

Designing a New Academic Council

A conceptual framework to reshape governance structures in a higher education institution

The article proposes a conceptual framework to guide the development of governance structures as part of designing a new academic council in an Irish technological university. The framework addresses the different academic activities that take place, risk levels, decision-making uncertainty, and responsibility. It may be of interest to other universities and institutions looking to examine or reshape their governance structures.

Introduction

The Technological Universities Act 2018 provides the legislative basis for establishing technological universities (TUs) in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2018). There are currently five TUs, which were formed by mergers of institutes of technology. These IOTs – along with the traditional universities – had mature and well-developed academic governance structures, typically built around a governing body (GB), an academic council (AC), and associated committees.

These governance bodies still form part of the new TU legislative context (chapters 3 and 5 of the 2018 Act), with GBs responsible for corporate governance, ACs for academic governance (Advance HE, 2018). Section 9 of the Act sets out wide-ranging functions of a TU, which (under section 11(1)) are to be performed by its GB. The GB may delegate functions to the AC, which itself has identifiable functions: the academic council 'shall control the academic affairs of the technological university, including the curriculum of, and instruction and education provided by, the technological university' (section 17).



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This gives a clear sense of the AC's academic (as opposed to corporate) focus but also its strategic and leadership role. There is a strong and overlapping relationship between the GB and AC, which is vital to institutional success, but it is also important to maintain separation and delineated responsibility for both corporate and academic strands of governance. This paper focuses on academic governance.

Context

South East Technological University (SETU) was established in May 2022 from the merger of Carlow and Waterford institutes of technology. The two IOTs had broadly similar governance structures, but the decision was taken to relook at this in developing a new AC model for the new university. The SETU GB appointed a working group to advise on the design of a new AC, to follow on from the existing council. The group produced a conceptual framework to guide the development of governance structures as part of the new design, before addressing more detailed tasks such as membership and committee roles.

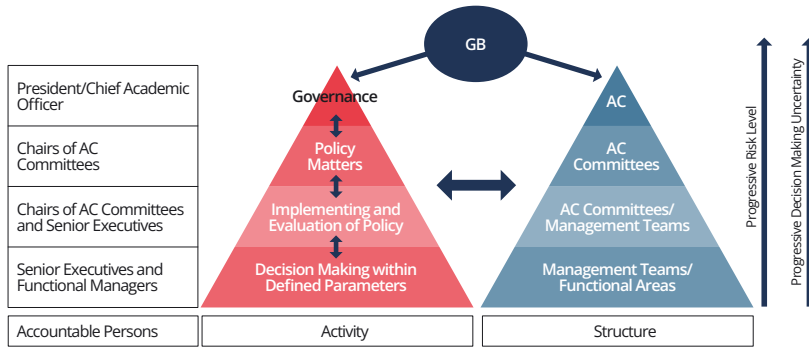
This article does not address the detailed tasks but presents and explains the conceptual framework developed, which may be of value to other institutions in examining their governance structures.

Proposed conceptual framework

The proposed conceptual framework is not a radical shift, as the core elements of structures and approaches from the pre-merger IOTs remain. It is rather a clarification of who does what in the context of risk (specifically in academic terms) and decision-making uncertainty.

Following from McDonald et al. (2020), we contend that appropriately managing different levels and types of risks, and ensuring that effective decisions are made by the right people or bodies, are key governance contributions from any structures that are put in place. Thus, these feature prominently in the framework and should influence what structures are adopted, where activities take place, and who is ultimately accountable. See the figure for a diagrammatic representation.

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Proposed conceptual framework

Looking first at the left-hand pyramid, we propose four overall layers of academic activity: academic governance at the top, filtering down through academic policy matters (including their development), implementing and evaluating policy, and decision-making within parameters dependent on the policies in place.

As one moves up the pyramid, the volume of governance-related decisions decreases, but their associated academic risk and complexity increase. For example, relatively routine decisions that require judgement to be made within parameters set down by established policy (such as the admission of students to programmes) carry limited risk and uncertainty, because the requirements to follow in making such decisions are set down by the university.

Council does not generally need to be consulted on such standard decisions, but rather needs to know that these decisions are being made and in an appropriate academic manner. By contrast, decisions that are complex and less certain and which may present academic risk to the university if poorly made (such as establishing strategic long-term academic partnerships with other organisations) represent high-level governance choices that may not have pre-established parameters to follow.¹

Thus, responsibility for decisions and academic risk management needs to vest with the appropriate university body, and this is where the right-hand pyramid is relevant. At the top of this pyramid is council, which needs to address matters of core and strategic academic governance in conjunction with GB, which embeds and instils broader university priorities. If council's time is spent on academic policy development or implementation, this limits its time and resources for strategic matters, so the detailed work on policy should be delegated to committees.

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¹ Decisions may have other risks for the university as well, including financial and reputational. These are beyond the scope of this article.

These committees report directly to council, they act in accordance with council priorities, and their outputs require council approval. But they are also given space and appropriate freedom to explore or research policy areas and to propose enhancements to what exists. In tandem with management across academic and non-academic areas, the committees take responsibility for implementing academic policies and evaluating their effectiveness on an ongoing basis, which means that those involved in policy formulation and policy actions are in active communication.

To understand the effectiveness of policies and ensure that policies are understood by stakeholders, information must flow from all areas that action the policies. This is highlighted by the two-way arrows in the activity pyramid, though policy priorities are ultimately determined by council based on its interactions with GB.

Bringing this all together, it is vital that clear accountability is established. This ensures that decisions are made at the most appropriate level and that sufficiently senior personnel take responsibility for this and for reporting. This may take the form of aggregated reporting of items for approval and/or information, and escalation of decisions when necessary.

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Thus, functional managers in conjunction with senior executives manage and report more-routine decisions but, at the other extreme, highly complex decisions must involve the president and/or chief academic officer (in discussion with others). Across the different levels, there is crossover of personnel to allow for consultation, consideration, or escalation, but also to ensure they report on their decisions. An effective governance structure should allow organisational members to proceed with their work without unnecessary hindrance, but also to ensure there is appropriate oversight.

A further consideration is establishing a secretariat role to assist council and, more specifically, the committees. In traditional academic governance structures, committees can represent the 'squeezed middle', as they strive to manage the time-consuming, detailed scrutiny of routine requests for approval on behalf of council with the more pivotal work on policy. Anyone who has been a member of such committees will attest to the challenge of balancing these within the available time, which may act as a disincentive to being a committee member.

We propose that allocating resources to committees – in the form of personnel – to undertake such scrutiny under the direction of the committee could pay dividends. Having specific people allocated to this, who possess the necessary policy knowledge and experience, can speed up this work as they become more proficient at identifying issues that the committee primarily needs to adjudicate on.

The necessary skill sets for such work should exist in universities; it is then a case of setting clear boundaries for the role which is advisory to committees who make the decisions. This arrangement should also encourage those who wish to volunteer and contribute to academic governance activities on committees, as they see higher value-add to their time commitment.

Concluding thoughts

This article proposes a conceptual framework that underpins the design of a new academic council. The structures put forward here are not a radical departure from previous approaches, but they do give greater clarity on where responsibility for core activities lies. Accountability for decisions and actions is stated at each level, which recognises and addresses the types of risks and decisions that exist. Including a secretariat role is more novel and should be a valuable addition to the structure, particularly in allowing committees more time for policy matters.

This framework has informed the development of the new academic council design in SETU and may be of interest to other universities and institutions in examining and possibly reshaping their governance structures as well.

REFERENCES

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