Charity Board Leadership Study 2025

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A study led by NVPC to understand how charity boards perform

Background

Strong board leadership is central to the effectiveness and accountability of charities in Singapore. Building on the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre's (NVPC) foundational study on board leadership in 2020, the Charity Board Leadership Study 2025 (CBLS 2025) was designed to deepen our understanding of charity board performance, with a focus on how specific board qualities (i.e., characteristics of a charity board) influence performance across board functions (i.e., functional roles of a charity board).

CBLS 2025 aims to create a Charity Board Performance Framework to guide charities in strengthening their boards. This framework underpins the complementary product—the enhanced, evidence-informed CNPL BoardPulse2.0—that serves as a tool enabling charities to conduct self-assessments of their board performance, facilitating reflection and aiding charities in identifying priority areas for improvement.

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Methodology

Charity Board Performance Framework

The Charity Board Performance Framework was developed based on the Charity Council's Code of Governance for Charities and Institutions of a Public Character (IPCs)[1] in Singapore, the Commissioner of Charities' compliance framework for charity boards[2], the Charities Act 1994[3], and a review of the academic literature on charity boards[4-8].

To assess the validity of the hypothesised framework, a self-administered online survey was sent to 126 Singapore charities across various sectors and financial sizes from July 2024 to April 2025.

Board members from these charities were invited to complete a self-report questionnaire designed to assess both board qualities and board functions. To ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions, the questionnaire went through a careful review process prior to distribution. This includes checks by researchers using the Question Appraisal System (QAS-99) and cognitive interviews with a panel of charity board members. The final sample included in the analysis comprised 1140 individual board member responses (from 114 charities with at least 80% board members participation rate).

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was conducted to examine the relationships between board qualities and board functions. SEM is a statistical technique used to understand how observed behaviours are linked to underlying traits; it tests if such hypothesised relationships hold true in real-world data. In this study, SEM was used to identify the characteristics of charity boards (i.e., board qualities) that have the strongest influence on how well they perform their functional roles (i.e., board functions). A diagram of the final model can be found in Annex A.

Methodology

CNPL BoardPulse2.0

Using the final validated Charity Board Performance Framework as the basis, the diagnostic tool CNPL BoardPulse was updated to version 2.0 accordingly to reflect how various board qualities contribute to the performance of board functions.

CNPL BoardPulse2.0 is able to provide three perspectives of charity board performance:

1 **Assessment of board qualities and board functions identified in the Charity Board Performance Framework. This provides a description of how a charity board is performing in each of these areas.**

The measures for board qualities and functions were first scaled to a range of 0 to 100 points to reflect scores on the individual level for each participating board member of a charity. Next, an average of these scores was taken to reflect a collective score for the charity board. These scores are compared against benchmarks derived from the 114 charities in the final sample.

2 **Ranking of board qualities according to their relative importance and the influence they have on the performance of board functions based on model weights in the Charity Board Performance Framework, highlighting the more impactful board qualities vis-à-vis the different functions.**

Model weights of board qualities were rescaled to reflect their relative degree of impact; those with values equal to or above the mid-point mark are considered to be of high impact. Priority areas were then identified for board development and improvement through a series of labels. Charities can draw on these priority areas to shape their action planning, while interpreting them in light of their own organisation's unique context.

Label	Score	Degree of impact
To Sustain	Equal or above benchmark[i]	**All degrees of impact**
Prioritise Improvement	Below benchmark	**Equal to or above the mid-point mark**
To Monitor	Below benchmark	**Below the mid-point mark**

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CNPL BoardPulse2.0

3 **Performance benchmarking across the final sample of 114 charities, and against key profiles of these charities[ii]: financial size, IPC status, and sector that a charity is administered under. This allows the charity to understand its relative performance compared to other charities with similar profiles.**

Benchmarks were derived from the average scores of charities within each comparison group. A charity's performance is categorised as 'equal or above benchmark', 'up to 10 points below benchmark', and 'more than 10 points below benchmark', offering a measured overview of the charity's board performance across the assessed areas.

Benchmark Details	Number of Charities	Number of Board Members
All charities:	114	1139[iii]
By Financial Size:		
$10,000,000 and above	32	399
Less than $10,000,000	82	740
By IPC Status:		
IPC	96	991
Non-IPC	18	148
By Sector:		
Community	7	56
Education	4	47
Health	15	167
Social & Welfare	55	551
Sports	4	44
Other charitable purposes[iv]	29	274

Methodology

CNPL BoardPulse2.0

> It is worth noting that the benchmarks do not reflect the entire charity landscape. Rather than landscape standards, these benchmarks reflect standards set by charities that participated in CBLS 2025, facilitating peer comparisons to support a charity's own board development plans. The representativeness of these benchmarks will grow over time as more charities become involved, ultimately reflecting landscape-wide standards in their ideal form.

[i] *Effort should be made to maintain board qualities that meet or outperform the benchmark, regardless of their degree of impact.*

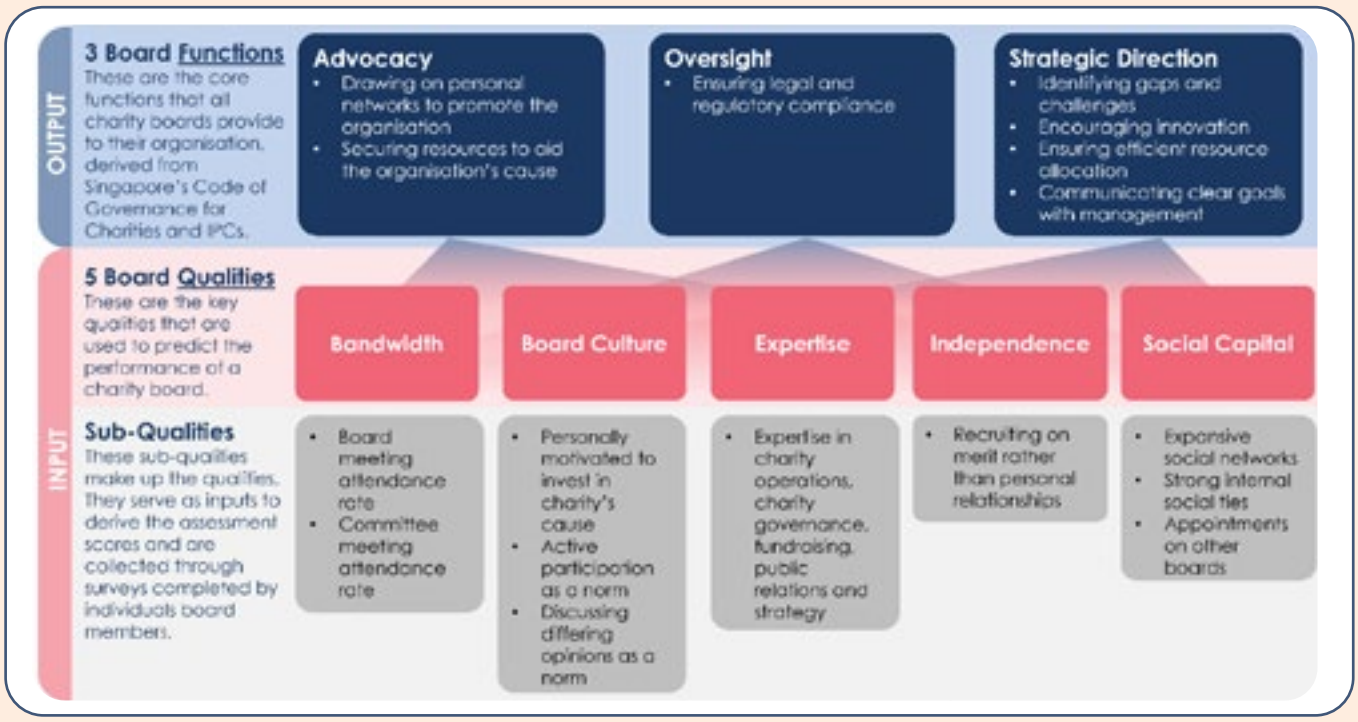
[ii] *For participating charities that did not provide relevant information through CBLS 2025, administrative data on financial size, IPC status, and sector administered were retrieved from the Charity Portal (accessed 3 July 2025).*

[iii] *Responses from 1140 participants were used for the analysis, while responses from 1139 participants were used for the benchmarking to reflect the latest trends in board performances.*

[iv] *Other charitable purposes include animal welfare, arts and heritage, environmental protection or improvement, religious, and other general charitable purposes.*

Charity Board Performance Framework

The Charity Board Performance Framework depicts three core functions that a charity board must perform and five key qualities that predict how well a board performs those functions.



Board Functions (Outputs a.k.a 'What's)

Advocacy

reflects the extent to which individual board members actively promote the charity and expand its external reach. This includes engaging with external stakeholders to build or sustain partnerships, speaking positively about the charity to outside audiences, and leveraging personal networks to identify resources or connections.

Oversight

captures board members' contributions to core governance responsibilities, including fulfilling legal and fiduciary duties through active engagement such as in reviewing budgets and financial plans, and ensuring compliance with regulatory and governance standards.

Strategic Direction

reflects board members' contributions to shaping the charity's long-term direction. It includes identifying and addressing service gaps, evaluating resource allocation, anticipating future challenges, and encouraging innovation to strengthen its effectiveness. It also encompasses communicating clear goals and policies to management to support alignment and execution.

Charity Board Performance Framework

Board Qualities (Inputs a.k.a 'How's)

Bandwidth

reflects a board member's capacity to actively engage in their duties by considering their board and committee meeting attendance. High meeting attendance indicates a strong commitment to the charity and greater availability and focus.

Board Culture

captures the shared values, behaviours, and expectations that influence how board members interact and contribute. It includes members' personal commitment to the charity's mission, the openness of the environment to constructive disagreement, and the perceived norms around effort, preparation, and active participation.

Expertise

captures the breadth and depth of knowledge that individual board members bring across key domains relevant to the charity's effectiveness. This includes operational knowledge, oversight and governance, fundraising and sustainability in fundraising, and external relations. Equally important are strengths in strategic thinking in the charity context.

Independence

assesses the degree to which a board member's appointment was not based on personal relationships. It is measured by how much personal (family or friend) connections influenced their recruitment or election to the board. A lower reliance on personal ties signals greater independence, suggesting that board composition is more likely to support objectivity, diverse perspectives, and sound governance.

Social Capital

reflects the strength and diversity of board members' connections, both within and outside the charity. It measures the quality and closeness of relationships among fellow board members and management, and assesses the breadth of professional and community ties a board member can draw on externally to support the charity's work.

Main Takeaways

1 The five board qualities collectively explain up to 59.6% of the variance in performance of board functions. A board member's personal motivation and passion to serve the charity's cause (a part of board culture) has the most influence on the performance of board functions—five times greater than the average influence of the other sub-qualities. As identified by the Chairperson of the Charity Council, Theresa Goh, the "intrinsic motivation and passion for the mission" are what make the nonprofit board members unique[9].

2 Board Culture is a critical board quality. Specifically, personal motivation to invest in the charity's cause is the most crucial quality affecting performance of board functions. Having strong social norms around active involvement in board-related matters is an important quality affecting performance of board functions as well.

3 Bandwidth of board members and internal social capital in boards are other critical qualities. Board members must have time and devote their attention to fulfilling duties. In addition, strong interpersonal ties with other board members and the management team facilitate the board to work effectively.

4 Balancing trade-offs in prioritising board qualities is necessary.

- To help the board perform better in the Oversight function, recruitment of board members needs to be based on merit and not personal ties (i.e., family and friends). To have stronger internal social capital, good interpersonal relations and trust need to be cultivated between board members after they are independently recruited.
- Although serving multiple boards might boost external social capital, it is more important to have board members with sufficient bandwidth who can commit their time and effort to perform their duties.

Actionable Recommendations

Recruitment

- Recruit board members independently. The board performs better in its Oversight function when personal ties (i.e., family and friends) were not a deciding factor in their recruitment.
- When choosing potential board members, focus on people with mission-aligned motivation. Look out for those who are passionate about the cause, with a high level of personal investment in it. Then, consider their experience and expertise in functional roles based on the charity's needs.
- While candidates who sit on other boards or are well-connected may be appealing, it is more important to ensure that they still have sufficient bandwidth to attend meetings and devote their attention and effort to actively participate in the board's activities.

Board Development

- Invest in relationship-building after board members are independently recruited. Create opportunities for board members and management to get to know each other on a personal level. This helps build trust and connections, which in turn translates into internal social capital, facilitating the board's ability to perform its functions.
- Build a culture where it is the norm for board members to participate actively in their roles, be open to sharing differing opinions and be personally invested in the cause. Work with key figures, such as the board chair, who may have a more significant influence on board culture and dynamics, to foster a culture of active involvement and open discussion.

Strategic Planning

- To identify more targeted capacity-building efforts, prioritise the board qualities that have a larger impact on the specific board functions the charity would like to improve on.
- Consider regular assessment using CNPL BoardPulse2.0 to monitor progress of board improvement efforts.

Conclusion

CBLS 2025 reaffirms the vital role of culture, capacity, and cohesion in driving charity board performance. By grounding board development efforts in rigorous research and aligning with national regulatory and governance expectations, CNPL BoardPulse2.0 equips boards with the insight and agency to lead effectively—nurturing a resilient, responsive, and purpose-driven charity sector.

Points to Note

CBLS 2025 Data Utilisation

CBLS 2025 study data was used to develop the Charity Board Performance Framework and performance benchmarks in the CNPL BoardPulse2.0 Self-Assessment Tool, solely to facilitate charities' self-initiated diagnostic and improvement efforts. It is not intended for purposes of monitoring and evaluation with regard to existing compliance and governance frameworks, and no identifiable information will be disclosed to regulatory bodies (e.g., Charities Unit) without explicit consent from participating charities. Performance benchmarks reflect the status of participating charities and will be reviewed regularly.

180- vs 360-degree Charity Board Evaluation

The Charity Board Performance Framework was validated using responses from charity board members in CBLS 2025, encompassing their perspectives on what makes an effective charity board. Similarly, performance scores presented in the CNPL BoardPulse2.0 Self-Assessment Tool reflect how board members' personally view their contributions to the different aspects of board qualities and functions. Taken together, the Framework and CNPL BoardPulse2.0 offer a 180-degree evaluation of a charity board's performance—based on internal views from the charity board itself, rather than a 360-degree evaluation that includes external stakeholders.

Points to Note

The Role of Board Chair

There is growing recognition that charity board chairs play a pivotal role in shaping board dynamics and, by extension, overall board effectiveness. How chairs lead discussions, manage differing views, and guide decision-making processes might influence the culture and functioning of the board. To support chairs who are motivated to strengthen their boards, community-based approaches could be adopted—such as peer learning networks or facilitated exchanges—to promote the sharing of best practices. The CNPL BoardPulse2.0 Self-Assessment Tool offers a useful starting point for such engagement, enabling chairs to reflect on their board's current dynamics and identify areas for improvement in collaboration with their peers.

Addressing Charity Board Diversity

Board diversity is a key aspect of governance and is presented as descriptive data in the CNPL BoardPulse2.0 Self-Assessment Tool. While demographic and experience information provide a snapshot of board composition, it does not fully capture how diversity influences board dynamics.

The Charity Board Performance Framework underpinning CNPL BoardPulse2.0 is based on an individual-level statistical model, supported by a sufficiently large sample to allow robust analysis. This enables actionable insights at the individual level—such as identifying members with the right motivation, capacity, networks, and expertise—and helps us understand individual board member's experience of working with their peers.

These insights extend to group-level dynamics, including board norms around effort, openness to dissent, and the strength of relationships within the board. However, as the model operates at the individual level, it does not directly assess collective attributes such as diversity.

As diversity may benefit charities in different ways, we recommend using the descriptive data as a basis for discussion on whether the current board composition aligns with the charity's needs and strategic goals.

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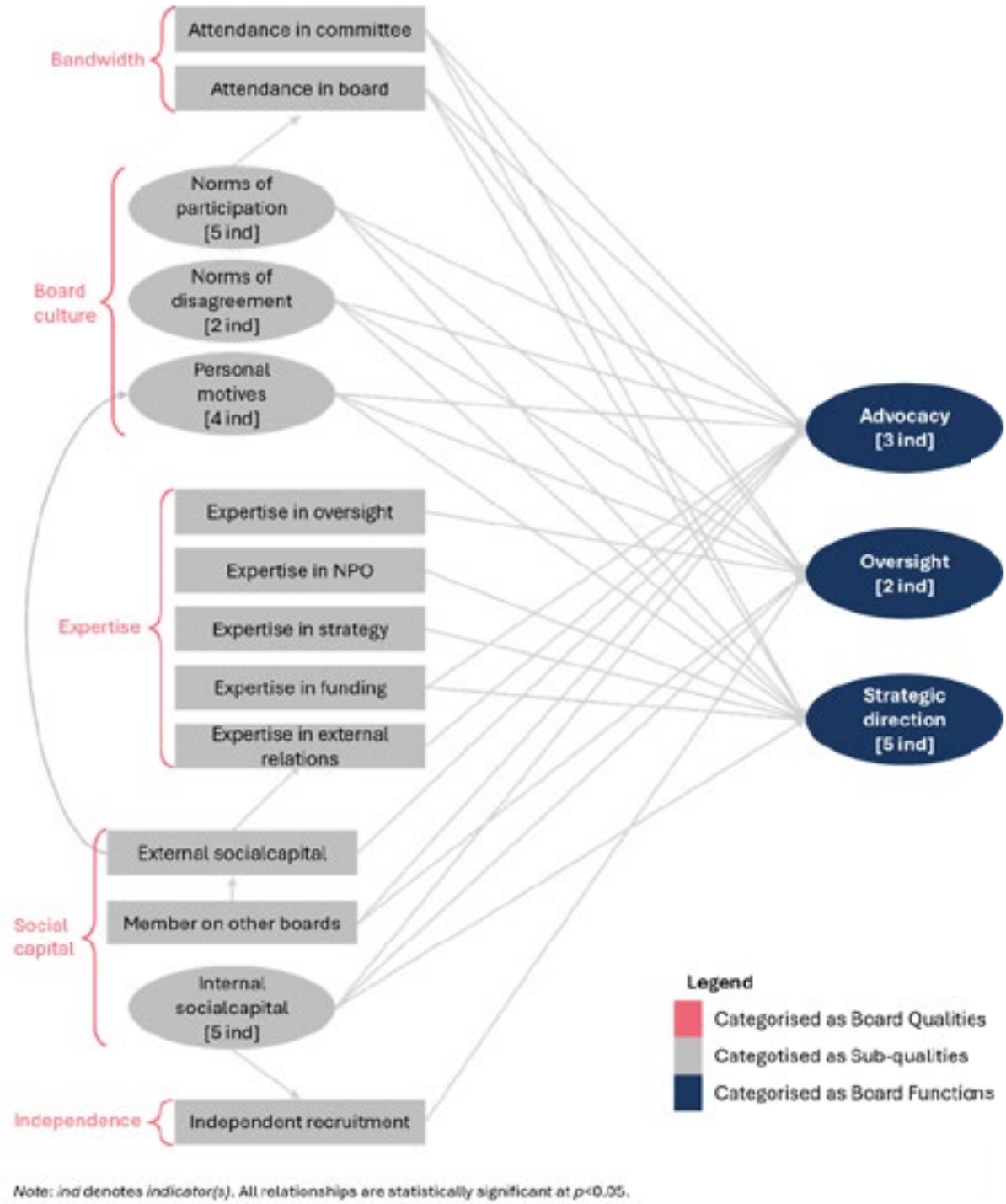
Annex A

Structural model depicting the Charity Board Performance Framework



Note: ind denotes indicator(s). All relationships are statistically significant at $p<0.05$.

Annex A

Board Qualities	Sub-qualities	Variable	Definition
Bandwidth	**Committee meeting attendance rate**	Attendance in committee	Attendance of committee meetings
	Board meeting attendance rate	Attendance in board	Attendance of board meetings
Board Culture	**Active participation as a norm**	Norms of participation	Social expectations surrounding active participation; measured with 5 indicators, e.g., 'approval/disapproval for asking uncritical questions in meetings', 'approval/disapproval for careful scrutiny of information prior to meetings'
	Discussing differing opinions as a norm	Norms of disagreement	Social expectations facilitating a safe space in disagreement; measured with 2 indicators, e.g., 'approval/disapproval for expressing disagreement with others in a meeting'
	Personally motivated to invest in charity's cause	Personal motives	Extent to which a board member is passionate about the charity's cause; measured with 4 indicators, e.g., 'volunteering for the cause (excluding board membership)'

Annex A

Board Qualities	Sub-qualities	Variable	Definition
Expertise	**Expertise in charity governance**	Expertise in oversight	Expertise in ethics, legal, compliance, and risk management
	Expertise in charity operations	Expertise in NPO	Expertise in non-profit management, specifically in volunteer management, financial management, programme content development, and community development
	Expertise in strategy	Expertise in strategy	Expertise in strategy and political acumen
	Expertise in fundraising	Expertise in funding	Expertise in fundraising and ensuring charity's sustainability
	Expertise in public relations	Expertise in external relations	Expertise in building networks and public relations
Social Capital	**Expansive external social networks**	External social capital	Relations with people outside the charity who are in positions of influence
	Appointments on other boards	Member on other boards	Number of other charity boards that board member sits on
	Strong internal social ties	Internal social capital	Good relations with other board members and management; measured with 5 indicators, e.g., 'frequency of spending time with other board members socially'
Independence	**Independent recruitment of board**	Independent recruitment	Personal relations not being the basis for recruitment to charity board

Annex A

Board Functions	Variable	Definition
Advocacy	**Advocacy**	Extent to which individual board members actively promote the charity and expand its external reach; measured with 3 indicators, e.g., frequency of 'speaking positively about the charity or its activities to external parties','drawing on personal networks to identify people or resources that may be beneficial to the charity or its mission'
Oversight	**Oversight**	Board members' contributions to core governance responsibilities, including fulfilling legal and fiduciary duties through active engagement; measured with 2 indicators, e.g., personal contribution to and importance of 'carrying out legal and fiduciary duties', 'ensuring compliance and attention to good governance'
Strategic Direction	**Strategic direction**	Strategic direction reflects board members'contributions to shaping the charity's longterm direction; measured with 5 indicators, e.g., personal contribution to and importance of 'anticipating challenges that may be faced by the charity and recommending strategies to address such challenges', 'encouraging charity to innovate'

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