

University of Manchester: Governance foundations to present day

Governance in the higher education sector is complex covering a wide range of activities and a diverse stakeholder body; governance processes enable power to be shared and exercised by different groups and operate at all levels of the institution, from Board and Board committee level to local School level committees and groups.

The governance framework provides financial and legal accountability and in common with approaches to governance in other sectors, the Board has responsibility for oversight, scrutiny, review, constructive challenge, and, through “critical friendship” holding management to account. Stewardship and ensuring institutional long-term sustainability are key considerations for the Board.

There are a number of different models of university governance.

Civic universities like Manchester are characterised by a binary or bi-cameral system which began development at one of the precursor institutions to the University, Owens College, in 1880. This developed into the civic university model which saw a Board of Governors or Council with overall governance responsibility and Senate exercising responsibility for academic governance, matters related to learning and teaching and research (including management of the curriculum, student admission, assessment regulations, academic programmes, academic standards and quality) and the overall student experience.

Historically, many governing bodies had relatively limited engagement with academic governance, sometimes relying on little more than minutes or reports from Senates or Academic Boards. However, this position has changed over recent years, not least because of a more competitive and uncertain external environment, rising student expectations with the increase in tuition fees and increasing public interest in higher education.

Present day

From December 2016, the Board was required to declare to the regulator/funder that it had reviewed and is satisfied with measures over the previous 12 months to assure the oversight of the academic experience and the setting and maintenance of standards.

Back then the regulator was the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). HEFCE ceased operation on 31 March 2018 and was replaced by the Office for Students (OfS).

The recent Governance Effectiveness Review, also known as the Halpin Review, has commented on the efficacy of current arrangements with recommendations for improvement. Further information on these improvements will be available on StaffNet later this year.