

Gender balance on the governing bodies of UK universities (0093)

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There has been significant change in the gender profile of academic and professional support staff in UK universities in the past few years. More women are having successful careers in universities and there has been improvement in promotions for women, although women still account for a very small minority of professors and senior managers (McTavish and Thomson, 2007; Tomàs et al., 2010).

Using a resource dependency and stakeholder theory approach, the aim of this paper is to consider the factors affecting representation of women on the governing bodies of UK universities. Jarboe (2013) concluded that less than one-fifth of universities had an appropriate gender balance but did not attempt any formal evaluation of the reasons for this. The paper uses current data from university websites and HESA, to analyse the gender composition of all university governing bodies in the UK in 2014, and whether there are particular characteristics which explain the variation of female membership across universities. Information was obtained about the total number of board members, whether external, university or student members, whether appointed or elected, and whether male or female. In addition data the gender of the chair of the governing body and the vice-chancellor or principal were also collected from university annual reports. For each university we collected the following data:

Student FTEs by gender and cost centre

All staff FTEs by gender and job classification

Academic staff FTEs by gender.

Our results show that females make up 31.9% of the membership of governing bodies, a substantially higher proportion than for the corporate sector and similar to female MPs. From a resource dependency perspective, this is disproportionate given that females account for the majority of students and staff in universities. There is some variation across universities and we examine a number of possible explanatory factors.

On average there were more than twice as many males (68%) than females (32%) on university governing bodies in 2014. At the extremes of the range one university only had two female board members out of 25 and one university had 15 out of 21. Given the commitment all universities have to equality and diversity it is surprising that the proportion of female members on governing bodies is so low. Indeed, the gender (im)balance on university boards is no better than for FTSE 100 companies (Treanor, 2014). The proportion of female members is remarkably consistent across different types of university, ranging from a high of 37.9% for “specialist” universities to a low of 30% for “new” universities.

Of more significance is the proportion of “external” female members to total external membership. The chair of the governing body has substantial influence over the appointment of external members and, therefore, we might expect a higher proportion of external female members than female members as a whole. Perhaps surprisingly the proportion of external female members (32.1%) is almost identical to the proportion of female members in total (31.9) although there are some differences within the groupings. In particular, the proportion of external female members is higher for Russell Group universities and “specialist” universities but lower for the other groups

The proportion of female members of university governing bodies is much lower than the proportion of female members of staff. For example, in “new” universities female staff make up 50% of the total staff but female governors only account for 30% of board membership. The disparity is lowest for Pre-92 universities where the proportion of female staff is 39% and the proportion of female governors is 32%. Few vice-chancellors or principals are female and this is matched by the low number of female chairs of governing bodies. However, the data shows that universities with a female vice-chancellor are more likely to have a male chair of the governing body, with the corollary also being true.

Using a simple regression model we test whether the proportion of females on boards of universities is related to the proportion of senior female staff, the proportion of female students, the type of university and if the university has a STEM focus. We also control for whether the VC or the Chair of the board is female, and also the size of the university.

The type of university does not explain the proportion of females on governing bodies. We find that female board membership is only significantly related to new universities, in that there are lower levels of female board membership at these universities. We observe that there are more external female members on boards when there is a higher proportion of female senior management and professors at the universities, but lower female lay members in boards of pre-

92 and new universities. We also observe that for female university members (insider/executive members), there is lower representation when the university is a post-92 institution and when there are more female senior managers and professors, but higher when the Vice Chancellor is female. We also observe that larger universities tend to have more female executive members. The results suggest that female representation in leadership roles at Universities play an important role in getting more women on boards. Also, the size of university is significant, where universities with greater visibility are likely to have more females on their boards.

There are three main limitations to this research. First, the data was collected for one academic year 2014-15 and therefore represents a single snapshot of the membership of the governing bodies of UK universities. Second, the paper has focused only on the representation of women on the governing bodies of universities and has ignored other groupings, specifically black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. Third, we have not addressed the question of whether having female members makes a difference in terms of decision making.

References

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