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Preliminary findings regarding English university governing body composition

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Abstract: University governing bodies are largely overlooked in governance research. Existing governing body discourse is largely conceptual and normative (Horvath 2017). Little empirical work has been done and most of it is out of date. Yet, the role of English university governing bodies is receiving more attention from regulators and stakeholders.

This paper reviews preliminary findings regarding the composition of England's 120 university governing bodies. It forms part of doctoral research into the roles of university governing bodies, partly framed by governance theories seldom considered in an academic environment. The research is based on publicly available information regarding structures and characteristics of 2,261 governing body members. It considers possible links between roles and characteristics. It then examines structural differences and provides thought-provoking insights regarding governing body diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, qualifications, and sector experience.

Paper: 1. Introduction

This paper sets out preliminary findings regarding English university governing body composition. It forms part of my doctoral research into the roles of these bodies, being conducted at system and university level.

The origins of university governance structures are well researched (Kerr & Gade 1989, Marginson & Considine 2000, Shattock 2017). However, the existing university governing body discourse is largely conceptual and normative (Kezar 2006, Greatbatch 2014, Horvath 2017). This is partly because little empirical work has been conducted and, with the exception of Shattock & Horvath (2019 forthcoming), that which has been done is out of date and mainly US-based (Kerr & Gade 1989, Chait et al 1991, Bargh et al 1996, and Kezar 2006).

Yet, university governing bodies are receiving more attention from stakeholders. The new regulator, the Office for Students, relies on them to oversee all aspects of the university, including academic

governance. It also requires governing body's "size, composition, diversity, skills mix...is appropriate for the nature, scale and complexity of the provider" (Office for Students Regulatory Framework, p145).

Researchers have identified the "corporatization" of university governance in response to funding constraints, marketisation and quests for efficiency and effectiveness (Christopher 2012, Kretek et al 2013, Stensaker & Vabo 2013). Further, it is argued "shared governance" – emphasizing academics' roles in institutional decision-making – is not working (Shattock 2002, Birnbaum 2004, Bowen & Tobin 2015). Work on governing body effectiveness emphasizes the need to clarify governing body roles (Chait et al 1991, Greatbatch 2014).

2. Analytical framework

My research examines university governing body roles (per Cornforth 2003 and illustrated here in *italic*) through the lens of corporate governance theories as set out in Hung's 1998 typology, including agency (checking compliance), stewardship (supporting management), managerial hegemony (ratifying decisions), stakeholder (safeguarding needs), resource dependency (securing resources), institutional (providing legitimacy) along with Huse's (2007) value creation theory (composite role). I illustrate below how the roles (per Cornforth) might influence governing body member characteristics.

Table 1: Potential Characteristics by Role

Roles

checking compliance

supporting the executive

safeguarding stakeholder needs

securing resources

providing legitimacy

3. Methodology

The study population is 120 English universities in receipt of public funds; reporting requirements yield greater data. University websites were the primary source. This approach provides a wealth of rich data without the need for resource-intensive surveys. The limitations, however, relate to inconsistency of information provided. The data was collected in autumn 2017 and updated in spring 2019.

An attempt was made to replicate, as much as possible, the characteristics captured in the most recent large-scale empirical study of UK university governing bodies (Bargh et al 1996). Where available, the following characteristics were captured: types of members and numbers of each; gender, ethnicity (estimated), citizenship; academic and professional qualifications; and up to two executive and up to three non-executive/trustee positions.

In addition to structure and demographics, occupation, employment status and executive and non-executive work experience were captured. Analysis included clustering members into groups according to employment status and extent of non-executive director/trustee experience. Members were also clustered by the predominant sector of their executive experience.

Due to historic differences in their foundation, English universities have effectively three different governing body structures – Oxbridge, other Pre-92s and Post-92s (Shattock 2006). The initial findings are presented here by these three groups of universities, with significant variances noted by subgroup (such as Civic and 1960s within the Pre-92s and Cathedral and specialist in addition to the former polytechnics within the Post-92s). The numbers exclude vacant board positions.

4. Initial Findings

English university governing bodies have over 2.2k members. The average size is 18.8, ranging from 11 to 26. Older universities have more internal members, primarily academics and students. Newer universities have relatively more non-academic staff members, as shown below.

Table 2: English University Governing Body Composition

Group	# of universities
Oxbridge	2
Pre-92s	47
Post-92s	71
Total	120
% women	

On average, gender does not vary by institution group, however 30 universities still have fewer than 33% women members. Gender diversity varies by member type. Only 26% and 27% of the chairs and vice-chancellors are women, but women comprise 52% of the 75 deputy chairs.

With regard to ethnic diversity, the earlier wave found 92% of the known sample was white. Students are the most ethnically diverse members (24%). Chairs and deputy chairs, vice-chancellors and academic members were 99%, 97% and 96% white, respectively.

Academics and alumni have been identified within the external governor population. 54 universities have a total of 68 academics, with the newest and Cathedral universities having the highest numbers. This might indicate they add legitimacy or lend support to the executive teams. 64 universities indicate alumni members. 75% of the older universities have an average of 3 alumni members, resulting in fewer “independent” members.

Chair characteristics warrant attention. 37% of chairs are active executives, in addition to their non-executive roles. Specialist universities are the highest subgroup at 54%. 44% of chairs have a predominantly corporate background. 25% come from civil service and public sector, peaking at 53% in the 1960s universities. 15% are professionals - accountants, lawyers and management consultants. 9% have worked in academia.

5. Next Steps

Further analysis of experience along with qualifications and ethnicity are underway. Insights gained from documentary analysis will be incorporated. Analysis will also be conducted to identify if chair characteristics – and any other institutional factors – appear to influence governing body composition. The datasets will be compared to previous studies.

These findings will inform expert interviews along with case study selection criteria for this research. However, it also represents a significant contribution to our knowledge of English university governing bodies - not only the structures but also key member characteristics.

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