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Governance in European HEIs: voices from the campuses.(0132)

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Abstract

Most comparative studies of university governance focus at system level and the relationship between the state and the university system and institutions. This paper reports on a small benchmarking project drawing out perceptions from actors within the institutions – their responses to policy change, to system constraints, to processes of decision making and accountability and to organisation culture.

Paper

The national context

The changing dynamic of higher education has led national governments to review the role of HEIs in the life of the state and its citizens. Massification has led to the student body expanding beyond the next cohort of the governing class and so the abandonment of a cosy club culture where common norms and values, and trust between actors were assumed. That growth, and the entry of graduates in to public service, means that HE policy becomes a subset of public policy, focusing on reform and 'modernisation' [Shattock, 2008]. That agenda fits with new public management and an assertion that the state can no longer afford higher education and the transfer of costs to the clients, though it is worth noting that the proportion of GDP spent in the UK on HE in 2008 was the same as in 1978 when student numbers were much lower, and research activity and quality comparatively under-developed. Internationalisation has led to the perception of HE as an element in market competitiveness, of nation-building in a global context, fed by data on institutional rankings [Siganos, 2008] in an information age. Those rankings provide an easy, simple indicator of performance used to interrogate management staff about strategic achievement. Institutions also respond to agendas set at a level above the nation state as supranational bodies develop.

These, and other factors, create system complexity and novelty. The appendix to Jongbloed *et al* [2009] shows an acceleration of changes by European country in each of the five year periods since 1995. Higher education has more diverse ends prescribed by the state, and governments are uncertain/unclear about the best means to achieving those ends. There is, then, an air of trial and error in government policy, especially given the periodic switch in governing parties. This leads to something close to a garbage can model [Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972] where ends are unclear, participation in decision making keeps changing and those involved bring the same ideological solutions or stances to every problem. On the key issue of autonomy, Jongbloed *et al* [2009] identify four dimensions: organisational, policy, financial and interventional, with little common practice across national systems. That emerged also in this small study, which identified the practical operating issues involved.

Institutional experience

Whatever is happening in the rarefied atmosphere of national, and, increasingly, supranational policy arenas, institutions must go on. The main body of this paper uses data from a benchmarking exercise and reports on UK developments to record the lived reality of the governance agenda close to the operational context, where the student experience, staff research and other HE 'business' are organised and delivered. Respondents in six HEIs completed a self-analysis questionnaire and then met over two days to consider the collated findings and the researcher's analysis and commentary. The institutions included large comprehensive universities, smaller specialist institutions, old and new, Mediterranean, Scandinavian and geographical locations between those two.

There were five main topics against which data were organised. Institutions are identified by number.

<u>Governance in a policy context</u>

We have ample autonomy [4]; there are no limits to internal organisation, but…few universities have been able to use the greater flexibility given.

Universities are academically autonomous by constitution, but there are some fairly remarkable restrictions in practical working conditions [1].

HEI 5 has autonomy derived from national laws. In practice the city authorities must approve every new subject taught, but this is easy because no funds are linked to the decision

The emergence of contract agreements was common, adjusting the balance between state and institution. This increased autonomy, but for HEI 3 this was greater autonomy to decide how to implement the financial cuts imposed. Contracts also demand greater professionalism among managers and governors, but 'bland sanctions', lax external regulation and failure to implement rules on financial controls mean that gains from good internal governance and management risk being lost. There was, too, in some cases, little communication between governors and funding agents as part of the contract process [though in one institution, the senator responsible for HE funding allocations was a member of the board!], and reporting mechanisms varied in their rigour with most reports being simply 'technical'. So, in some cases, institutional autonomy came by neglect; in some cases respondents interpreted autonomy to mean academic freedom for staff: their expectations about institutional self-determination were lower than for the traditional UK universities, since most were still, or had been until recently part of the state apparatus.

Stakeholders in governance

With one exception [7], there was little movement to 'skills audits' among governors and potential new members, as in the UK. Most members represented 'constituencies' linked to the HEI, though in one case [3] streamlining had removed representatives of political parties and lobby groups to improve professionality and avoid agendas being diverted by irrelevant issues: 'too many people were able to influence resolutions without having to implement them or bear the consequences'.

Most of the sample had examples of good practice on community links:

- partnership with local and regional authorise in a Science and Technology Park [5]
- a foundation sponsored by local companies and individuals [5]
- an industry think tank to develop scenarios and strategic plans [2]
- a 'social balance sheet' to record and evaluate activities [4]
- web-based information and consultation [1, 7], most recently on strategic priorities

That last example was most developed in a specialist institution where most local employers were also alumni of the HEI.

Democracy and decision-making

Basic committee structures and senior staff roles were usually prescribed by legislation, though in two cases there was deviation from the legal requirements. In one, this was to retain previous inclusive collegial democracy rather than the corporate executive model now embedded in legislation, which also reduced the rights of part-time staff within democratic processes [7].

There were tensions among the agents of decision-making, though most agreed that 'the university is run by the President's office' [3]. Case 4 located itself in a shift from an oligarchic system to a 'demo-corporative' one. The smaller, specialist institutions operated a number of informal processes. Case 1 had a monthly 'morning market place' where 'hot' topics could be raised. Case 7 had an executive tour by the Rector to ask 'what can the executive management do to help the department fulfil its objectives?'. It also had an open door policy of access to the Rector and senior staff, used by a 'manageable' number of people but with symbolic as well as utilitarian value. The devolution/diffusion of decision-making was not universally welcomed by senior staff: 'every day somebody takes a decision; I have to take the responsibility'.

Most senates/academic councils had only advisory or regulatory functions, with committees acting as 'filters' – clearing houses doing preliminary work [4]. Any power committees had was, therefore permissive and dependant on the attitude of the rector/executive. The concept of collegiality in an academic community was not prevalent, and there are recent examples in the UK of elected members being refused permission to speak in meetings or being sanctioned for expressing critical views.

Among the benchmarked sample there was evidence of considerable student involvement right up to executive committee [4], though to claim that membership of the governing body by two transient students 'allows them full participation in and knowledge of the working of the institution' [2] is perhaps optimistic. Case 5 made extensive use of student surveys and Case 1 had a joint bulletin published by the university and the students' union.

Governance and strategy

Strategy was seen as an executive responsibility. One set of minutes of an academic council [2] had page after page of decisions on course validation or examiner appointments and covered teaching and learning

strategy in seven lines. Most governing bodies also concerned themselves with management and administrative matters. There was some embarrassed acknowledgement that there might be more widespread involvement in strategy [1]. In Case 3 the governing body had moved closer to the executive since its re-constitution. This raises the issue of how much distance is necessary for the governors to allow governors to be informed but not involved in exercising scrutiny and monitoring functions.

A recent account [Weale, 2010] of arrangements at Exeter suggests that role boundaries may have been blurred. There, governors are 'twinned' with a member of the executive in small groups that displace committees of the governors. The Senate and its members are excluded from formal involvement, even though some issues treated by these pairings are academic. There is, then, a danger of failure to separate functions and of the governors drifting to incorporation into management in a process that removes them from sitting above the organisation, able to make a disinterested evaluation. Collegiality appears to have disappeared into a corporate culture [McNay, 2006] exercised out of the light of open scrutiny.

The self-assessments presented strategy as unproblematic, though there were different approaches to the process. Case 1 started with an extensive stakeholder survey, followed by wide internal involvement to enhance commitment. Case 2 started with the draft mission and strategy being *approved* by the executive, *presented* to a joint executive/governors meeting, and *adopted* by the governing board, with faculty level strategies developed as a second phase within the adopted framework. Case 3 is going through a revolution to identify selected areas for preferential investment with decisions strongly led by financial factors. Case 5 is also budget led in an objective-rationalist way. Case 4 has a confusion: it adopts a day-to-day adaptive strategy, which leads to poor leadership, lack of control, personal agendas and strong conflicts. As with Case 7, its mission is defined by law and statute. Case 7 has completed a long and embracive review, and acknowledges 'strategy fatigue'.

Part of the issue faced by governors and managers is to reconcile equity and diversity within a context demanding compliance, uniformity and conformity. Case 4 has particular problems with staff solidarity in defence of a narrow interpretation of equity leading to standardised treatment across departments without strategic differentiation. Budgets become aggregations of ambitions and senior managers avoid decisions that may cause conflict. A joint project with an external company raised

even more clashes of values and norms and such shared governance partnerships are no longer pursued. Other challenges emerging for governance include ethical issues related to research as it pushes the boundaries of knowledge, and those relating to use of IT – not plagiarism, now mainly sorted, but behaviour within social networking sites and sanctions against civil servants [which academics are] for resisting e-based approaches to teaching and learning.

That clash of cultures operates in governance and was summarised by one respondent:

> Another element is the meeting of two cultures or traditions: tha academic community's partiality towards elaborate, detailed, eloquent and – not least – lengthy documents, on one hand, and, on the other, the precise, focused and brief tradition of the business world respresented by the external members of the board. The draft [strategy] at one point consisted of 12 pages, while the Board would prefer just 2 or 3. The final version will probably end up somewhere in between – with 5 or 6 pages – another example of the tradition of consensus –seeking behaviour.

Conclusions

The study identified areas for fuller work by institution staff. The full benchmarking group, after reviewing the report, identified a set of core, key principles for good governance:

- leadership needs to have constitutional consent
- the legislature and executive should be separate, with checks and balances on both
- professionality in governance necessitates training for democratic decision-making
- the new context of HE – enterprise and competition in a globalised world – necessitates a review of the role of bureaucratic national regimes of governance.

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