

Setting up and Running Effective Industry Advisory Boards for your Department

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Considerable interest has developed in making Higher Education programmes and research more “relevant” to stakeholders. Some programmes are accused of being out of touch of employer needs or even too “ivory-towerish”, in teaching and research. However, this is hardly a new phenomenon and one technique that has been used to good effect to mitigate has been the industry advisory board.

In my experience, having set up four boards for different Departments and Programmes, and observed the (mis-)functioning of a number of others, there is however considerable variation in board mandate, composition, and overall effectiveness. Properly constituted, membered and run, such an industry advisory board can be extremely beneficial to a Department. The opposite is also true – a poorly run, structured and purposed board can sometimes be a major impediment to advancing a Department’s mission (Worth, 2008).

Considerable thought needs to go into several aspects of a board, including the “nurturing” of the board through it – and the Department’s – development. Is this a new programme or department or an existent one? Does it have a history of poorly functioning or no industry advisory board or stakeholder involvement in the Department? Would it benefit most from light-touch advice or more directive, closely involved board members? Who will chair the board and take responsibility for it meeting regularly, documenting action items and outcomes, and fostering multi-faceted interactions with staff and students? What mandate should the board have and how should it be constituted (and regularly refreshed)?

Leadership

Just like with Department leadership (Leaming 2006), in my experience an absolutely crucial factor is effective leadership of an industry advisory board, including its formation, membership, organisation and development. For my new Software Engineering programme board in the early 2000’s, I was fortunate to have a charismatic senior executive from a large local software company who worked closely with me to specify the new industry advisory board charter, recruit a set of excellent stakeholders, and run meetings. Similarly, for my Electrical and Computer Engineering department advisory board set up in the late 2000’s, an experienced software company director and former industrial researcher performed a similar leading role, with me as Chairperson being simply one of the board members.

It is possible, but far from ideal in my mind, for the Chairperson to form and chair an advisory board. I currently perform this role for my Computer Science and Software Engineering Department industry advisory board, and also did so for my Software Engineering programme board during a leadership inter-

regnum. However, ideally an industry chair I believe to be the best approach, one who takes the major responsibility for running the board.

Representation

The obvious attraction of an industry advisory board, particularly for vocational disciplines, is a connection to representatives of graduate employers. A range of stakeholders is good to include where feasible e.g. I have aimed to include representatives from large corporate managers and Chief Technical Officers, CEOs of small and medium companies, entrepreneurs running their own start-ups, and government department representatives.

A wider pool of stakeholders is also good e.g. on past boards I have included high school (and even middle school) teachers, providing a connection for addressing student recruitment and interest. I have included academics from other Departments or other Universities, to provide a collegial input including how their own board functions. Staff and student representatives I have also found to be a good idea, if possible one elected from each. A past student of the Department now working in industry can provide multiple perspectives.

A danger to avoid is a board that is simply too big (or small) to be effective. I have found for a broad Department around 8-10 seems to work the best. For a more focused programme, perhaps 6-7 is sufficient to get both broad representation but have focused board agenda and discussion.

Board Charter

An advisory board is just that – advisory. This requires a board with participants who are willing to give advice – sometimes presented strongly if needs required – but not dictate or be captured by vested interests. This requires good board leadership, constitution of the board from representatives of stakeholders that understand both their own and other board members’ perspectives, and good governance of the board.

Part of good board governance is a clear charter defining the purpose of the board, its membership and terms, operating procedures, meeting frequency, how deliberations are captured, and so on. I like having a board AGM yearly which includes revisiting the board’s charter, board membership and critically self-reviewing the effectiveness of the board. If the advice or effectiveness of the board is found wanting, a renewal process may be needed. This can include substantive membership change, charter modification or board operational revision. Keeping membership change moderate is, however, preferable to enable new members to gain from existing member knowledge.

Two sample charters I have helped to develop and refine, one for the Software Engineering programme at the University of Auckland (a more operational level, programme-focused industry advisory board) and one for the Department of Computer Science and Software Engineering (a broader, more strategic Department-focused board) are available at: <http://tinyurl.com/b66vebk>

Meetings

Boards need to meet periodically – for a broad department board with a more strategic focus, I have found 3-4 times per year seems to work well. For a more focused programme industry advisory board, providing more specific guidance to the programme, perhaps a little more often.

Themed meetings, besides the AGM, seem to be an effective way to structure board business to get targeted outcomes. For example, a board meeting focusing on teaching, one on research, one on building industry relationships, perhaps others on schools engagement, government lobbying, etc.

Like all well-run meetings, industry advisory board meetings need structured agenda, papers available to members well in advance, action items, promptly circulated minutes, and follow-up. I have found using a Wiki or intranet made available to members holding these materials including past meeting minutes to be effective. Ownership of action items by a specific board member seems to help them be advanced.

Holding meetings off-site can have positive benefits. For my software engineering advisory board we rotated meetings among board member companies/school/other university for each meeting. The “host” member was responsible for meeting arrangements. Some board chairs provided their own Executive Assistant to manage agenda, minutes and meeting arrangements. At other times I have made my own assistant or Department Manager available to the board chair to assist them.

Networking with Staff and Students

Finally, an industry advisory board is really “owned” not by the Department chair or board chair but by the students and staff of the Department and the wider university (and stakeholder) community. Having elected staff and student representatives assists this notion but I have found fostering a variety of board and staff/student interactions very beneficial. These include making board documents (agenda, minutes, papers etc) available; running informal social events with the board; holding colloquia with board members, sometimes hosted at a board member company.; and having board members invited to attend prize-givings, student project demonstration events, and so on.

A further technique introduced by one of my board chairs was to team a board member and staff member with specific “portfolios” to advance together e.g. a board member and staff member to advance industry-informed teaching; to advance collaborative research with industry; to advance schools engagement etc. This both assists shared ownership notion but tasks board and staff members individuals with specific responsibilities to achieve.

Summary

Industry advisory boards can be a very effective tool in helping the Department Chair to achieve the Department and wider university mission. Boards with a well-defined role, broad stakeholder representative membership, effective

leadership, and regular structured meetings and targets work much more effectively.

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References

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