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## **Adding value: Engaging stakeholders in higher education via the course advisory committee**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Stakeholder engagement in higher education is viewed as important for institutional viability amid growing competition and in response to demand for skilled graduates equipped to succeed in today's rapidly changing world. However, limited research explores what motivates external stakeholders to provide their expertise to educational institutions via formal stakeholder structures. This study examines the motivation, engagement, contribution, and benefits of participation in university business course advisory committees from external stakeholders' perspectives. Findings show that stakeholders are motivated by a desire to give back to their profession, the institution or society. They see their engagement in committee discussion as "adding value" to the institution and seek feedback on how their input is used.

**Keywords:** stakeholder engagement, higher education, advisory board, reciprocity, business school, value creation.

Stakeholder theory places stakeholder relationships at the centre of organisational strategic focus and suggests organisations create value for all stakeholders not just shareholders (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholder engagement (as opposed to stakeholder management) has a focus on value creation via cooperation, collaboration, participation, and reciprocity (Kujala, Sachs, Leinonen, Heikkinen & Laude, 2022). In the higher education sector, stakeholder engagement with industry, alumni, students, and academics has two main purposes. Firstly, it facilitates institutional sustainability in the face of decreased public funding, increasing competition and internationalisation. It does this by enabling universities to expand their mission beyond teaching and research to pursue commercial activities and access new revenue sources via partnerships with external organisations, communities, and other relevant groups (Alves, Mainardes & Raposo 2010; Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno 2008; Broucker, De Wit & Verhoeven 2018). Secondly, stakeholder engagement is viewed as a way to assure and maintain quality educational standards whilst simultaneously aligning curriculum to government and societal expectations to provide a skilled workforce (Felsen & Nastanski, 2016, Jackson, 2020). This latter shift has seen growing demand from standards and accreditation authorities for the involvement of stakeholders in institutional quality assurance and governance processes (Miller, McAdam &

McAdam, 2014). Consequently, stakeholders are increasingly invited to advise on national policy and to serve on university boards and advisory committees (Beerens & Udam, 2017) in an effort to align education with industry needs (Wheelahan, Moodie & Doughney, 2022). For example, in Australia, the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) (2021) requires institutions to ‘take account of emerging developments in the field’ when monitoring, reviewing, and improving accredited courses (Australian Government, 2021, HESF, Section 5.3.2) with the result that most Australian university course accreditation policy mandates some form of stakeholder engagement in the course re-accreditation process<sup>1</sup>. Stakeholder engagement in the review of business curriculum design, development, and delivery is also strongly recommended by international accrediting bodies such as AACSB International and often mandated by discipline-based professional accreditation bodies (e.g., the Australian Human Resource Institute) as a way to help bridge the theory/practice gap and ensure courses are aligned to current and future industry needs (Attree and Neher, 2023).

One useful mechanism to facilitate stakeholder engagement in curriculum quality assurance is the course<sup>2</sup> advisory committee, sometimes referred to as an advisory board or advisory council. Stakeholder members of advisory committees are essentially skilled volunteers who generously give their time and expertise to the university, offer valuable insight into industry trends, identify requisite graduate skills and capabilities, guide development of future curriculum, and provide advice and assistance for accreditation (Andrus & Martin, 2001, Baker, Karcher & Tyson, 2007, Ellingson, Elbert & Moser, 2010, Neal, 2015). Despite their seeming widespread use in higher education, literature on stakeholder engagement in advisory committees in general (i.e. including disciplines such as IT, engineering and social work), and business disciplines specifically, appears to be an under researched area. Of the business focussed studies that do exist, most are US based and either provide a case description of their own institutional experiences establishing and operating a committee (e.g. Andrus & Martin, 2001, Felsen & Nastanski, 2016, Penrose, 2002), provide opinion and advice (e.g. Flynn, 2019) or report survey results on factors such as size, frequency of meeting, membership selection,

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a desk audit undertaken by the first author.

<sup>2</sup> The term course is used throughout this paper to refer to a program of study in a particular discipline area leading to an award such as a bachelor’s degree.

purpose, bylaws, and membership terms (e.g. Baker et al., 2007, Ellingson, et al., 2010, Kaupins & Coco, 2002). Many conclude with guidelines and suggestions for the establishment, function, purpose, and operation of the committees (see for example Mello, 2019, Rose & Stiefer, 2013). Although this research captures the establishment, purpose, structure, and operational aspects of business discipline advisory committees, it provides limited understanding of the motivations that drive stakeholders to take on and continue in a committee role. This is important to advance management education that aligns with government and industry needs whilst also meeting accreditation requirements. Further, no business focused studies could be found examining the Australian context.

Arguably, understanding what motivates stakeholders to agree to become members of an advisory committee, how they contribute, what sustains their engagement and being aware of the benefits members derive from participation, can assist institutions in developing strategies to engage members more effectively and drive collaboration and reciprocity in the stakeholder relationship. However, only three studies were found to investigate these aspects from the perspective of the stakeholders engaged in business based advisory committees. Within the two US based studies committee members expressed strong motivations “to give back”, “to make a difference” (Nagai & Nehls, 2014, p.10) or because the work aligned with their “personal core values”, “beliefs about service to the profession” and “personal fulfillment” in bringing their “real-world experiences” to the curriculum (Hinton & Williams van Rooj, 2021, p287). In the UK context, Hardcastle and Associates (2020) identified similar external stakeholder motivations i.e. to give back, make a difference, share their expertise and “equip the leaders of tomorrow” (p. 43). Advisory committee participants in all three studies indicated knowledge gains from committee discussions and building their industry networks as benefits of involvement. Factors that facilitated ongoing participation included effective leadership, clear guidelines, and agendas that promoted collaborative discussion.

This article extends and expands this scant prior literature examining the motivations and experiences of external stakeholders involved in business course advisory committees from the perspective of the stakeholders themselves. In addition to exploring the motivations for joining and ongoing participation it also examines how stakeholders view their contributions, what sustains their engagement in the committees and how they derive reciprocity from the stakeholder relationship.

Further, given the lack of studies addressing this issue from an Australian perspective, examining the motivations for participation and facilitators of continued engagement of Australian stakeholders in course advisory committees would provide a useful comparison with overseas studies and allow Australian higher education institutions to tap into any local nuances.

In summary, stakeholder engagement in higher education is viewed as important to facilitate the “third mission” of universities to engage with industry and community partners (Jongbloed et al., 2003, p.303) and to enhance the quality and industry relevance of the curriculum. Studies examining external engagement of stakeholders in the quality assurance of curriculum (i.e. via a course advisory committee) are predominantly US based, favour case description or survey methods and, in the majority, report the viewpoint of internal stakeholders i.e. business deans and committee chairs.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHOD**

Determining the motives of stakeholders for engagement in advisory committees can be beneficial for universities in developing strategies and practices to better engage and retain members on these committees to effect knowledge transfer, aid reciprocity, and aim to create value for all stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). This study therefore addresses the gap in the literature outlined above by exploring stakeholder motivations for and engagement in course advisory committees within the Australian context. Research questions were as follows:

1. What motivates stakeholders to become and remain engaged in a university-based course advisory committee?
2. What does stakeholder engagement look like? How do stakeholders contribute, collaborate, and create value?
3. What benefits/value/reciprocity do members derive from participation?
4. How can business schools improve the operation of their advisory committees to ensure stakeholders are engaged and contributing?

The research used a constructivist grounded theory methodology based on the work of Charmaz (2006, 2008). Grounded theory is a qualitative research strategy that seeks to develop or generate an explanation (a theory) about a process, action, or social interaction, shaped by the views

of multiple participants. The theory arises from, i.e., is grounded in, data that has been systematically gathered and analysed (Creswell & Poth, 2016, Myers, 2019). Myers (2019) states that grounded theory is “useful in developing context-based, process-oriented descriptions and explanation of organizational phenomena” (p.127). This strategy of inquiry is therefore appropriate to investigate a context-based social process such as the operation of a course advisory committees and to examine the experience of multiple members who engage and interact in this process.

Data collection for this study proceeded in two stages. Stage 1 (complete) collected data via 23 semi-structured qualitative interviews using a convenience sampling approach targeting members of two business based advisory committees at a single university. Membership of these committees consisted of students, alumni, industry/government sector managers, external and internal academic staff. In some cases, one member may have fulfilled many roles i.e., as an alumnus, an industry professional, and a sessional academic. In total, 28 current or former members were invited to participate in the research. Only five members did not respond (resulting in an 82% response rate). This paper presents the findings of external stakeholders only i.e. 17 of the 23 research participants.

Following interview, anonymised transcripts were imported into NVivo for analysis and coding. The coding approach followed the grounded theory methods advocated by Charmaz (2006) i.e., beginning with segment-by-segment coding and then moving to focussed (or selective) coding where the most significant initial codes are sorted, synthesised, and integrated. Comparisons and contrasts were made with other respondents to identify patterns and similarities in the data. Memoing was used to capture potential biases, note down personal experiences and perspectives and to explore potential subjectivities inherent in the data collection and data analysis process. Stage 2 of the data (ongoing) seeks theoretical saturation on concepts and categories arising from the data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Stakeholder motivations

Similar to findings in US and UK qualitative studies (Hardcastle & Associates, 2020; Nagai & Nehls, 2014, Hinton & Williams van Rooj, 2021), preliminary analysis from Stage 1 of the data suggests participants were motivated to join and remain as members on course advisory committees

through a desire to “give back” and to serve their profession. For example, members discussed giving back to the profession “that I have been involved with for 30 years” (P3 Industry expert), alumni expressed a desire to “give back” to the institution that they “had an affiliation and affection for” (P8 Alumnus/Industry expert), while others wished to “contribute to society” (P5 Industry expert). An interesting nuance in our data however was a desire by participants to exert influence and have a strategic impact on the industry, the curriculum, and future learning. For example, P4 (Industry expert) described being motivated to “in a small way influence the future learning of students coming to a profession that I love dearly”. Alumni/current students mentioned wanting to “keep things in the course that I ... found valuable” (P11 PG Student/Industry expert), and “adding value to the MBA” (P14 Alumnus/Industry expert), as well as influencing the focus of the course by bringing in the “practitioner perspective... to help graduates prepare for the workforce” (P15 PG Student/Industry expert) and make a “real world difference” (P12 Alumnus/Industry expert).

Although pride (and loyalty) to their alma mater have been suggested in the literature as motivators for engagement with advisory committees (Penrose, 2002) another interesting discovery emerging from this study was that several participants expressed *personal* feelings of flattery, pride, recognition, and reward as being significant motivators for them to accept the initial invitation to join the committee e.g.

*it was to me quite exciting to be asked. And I felt it was, I suppose, internally, a little bit of a reward to me for all of the years of study and the hard work I'd done. And I thought wow to be asked to be on something like this was a real honour.*  
(P13 PG Student/Industry expert)

While these feelings that their “efforts had been flagged and ... recognised by the university” (P16 UG Student) were common among alumni and students, similar feelings of recognition, flattery, feeling “a degree of pride” (P4 Industry expert) and “an element of recognition of your experience” (P3 Industry expert) were also identified by non-alumni industry members as motivators for them to accept the invitation.

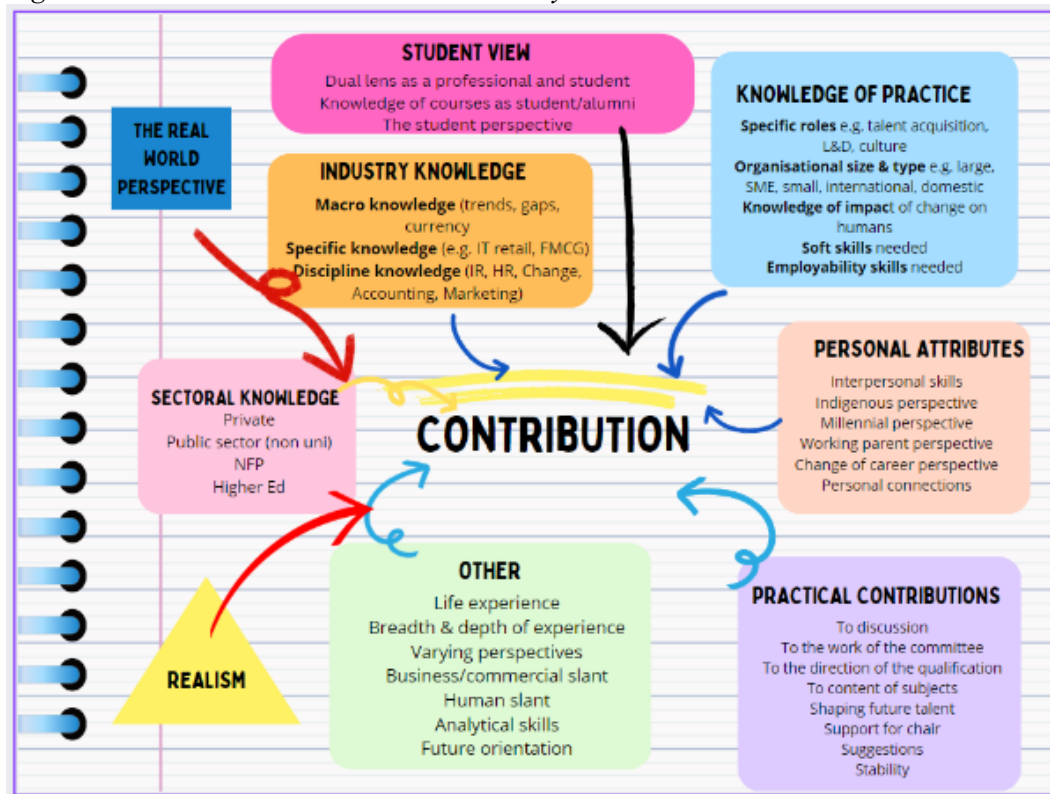
Career related motivators to accept the invitation were also identified by participants in this study. Both students and industry representatives acknowledged that membership of the committee “looks good on a resume” (P16 UG Student) and on LinkedIn profiles. Industry participants saw

membership as providing them with additional “reputational” aspects (P3 Industry expert) and an “element of credibility, authority which is useful for engaging with clients” (P8 Alumnus/Industry expert) or for demonstrating to future managers their “motivation to continually learn and build skills” (P13 PG Student/Industry expert).

### Stakeholder engagement and contributions

Whereas prior research has discussed the contribution of stakeholders from the perspective of university chairs and deans (e.g. Andrus & Martin, 2001, Baker et al., 2007, Ellingson et al., 2010), contribution from the perspective of the external stakeholders has not been previously explored. In line with the research question “what does stakeholder engagement look like?” participants were asked what they brought to the committee and how they had contributed: Members viewed their contributions as unique, stemming from their industry, sectoral or discipline knowledge, their life experience, and personal attributes. Figure 1 below summarises their contributions:

Figure 1: Stakeholder contributions to advisory committee



Source: Author

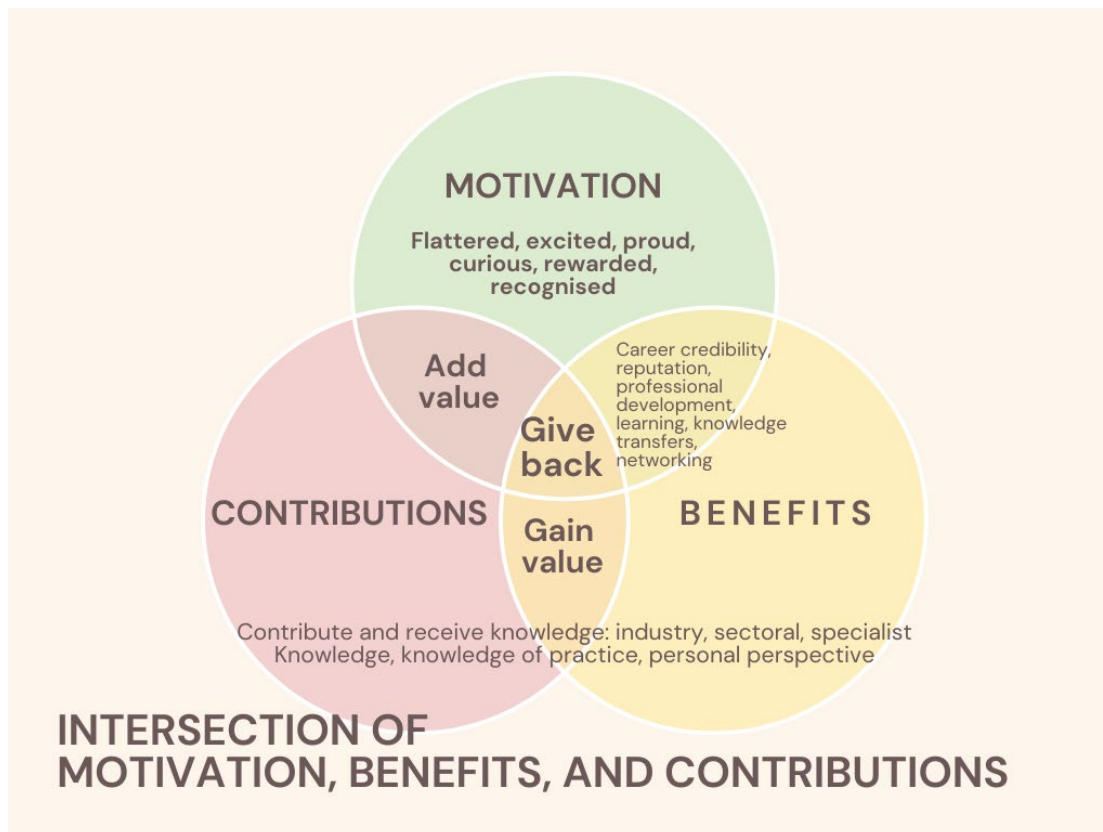


### Reciprocity/Benefits

Benefits stakeholders derived from involvement in the committee included prestige, and career and professional credibility (as mentioned above). Similar to findings by Nagai and Nehls (2014), and Hardcastle and Associates (2020) participants cited the opportunity to gain industry knowledge as a benefit of participation. They described rich learning and professional development advantages via exposure to diverse perspectives, insights into other sectors or industries, and the ability to keep up with trends e.g. “some things that come out in meetings are just so, well you think, wow, I hadn’t really thought of that before or heard it put that way” (P7 Alumnus/Industry expert). Others mentioned how “listening to others triggers my thought processes” and being “stimulated and attracted” by “topics that are interesting, evolving and constantly changing” (P15 PG Student/Industry expert). Participation enabled exposure beyond their own sector(s) to “encounter the experiences of other people in multinationals and corporates” (P8 Alumnus/Industry expert) or insight into how “people from non-profits or an educational setting, or from other services ... handle issues”. Other benefits included opportunities to network and connect with others, gain new experiences, gain knowledge of the university sector and, for a couple of participants, support a move into academia.

There was significant overlap between respondents’ answers to questions on their motivations for joining the committee, the contributions they made, and the benefits they derived as can be seen in Figure 2 below. Stakeholder literature views value creation as a major component of the stakeholder engagement process (Kujala et al., 2022). The concept of *adding value* emerged as a major category in the research and a significant motivator for engagement. Participants view their contributions as important to the university and wish to see how they are making an impact on curriculum. They were motivated to influence the future profession or the future of the qualification. Accordingly, participants were keen to receive feedback on how their advice was being utilised. If their contribution wasn’t being utilised, if they were “talking in a vacuum” (P4 Industry expert) couldn’t see any progress or their “advice was not taken seriously” and the experience was just a “waste of my time” (P12 Alumni/Industry expert) then they would seriously question ongoing involvement. Value was therefore a reciprocal concept given that participants also gain value via the benefits listed above.

Figure 2: Intersection of motivations, contribution, and benefits



Source: author.

### Operational improvements

In order to understand how business schools can improve the operation of their advisory committees to ensure stakeholders are engaged, contributing, and adding value, participants in the study were asked what factors facilitated their continued engagement and what might prevent future participation. Administrative facilitators of engagement included a time commitment that is “not too burdensome” (P8 Alumnus/Industry expert), a straightforward process, well organised meetings, clear agenda, adequate notice, advanced scheduling, and participation via Zoom teleconferencing. This corresponds with the reported view in the literature from internal stakeholders such as chairs and deans, that efficient administrative processes can support the effective operation of the committees (Baker et al., 2007, Flynn, 2019).

A collegial atmosphere and positive relations with the chair were also noted as facilitators of engagement. Disincentives to ongoing participation included poor relational aspects (if the group was dysfunctional, not collegial), or operational aspects (if workload became more onerous or poorly

administered). A strong personal disincentive centred around not being able to add value, or not having their input valued or utilised (as noted in the section above). Recommendations for improved operation included clarity of purpose, and more focused “discussions that are a little bit future oriented, what do we see coming, how do adapt the program and the content to those things ... that’s where I think the highest value is” (P3 Industry expert) and communication/feedback from the university on where and how their expertise was used. Given the central importance to external stakeholders of this concept of “adding value” and their contributions being used, this is an area which will be explored further in the next round of data collection.

### IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

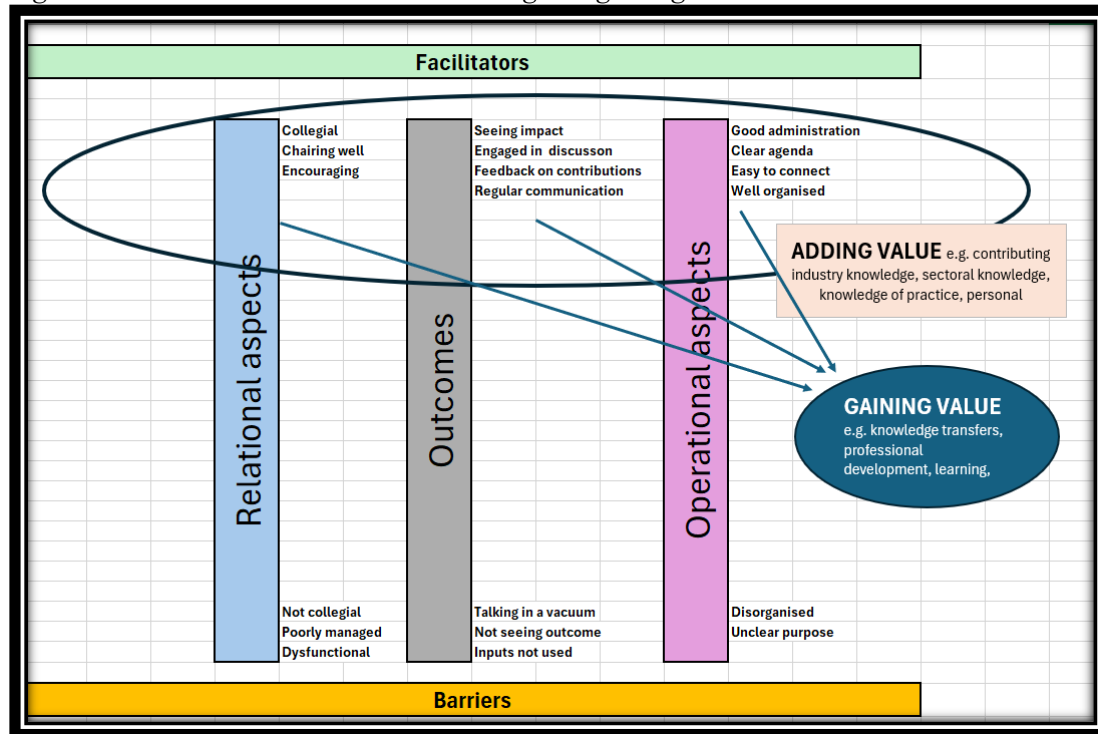
This study adds to the extant literature on stakeholder engagement in higher education by examining the motivations and perceptions of external stakeholders who were members of a course advisory committee. The study also provides a rare insight into the Australian context. The findings reveal that feelings of flattery, recognition and reward can motivate external stakeholders to accept an invitation to join as a member of a university course advisory committees. Participants also cite a desire to give back to their profession, the university and/or society as a driver for engaging in the committee. Implications of this for universities is that both alumni and non-alumni have similar driving motivations for engagement. These external stakeholders view their contribution as *adding value* to institutions through provision of industry and sectoral knowledge, knowledge of practice and a real-world lens. This suggests that engagement of stakeholders in course advisory committees can assist Australian higher education institutions in responding to quality assurance and governance requirements to keep up to date with emerging trends in industry and develop graduate knowledge, skills, and capabilities accordingly. As such this finding verifies arguments put forward in the literature by US scholars including Andrus and Martin (2001), Baker et al (2007), Ellingson et al (2010) that advisory committees are a useful mechanism for the provision of expert advice on the content, relevance, and future direction of their educational offerings.

Sachs and Kujala (forthcoming) outline 3 key aspects to stakeholder engagement i.e. 1) stakeholder engagement is purposeful in that it has “certain explicit or implicit aims”, 2) it should

involve stakeholders in “a positive manner in organisational activities” and 3) stakeholder engagement is viewed to favourably impact an organisations financial and social performance and create value for stakeholders. The findings from this study showed external stakeholders wished to be engaged purposefully and to “add value” to Australian higher education. Stakeholders were keen to share their knowledge and guide/influence the direction of the curriculum, seeking opportunities for focused discussions. Furthermore, the participants wanted explicit feedback on how they had added value and contributed to organisational outcomes – further emphasising the need for a purposeful focus. A collegial atmosphere and positive relations with the chair were viewed as facilitators to engagement. Mutual value creation and reciprocity as advocated by Freeman (1984, 2017) appears to be occurring in the stakeholder relationship with course advisory committee members identifying a number of benefits of committee participation including networking opportunities, reputational and career benefits, and knowledge transfers/learning opportunities. These reputational and career benefits also suggest a purposeful or strategic focus to their engagement.

Implications of this research for higher education institutions lies largely in the information from participants on the facilitators of and barriers to ongoing engagement. Figure 3 categorises these into three broad areas i.e. relational aspects, strategic or outcomes focused aspects, and operational aspects. While efficient administration of the operational aspects of the committee such as scheduling, timing, agenda distribution was viewed positively, primarily stakeholders expressed a strong desire to be actively engaged in the work of the committee (i.e. discussion and knowledge transfers) and to influence the direction of the profession and curriculum. To maximise contributions and engagement institutions therefore need to build into the agenda opportunities for discussion and could also potentially explore asynchronous opportunities for input. Participants also sought to understand where and how their input was being utilised indicating that if their feedback wasn’t being used then they would “walk away” (P1 industry expert). Institutions therefore must ensure that communication and feedback are incorporated into committee agenda and activities. Interestingly while trust is an important concept in the stakeholder engagement literature feedback and communication to stakeholders are under-researched areas.

Figure 3: Facilitators and barriers to adding and gaining value



Source: author.

Through the process of “adding value” participants also “gained value” via knowledge transfers, networking, professional development, and reputational associations. Institutions could also seek to publish their committee members on their website, provide testimonials via LinkedIn or investigate other ways to make explicit the relationship and the value add provided via this stakeholder engagement. Collegiality and constructive relational aspects enabled and supported such engagement and value creation. These findings therefore align with the strategic focus of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and highlight the role of cooperation, collaboration, participation, and reciprocity for value creation in stakeholder engagement (Kujala et al., 2022).

Finally, the authors acknowledge certain limitations with this study. Firstly, given the grounded theory nature of this study findings may not be generalisable to other settings. Further this paper reports on the first stage of data which focuses on the experiences of members of an advisory committee at a single Australian institution. Stage 2 of data collection will seek to extend the theoretical sampling and further develop the emerging theory related to the concept of adding value.

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