

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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An exploratory study of English university governing body roles

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Abstract: This study contributes to the understanding of English university governance by analysing governors' views regarding governing body purpose, stakeholders, roles and influences on their perceptions. It is based upon semi-structured interviews with over 60 governors representing a broad cross-section of member types across five English university case studies. An understanding of internal, external and individual influences on members' perceptions is sought. A range of existing governance theories are deployed to inform the analysis.

The majority of governors identified nine key roles, aligned to strategic, oversight and support high-level roles, and five key influences. Analysis revealed several cross-cutting themes. Three relate to influences, including the importance of member characteristics, the emergence of 'new' stakeholders and the significance of context. Two relate to the roles themselves. Governors agree about 'governance versus management' in their strategy and oversight roles but views differ regarding support and service roles. A potential conceptual framework of dimensions of university governing body-level governance is proposed.

Paper: 1. Introduction

This paper sets out how English university governing body members understand their roles and influences on these perceptions, based on over 60 governing body member interviews across five university case studies. It identifies cross-cutting themes and proposes a conceptual framework of dimensions of university governing body-level governance.

Studies of university governance have mostly overlooked governing bodies, except for two small-scale studies (Berezi 2008, Buck 2012). The existing university governing body discourse remains largely conceptual and normative (Bargh et al 1996, Kezar 2006, Horvath 2017). The new English regulatory regime puts more onus on governing bodies. Scholars have identified "boardism", "corporatisation" and "laicization" of university governance in response to funding constraints and marketisation (Kretek et al 2013, Stensaker & Vabo 2013, Veiga et al 2015, Shattock & Horvath 2020) and said "shared governance" – academics' roles in decision-making – is not working (Shattock 2002, Bowen & Tobin 2015). Governing body effectiveness research emphasizes the need to clarify governing body roles (Chait et al 1991, Greatbatch 2014).

2. Analytical framework

My research adopts three high-level role clusters – strategy, control and service – for analytical purposes (Zahra & Pearce 1989). It also builds on Hung’s (1998) governing body role typology by exploring individual along with internal and external influences. It considers how corporate governance theories might help explain governors’ perceptions of governing body roles, as illustrated below (Cornforth 2003).

Table 1: Potential roles and related theories

Potential roles	Underlying theories	Early scholars
Checking compliance	Agency	Fama & Jensen 1983
Ratifying decisions/rubberstamping	Managerial hegemony	Mace 1971
Supporting management	Stewardship	Donaldson 1990
Safeguarding stakeholder interests	Stakeholder	Freeman 1984
Securing resources	Resource dependence	Pfeffer & Salancik 1978
Providing legitimacy	Institutional	Selznick 1957

Source: Hung 1998, Cornforth 2003

3. Methodology

The research is based on case studies across a purposive sample of five English university governing bodies, including two Post-1992 and three Pre-1992 universities. 61 governors - 22 internal including all five Vice-Chancellors and a range of staff and student members - and 39 external, including all five Chairs from four different sectors and others with a range of demographic characteristics and experiences. Semi-structured interviews explored governors’ understandings of governing body purpose, stakeholders, roles and influences on their perceptions.

Interviews took place from January to July 2020, with two cases being conducted face-to-face and three remotely due to the pandemic. All further data analysis - iterative coding and thematic analysis - took place from August 2020, with each case study written in turn. I checked the cases for consistency and identified cross-cutting themes.

4. Governing body roles and cross-cutting themes

The majority of governors across four or more case study universities identified nine key governing body roles: approving strategy; shaping strategy; monitoring the delivery of strategy; agreeing key performance indicators and targets; assuring compliance with legal, regulatory, and funder requirements; identifying risks; understanding the student experience; providing expert advice and

acting as a 'critical friend'. Governors were least confident about their roles in overseeing academic governance and monitoring the delivery of strategy. Roles mapped to amended clusters of strategy, oversight and support. Governors identified five key influences on their roles: two internal – the Vice-Chancellor's approach and organisational culture; two external – the Office for Students and the introduction of tuition fees; and one individual – their executive and non-executive experiences of governance.

Analysis revealed five cross-cutting themes. Three related to influences on roles – including the relative importance of governing body member characteristics (e.g. sector background and gender) compared to governing body composition (e.g. size and membership); the emergence of 'new' governing body stakeholders, including students and the Office for Students; and the significance of environmental and institutional contextual considerations. Two related to the roles themselves. Governors largely agreed about their strategy and oversight roles, consistent with agency theory, with the governing body responsible for 'governance', that is decision control (approving and monitoring) and the Executive responsible for 'management', that is decision management (initiating and implementing). Governors identified a third group of internally-focussed support roles, consistent with stewardship theory, as opposed to externally-focussed service roles, consistent with resource dependency theory, found in other governing body research.

Three dimensions of university governing body-level governance are proposed. The degree of integration relates to the general scope of the governing body work, and specifically, in the areas of strategy, oversight and support. The nature of involvement relates to the Vice-Chancellor's approach and the governing body members' capacity and capability. The level of legitimacy pertains to key stakeholder perceptions regarding the governing body in the context of wider institutional governance. A range of indicators are proposed for each.

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