024).

Connectivity between the bodies is vital for effective functioning as decisions can cross over domains, necessitating bodies to work in tandem (Advance HE, 2018). Thus, cross-memberships of bodies through chairs (Dooley, 2007) and joint committees (Advance HE, 2018) are valuable structural features to incorporate into university governance models. This resonates with Rowlands (2013), who looks for new modes of governance that are more aligned with real university work as opposed to the dominance of corporate modes, and Rowlands and Ngo (2018) who emphasise the need for academic governance approaches to fit the contexts and purposes in which they are implemented. The value of shared governance in universities is clear, as it “encourages faculty to share their knowledge and insight during institutional decision-making” (Curnalia and Mermer, 2018: 129), recognising that they have considerable expertise to contribute across many areas. In this respect, shared governance entails collaboration (Johnson et al., 2017).

A helpful framework is provided by Carnegie and Tuck (2010) in their ABC model of university governance. This presents an integrated approach to shared governance, which requires collaboration within the university and where groups agree between themselves as to how governance will be shared. Thus, the model (Figure 1) combines academic, business and corporate governance and shows that these respectively relate to scholarship, performance and conformance. Rather than being in conflict, they are interdependent and collectively important. By way of illustration, the authors note “scholarship can feed income enhancement and accountability, performance can feed originality/innovation and accountability, and conformance can feed originality/innovation and income enhancement” (2010: 438-439). Thus, in this structure, it should not necessarily be the case that one form of governance must be the exclusive or sole remit of one specific body, rather they can be part of a connected whole.

¹ Titles here may vary by institution.

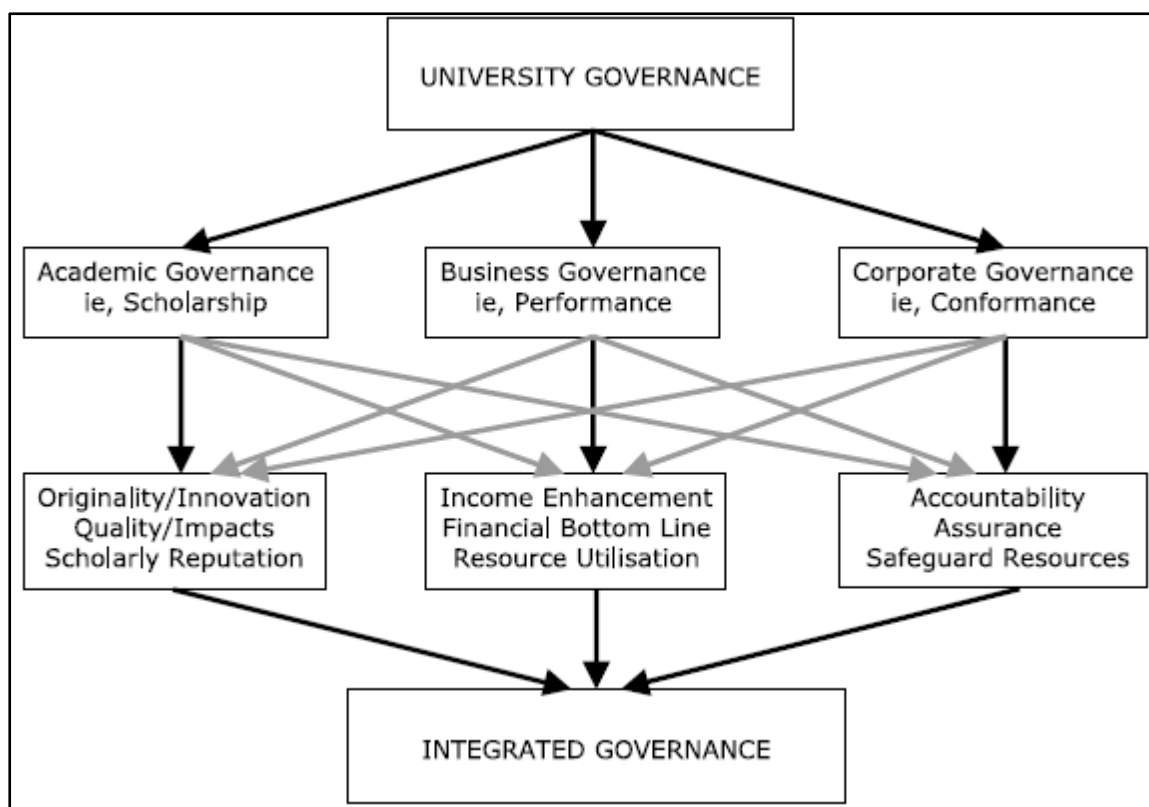


Figure 1- The ABC of University Governance (Carnegie and Tuck, 2010: 438)

From the literature, we can see that university governance presents challenges. However, there are ways to mitigate these by taking a broader view of governance as a collaborative, co-operative and shared endeavour as opposed to something that is siloed or unitary; as noted by Curnalia and Mermer (2018), shared governance is important to organisational success. This, perhaps, requires a re-think about relationships and how best to facilitate sharing responsibility at the cusp of decisions that cross-over the remits of different bodies. Housing governance in one single body is unlikely to be effective or even acceptable to the university community, particular in the context of academic freedom. An alternative arrangement, and one demonstrated in this paper, is sharing governance through a joint committee in a specific area that naturally crosses-over bodies responsibility remits and that is important to universities generally. That area is quality, and more specifically whole-university quality.

Developing the Joint Quality Committee

As noted above, the establishment of JQC represented a novel departure for SETU in the development of a collaborative approach to the governance and management of quality. Cognisant of the benefits of such an approach, the university has designed the committee to comprise membership from and to report to both SETU's Academic Council and its Governing Body. Through its functions, the committee supports and complements the activity of other university entities. This has required careful planning and coordination to support efficiency, to promote clear understanding of the discrete and complementary responsibilities of relevant bodies (thereby preventing duplication of work), and to ensure that engagement is genuinely collaborative.

Terms of Reference of the Joint Quality Committee

JQC is one of four committees² of Academic Council and one of six committees³ of Governing Body. Its [terms of reference](#) set out its role and remit and confirm its responsibility for the overall quality of the university through its undertaking of relevant functions and activities, including the:

- recommendation to Academic Council and Governing Body of policies for quality review;
- implementation of the university's schedule of quality reviews and the reporting of review outcomes as well as the approval and monitoring of related implementation plans;
- development and implementation of a schedule of quality data for review;
- implementation of the university's policy on academic risk and its maintenance, review and adjustment of the university academic risk register, as well as the undertaking of action (or stimulus of action) on foot of the risk register.

In addition to regular updates to Academic Council, Governing Body and the Executive Management Team through the circulation of its minutes to these bodies, JQC submits an annual report to both Academic Council and Governing Body and may be invited to present more detailed updates on specific items to either body. JQC may also stimulate action by these bodies and/or by the Executive Management Team as a result of its oversight of review activities.

The committee's functions are interlinked and complementary and committee activity of one kind may impact on others. For example, the committee may mandate the adjustment of the academic risk register following consideration of the outcomes of university reviews or the review of data. Consideration of the academic risk register may in turn have an impact upon the data review schedule or the schedule of quality reviews.

Membership of the committee is drawn from both Academic Council and Governing Body and there is some crossover between the membership of JQC and other university committees. This helps to connect the work of committees engaged in the consideration of inter-linking areas and topics while ensuring that the same issues are not being debated by (only) the same people in different forums. In acknowledgement of the value of externality to the committee in performing its functions and supporting benchmarking of processes with practice in other sectors, the role of chair is undertaken by an external member of Governing Body. The role of secretary is fulfilled by the Vice President Academic Affairs, Teaching and Learning and the Vice President Research, Innovation and Impact is an ex officio member. These roles represent important links to the Taught Studies Programmes, Teaching and Learning Committee and the Research and Research Programmes Committee, which are chaired by the Vice President Academic Affairs, Teaching and Learning and the Vice President Research, Innovation and Impact, respectively, who are also members of the Executive Management Team. The Students Union President nominates two students as members (one undergraduate and one postgraduate) and the two current student members also sit on Academic Council, which constitutes a further important linkage. Finally, three members of Academic Council are nominated as members by the university's President, and three members of Governing Body are nominated jointly as members by the Governing Body chairperson and the university President. Up to two additional members may be co-opted by the committee, providing scope in the future for further connectivity if identified as necessary.

Delineation of committee roles and responsibilities

During initial discussions regarding the committee, its role and remit, there was a keen awareness of the need to ensure complementarity and clear delineation between the committee's functions and activities from those of other university committees. In particular, the architects of the university's governance structures were aware of the potential for duplication between the remit and activities of JQC in its review of activities and data and the remits of other committees of Academic Council. The key matters to consider in making the necessary distinctions are (i) the purpose of review and (ii) the

² The other committees of SETU's Academic Council are the: Taught Studies Programmes, Teaching and Learning Committee; Student Experience Committee; and Research and Research Programmes Committee.

³ The other committees of SETU's Governing Body are the: Audit and Risk Committee; Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Committee; Finance & Capital Investment Committee; Nominations Committee; and Policy Committee.

nature and level of the relevant data and information. The JQC's role across the breadth of its activities is a confirmatory one – it confirms to the university's Governing Body and Academic Council that activities are being undertaken and, through its oversight and consideration of these activities, it provides assurance to the university that its quality assurance infrastructure is being implemented appropriately. Correspondingly, and as set out in the committee's terms of reference, the quality data reviewed by JQC are aggregated, whereas other committees involved in considering the data will consider the data at a more granular level.

The main three elements of the committee's work are considered in greater detail below.

Joint Quality Committee and quality reviews

JQC is the entity responsible for developing and maintaining the university's framework and schedule of quality reviews. These encompass reviews of academic units, which are mandated by legislation, as well as (non-statutory) reviews of service areas (incorporating both administrative and professional support units) and specific thematic areas. Supported by the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the committee has developed a policy for university reviews, which will be supported by ancillary policies relating to the conduct of the specific review types.

The policy sets out the discrete and complementary responsibilities of a number of university entities in the conduct and approval of reviews and the approval and monitoring of review outcomes and responses thereto – these entities include the JQC itself, the unit under review, the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Executive Management Team, Academic Council, and Governing Body.

As noted elsewhere in this paper, quality review processes and their outcomes may provide stimuli for further review and/or monitoring activity by the JQC, or may act as an impetus for the committee to request responses or actions by other university bodies.

Joint Quality Committee and data review

The committee's role in its consideration of university data is one of monitoring and oversight to ensure that the university's activity across the breadth of its education provision and service delivery is supporting the achievement of its strategic objectives. As set out above, the committee's consideration of data is at a strategic level and does not diverge into deliberations and recommendations on granular elements of faculty/service area activity, which fall under the responsibility of other university bodies.

The committee agrees the schedule of data to be submitted to it by university stakeholders and collaborates with the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs to ensure that the relevant data are available and undergo appropriate analysis prior to their consideration by the JQC. The committee continually reviews both the data and the university review schedule for emerging strategic-level issues. It may also amend its data and/or review schedules as required in response to issues identified, or in order to respond to developments in the external environment.

JQC may highlight key thematic areas arising within the data reviewed, as well as across university review processes, and, as noted above, bring them to the attention of relevant entities within the university for their response or action. Themes or issues identified may prompt the initiation of a review or other engagement with a specific area or areas within the university.

The types of data that JQC may consider can be categorised under three broad headings: academic performance; the learning environment; and external reviews. A sample of data that may be reviewed by JQC is set out in the Appendix.

Joint Quality Committee and the academic risk register

Work is currently ongoing on the development a new academic risk register for the university, consideration of which will be a standing item on JQC meeting agendas. The risk register's re-development is a collaborative effort between the committee itself, the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Office of the Vice President Governance, which manages the overall university risk register.

As in the case of data review, the risks for inclusion in the academic risk register are at a strategic level. When entering a risk into the academic risk register, the committee will categorise the risk as low,

medium or high and assign a risk owner, which may be itself or a specific governance body, faculty or area. Risk owners will report to the committee on their actions to mitigate risks.

Risks may be identified through other categories of committee activity. For example: the committee's consideration of aggregated data may indicate that resources for a specific area of academic delivery are inadequate. In this case, the risk would be entered into the academic risk register and assigned to the Executive Management Team, who would be expected to issue a comment to the committee and then report periodically on risk mitigation/removal actions.

Establishment of SETU's Joint Quality Committee and lessons to date

The first meeting of JQC took place in March 2024 and two further meetings have taken place between March and the time of writing (October 2024), with the next meeting scheduled for December 2024. That meeting will see the initiation of the university's first review of an academic area as well as its first review of a thematic area.

The terms of reference provide for at least four meetings per academic year, and it is envisaged that the committee will meet every September, December, March and June. In practical terms, the scheduling of JQC meetings can be challenging. Given the committee's reporting relationship with both Academic Council and Governing Body, early and frequent communication is required between all three entities to ensure that their agendas are coordinated and that the activities of each body are conducted as efficiently as possible.

It is hoped that the involvement of student representatives at both under- and postgraduate level as committee members will strengthen the impact of the student voice in university governance. In this regard, an area for potential enhancement to support increased collaboration and engagement with and by students is the development of a briefing session for student members prior to the commencement of their terms of office. This session will clarify the role of the committee, how it interfaces with other university bodies and areas and prompt student members to consider ways in which they may support and enhance its work.

While the committee is at a relatively early stage of its existence and activity, it is already evident that it will serve as a significant connector between the primary governance bodies of the university (i.e. Academic Council, Governing Body and the Executive Management Team), ensuring that these are kept apprised of key actions, plans and themes relating to the university's quality. This should help the university to avoid any temptation to 'pigeon-hole' governance bodies, whilst still maintaining clear lines of responsibility (Dooley, 2007) and appropriate separation (O'Riordan et al., 2024) between the three entities.

It is also envisaged that the committee's work will support increased engagement with and between the subsidiary committees of Academic Council and Governing Body, and between key members of the executive. The interlinked elements of the committee's remit (i.e. quality review, data review and review and monitoring of academic risk) should also support greater collaboration across university faculties and service areas. This will help to foster a more integrated approach to shared university governance (Carnegie and Tuck, 2010) in a specific area of significance and a structure around this area that fits the context and purpose of the university (Rowlands and Ngo, 2018) as it develops.

Ultimately, it is intended that the committee will facilitate a broader view of how the university's governance should and can be undertaken, an avoidance of siloed approaches to governance and quality management and a re-thinking of relationships and engagement between the entities involved in these endeavours to support a collaborative approach to quality that is on the cusp of corporate and academic governance. While focused on quality at present, there is scope to use this joint committee structure in other areas of importance as a means of further integrating university governance and, in time, this may be explored by the new university. We believe that the development of the JQC may be of interest to other higher education institutions who are seeking new ways to foster and further develop shared governance in their organisations, with scope to tailor the structure and membership arrangements to suit different circumstances and areas of focus.

Appendix

Examples of data that might be reviewed by JQC and the purpose of review

Summary programme board reports - Number of summary programme board reports completed at institutional level - Number of summary programme board reports completed at faculty level - Major feedback themes arising - Presence of student feedback (and major themes arising) - Actions taken in response to issues/feedback noted within programme board reports	- To confirm that programme boards are operating as per institutional policy - To confirm that programme boards are collecting feedback and acting upon/responding to the feedback - To consider whether the academic quality risk register may require amending/ updating based on the data reviewed
Grade distribution and award classification - Distribution of grades by faculty/department/discipline/programme - Distribution of award classification by faculty/department/discipline/programme - Trends in grade distribution and award classification year-on-year by faculty/department/discipline/programme - (Where available) Comparative data regarding SETU grade distribution/award classification and those of other higher education institutions	- To confirm that SETU graduate outputs and outcomes are appropriate, aligned with the university's strategic objectives, and serve the university's regional remit - To confirm that SETU learner achievement data (and trends therein) are being benchmarked internally and against data emanating from peer higher education institutions - To consider whether the academic quality risk register may require amending/ updating based on the data reviewed

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