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Understanding and Developing Deliberative Approaches to University Governance

**Research report
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Executive Summary

This report sets out the results of a review of existing research on deliberation in the context of university governance – an area of scholarship that, while both promising and increasingly relevant, is still nascent and in need of further development. Drawing on an initial analysis of 140 articles and book chapters that engage with the issue, the review presents a number of observations about deliberative university governance. For one, the review demonstrates that deliberation is a significant idea within university governance, both by virtue of a growing number of researchers giving it a central place in their work as well as the frequency of references to deliberation in discussion. That this occurs across various fields adds to a sense of its wider relevance. Nonetheless, the review also demonstrates that conceptual approaches to deliberation in the literature vary considerably. Some authors tie their engagement to established political theory, while others provide no definition, and others occupy a middle path to varying effects.

In practical terms, the review demonstrates that deliberation is invoked in a variety of formats and contexts within universities. In addition to innovations intended to further deliberative approaches, both proposed and instituted, the review shows that authors regularly make claims about deliberation being a common feature of different bodies in university governance. Accordingly, in addition to scholarship making normative claims that university governance *should* be deliberative, scholarship also makes descriptive claims or assumptions about governance already being deliberative. Such claims are, however, not based on empirical research. While such broad trends are identifiable, the report points to the need for both empirical research on both conventional and innovative practices alike and highlights the need for more thorough, systematic theory regarding deliberative university governance and its relationship to longstanding models in the field. In all, then, this review offers an initial analysis of an emerging field and offers direction for future research.

1. Introduction

Over the last several decades, deliberative democracy has evolved to become a major field in both research and practice. Researchers have understood deliberative democracy in a variety of different ways over time. From a more applied perspective, deliberative democracy is reflected in efforts to make collective decisions through deliberation as a distinctive form of communication—“mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern” (p. 2)—rather than through alternatives like aggregating individual preferences (Bächtiger et al., 2018). For Gutmann and Thompson (2004), deliberative democracy centres on ensuring that collective decisions can be meaningfully justified on the basis of a vigorous exchange of reasons that “appeal to principles that individuals who are trying to find fair terms of cooperation cannot reasonably reject” (p. 4). More recently, Scudder (2020) emphasized the crucial role of listening in enabling people to adequately consider each other’s reasons and perspectives.

Unsurprisingly, political scientists have been particularly active in the development of deliberative democracy, with the field going through multiple ‘turns’ (see, e.g., Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010; Florida, 2018; Palumbo, 2024). The field’s ‘practical turn’, for example, refers to efforts to translate the core normative tenets of deliberative democracy into real-world settings (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2010). To illustrate this practical turn in practice, an application that has galvanized considerable attention in recent years from academics, policymakers, and activist is deliberative mini-publics, which refer to “carefully designed forums where a representative subset of the wider population come together to engage in open, inclusive, informed and consequential discussions on one or more issues” (Curato et al., 2021, p. 3). Mini-publics have been implemented around the world on a vast array of topics, including the 2017 Citizens’ Assembly on Brexit (Renwick et al., 2018) and the 2023 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (Curato et al., 2023). Beyond mini-publics, researchers have identified myriad other ways of instantiating deliberative democracy in the real world, such as Ackerman and Fishkin’s (2004) proposed ‘Deliberation Day’, a two-day civic holiday convened prior to presidential elections. Insights from deliberative democracy have been applied in various non-state contexts like corporations (Ferraro, 2019), multi-stakeholder initiatives (Pek et al., 2023), schools (Nishiyama, 2019), and cooperatives (Gonzalez, 2025).

Higher education institutions have garnered growing attention in recent years as promising contexts for more deliberative approaches to governance. For example, research has begun exploring the relevance of deliberative approaches to policy development on specific issues like curriculum development (Feldt, 2023), student equity (Hampton, 2013), and developing standards for the advancement of Indigenous cultural competency in Australian law schools (Wood & Levy, 2018). Many universities have implemented, or are in the process of implementing, deliberative practices to engage their stakeholders. For example, in 2023-2024 the University of Copenhagen’s Faculty of Social Sciences undertook a climate assembly (University of Copenhagen Faculty of Social Sciences, 2024). The University of Paris-Est Créteil has formalized the use of deliberative assemblies involving both students and staff, convening them annually to address various sustainability-related topics affecting the institution (Frenkiel, 2026).

As background context for readers, we briefly describe the origins of our interest in this topic, given our different disciplinary backgrounds (Jeffrey in law, Simon in business). Both of us have long had a scholarly interest in deliberative democracy. As we began settling into our faculty roles, we perceived several opportunities to improve the way students are engaged on campus in order to improve university decision-making. Inspired by the practical turn, we began our journey by looking for ways to bring deliberation to life in our own institutions. In 2021, Jeffrey led the implementation of the *Students' Jury on pandemic Learning* at Queen Mary University of London's School of Law, in which participants sought to develop recommendations about how the School ought to tackle teaching amidst the pandemic (Queen Mary University of London School of Law, 2021; see, also, Kennedy, 2023). In 2020, Simon was part of the core team that implemented the *Students' Dialogue on Democratic Engagement* at the University of Victoria, a pilot program intended to explore whether and how deliberative mini-publics could be used on campus to meaningfully engage students on public policy issues (University of Victoria, 2021). This initiative helped inspire the 2025 *Students' Assembly on Reducing Harms from Toxic Drugs*, in which participants developed an array of recommendations focused on helping the university prevent and reduce potential harms associated with toxic drugs (University of Victoria, 2025). Our initial practical experiences set the stage for an emerging research program on the topic. For example, in Pek and Kennedy (2025), we drew on our analysis of the London School of Economics Student Union's 2022 Democracy Review—which we supported in an advisory capacity—to unpack various forms of impact that can flow from deliberative mini-publics in the university context. We have also advocated for more deliberation in universities (e.g., Kennedy & Pek, 2024) and collaborated on an effort to provide practical guidance to practitioners interested in pursuing student mini-publics (Ellis et al., 2023). In short, this is a topic that we are both personally and professionally interested in.

Our own experiences, combined with our deepening exposure to others' research and practice over time, have opened our eyes to the transformative potential of deliberative democracy in university settings. While prior research on the topic provides important insights, it is currently fragmented, with pockets of research investigating specific topics and practices largely in silos. This omission is striking not only because of the significant degree of prominence and promise that characterizes deliberative scholarship in other state- and non-state contexts, but also because of higher education scholarship's success in developing various normative and descriptive models of university governance (e.g., Birnbaum, 1991; Trakman, 2008). Accordingly, we see it as essential that research in this area is advanced. In this way, the SRHE's Scoping award program is an ideal opportunity to synthesize and make sense of prior research at the nexus of deliberative democracy and university governance with an eye on identifying promising opportunities for future research and practical experimentation. This review is therefore an initial effort to collect and analyze, at a high level, existing research at this intersection.

2. Approach

This review sought to aggregate, clarify, and begin organizing the disparate research, both theoretical and empirical, related to deliberation and university governance, as well as establish gaps and determine directions for future research. In all, our approach reflects what Gough (2007) calls a “thematic review”—a common form of review that explores a particular theme in the literature without necessarily employing the formalized rigour of a fully systematic review. Because our pre-existing familiarity with some of this field formed a starting point, the approach also took on elements of Gough’s (2007) “expert review”, which “is informed by the skill and experience of the reviewer in that particular field” (Briner & Denyer, 2012, p. 114).

In conducting this review, we first sought to identify relevant research at our identified intersection, as it appeared in academic journals and scholarly books. Building on some articles with which we were already familiar, a research assistant used Google Scholar to search for works employing the language of “deliberation”, “deliberative”, “deliberate”, and other variants within articles and book chapters discussing universities and their governance. Accordingly, the above terms were searched in tandem with key words related to the latter: for instance, searching for “deliberation” AND “university governance” or “higher education.” Within our search terms, we also included “dialogue” and close variants, as we recognized that ostensibly similar conversations might occur using that language and did not want to exclude relevant substance for formal reasons. From these, forward and backwards citation tracking was used to identify other relevant texts. No limits were placed on a date range for publication.

In terms of university governance, we recognize that this is a broad term. For example, Sultana (2012, p. 348) argues that it “refers to higher level strategic thinking, to the articulation of overarching goals that give the community or institution a sense of direction, as well as to the establishment of the legitimate frameworks that regulate interaction between members, including the rights and responsibilities of various actors, as well as the promulgation of laws, policies, and instruments of implementation.” As part of this breadth, governance can certainly include a variety of actors, bodies, policies, and decision making processes outside individual institutions that impact university life (see, e.g., Vidovich & Currie, 2011). In our focus, however, we have chosen to generally adopt what Musselin (2021) termed a *meso* perspective, focusing primarily on governance internal to universities rather than among universities and other societal actors, though we accept that the distinction is not always clear-cut.

Approximately 200 articles and book chapters on our target intersection were collected. Because we did not use entirely systematic keyword searches nor formal inclusion/exclusion criteria, this body of literature is not comprehensive and, while we prioritized those that seemed most applicable, some relevant texts may not have been included. However, this review does represent a sizeable and highly relevant portion of the literature that allows for broad trends to be identified in line with our purposes.

Of the articles and chapters that were collected, 140 of them were initially assessed according to broader, pre-set focuses rather than through a formal inductive or deductive coding process. For 122 of these articles and chapters, this entailed a research assistant summarizing and excerpting texts, identifying chiefly (i) the context in which deliberation was invoked, (ii) how it was conceptualized, and (iii) the ways in which it was

incorporated into theory or practice. The remaining 18 were reviewed by the authors to supplement the prior summaries. We then examined and reflected on the summaries and our notes to identify broad trends and omissions in the literature relevant to the focus of this review. It is worth noting that, because we did not adopt a formal systematic review methodology, it is possible that bias may have crept into different parts of our analysis despite our efforts to be objective.

The key observations coming out of this analysis are reported below. Within these, we focus specifically on *deliberation* rather than dialogue. While some very similar trends might be noted about the role of dialogue in higher education literature, the distinct notion is less rooted in theoretical frameworks and may require more detailed and systematic analysis. In any case, our intention in including this within our searches was ultimately to support our focus on deliberation rather than to conduct a review of dialogue *per se*, and thus its exclusion does not affect the results we share below.

3. Results: Deliberation and University Governance

a. Interest in Deliberative Governance

Despite the fact that deliberation and university governance is not yet a particularly developed intersection in scholarly literature, the term “deliberation”—in addition to other, potentially related terms like “dialogue”—is invoked quite frequently in higher education research. The review examined one hundred and forty scholarly works using these terms, though this was far from comprehensive. A limited number of these works focused on deliberation in reasonable depth, and tended to be more recent, following the deliberative turn in political philosophy and science more generally. For instance, Croucher (2025) specifically drew on deliberative democratic theory to explore ways of navigating challenges in more deliberative ways. Evidenced by the title of their article, Hampton (2013) places the focus squarely on “Deliberative Governance in Higher Education.” However, the extent to which deliberation is itself a central aspect of the research speaking to the topic varies. A significant portion of the articles and chapters reviewed spoke to deliberation in passing or incidental ways. For example, in discussing governance reforms in the European context, Capano and Regini (2014, p. 78) mention deliberation only once in noting that “the formal structure of university governance was based on the existence of collegial deliberative bodies,” without further discussion.

Setting aside the substance of what scholarship says about deliberation, the frequency itself suggests that scholars see something in the term that they think is relevant to common practices or ideals within university governance. Even absent a normative commitment to deliberation, this ready connection suggests that further research might be warranted to better understand the current place of deliberation in higher education and research on higher education. Notably, our review revealed that research discussing deliberation in university governance appears in a wide variety of journals, indicating attention across different disciplines or fields.

Our target research appeared most frequently in journals with a focus on Education, Management, Business, and Public Administration. Research also appeared in journals touching on areas of Political Science, Law, Public Policy, and Sociology, as well as specific angles engaging topics across fields, including Leadership, Behaviour, and Sustainability. Accordingly, deliberative university governance is something that has been, and is likely to continue to be, an interdisciplinary field. While there are inevitably disciplinary differences as a result of this, the below findings focus on broad trends across this scholarship without analyzing tendencies within subject areas.

b. Conceptual Approaches to Deliberative Governance

One aspect of the broad trends at this intersection is perhaps conceptual in nature and relates to the ways in which the term “deliberation” is invoked within literature. Here, our review suggested that the terminology of “deliberation” is used in inconsistent or variable ways. A similar trend was noted with respect to the use of dialogue, though we focus here on deliberation as our core interest. Taking into account the developed theory on deliberative democratic decision-making, references to deliberation within research on university government can be seen to vary along the lines of both definitional clarity and

adherence to established theory. At one end of the spectrum, deliberation is employed without any definition being indicated at all. This was the case in most of the works reviewed in this study.

For example, Denis, Côté, and Hébert (2023) invoke the idea in the context of decision making about teaching and career development that occurs through “deliberation”, while Revitt and Luyk (2016) point to deliberation about library policy as a Library Council function; however, neither define the term or unpack its components. Mignot-Gérard (2003) references “deliberative bodies” or “deliberative structures” at a variety of points in their analysis, without explaining the meaning or expectations of deliberation as compared to other forms of decision-making or engagement. Perhaps a step further, Maxwell and Hamilton (2023, p. 679) contrast “deliberation” associated with faculty membership with a “corporate executive leadership model,” but also do so without explaining that deliberative quality and how it differs from the alternative.

On the other end of the spectrum, authors have more closely aligned their use of the term with established, more robust theorizing of deliberation within political theory. In these respects, authors have used a fairly comprehensive notion of deliberation, centred not only on reason-giving and persuasion, but listening, all oriented toward arriving at consensus. In many such cases, scholars have explicitly tied their research to authors such as John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, John Dryzek, and Seyla Benhabib. These works include recent writing as well as that dating back decades – albeit still occurring after the deliberative turn led by the aforementioned authors – and are often those that entail a more concerted focus on the significance of deliberative democracy for university governance.

For instance, Aidnik (2024, pp. 98–99) defines deliberation in some depth, including by contrasting it with other modes of decision making while citing Habermas and others:

“Participants offer reasons to persuade one another of the proper course of action or problem-solving strategy”, adding that “[t]he legitimate force is the peculiar force of the (better) argument. In EPG decisions are made in a way which allows a significant place for listening and perhaps accepting alternative arguments and good reasons, rather than simply engaging in bargaining, strategic maneuvering, exchanges of favours and so forth.”

Hoareau (2012) likewise grounds their analysis in deliberative democratic scholarship and sets out three “minimal conditions” on which deliberation relies: justification through reasoned argument, openness to others’ arguments, and reciprocity. Likewise, Croucher (2025) engages very directly with deliberative theorists in unpacking the ideals at the heart of their work.

Importantly, grounding in deliberative theory should not be taken to mean that deliberation is conceptualized the same in each, as different scholars in higher education may gravitate toward different political theorists (see, e.g., Hampton, 2013; Mashabela, 2011). Both the theorist and the time at which their work is cited can impact the notion of deliberation being engaged with. For instance, Marginson’s (2006) work drawing on Habermas lacks much by way of discussion about listening and humility that might be emphasized in more recent deliberative scholarship.

Other work sits somewhere in the middle of these ends. This might happen in various ways, such as pointing to some elements of deliberation without noting other significant aspects, invoking ideas that may be outside conceptions of deliberation found within the literature, or implying definitions that have to be inferred, with different degrees of clarity. For instance, Cameron and Tschirhart (1992) use the term—in a way that does not reflect deliberation as a distinct mode of political interaction—to refer to what appears to be negotiation processes or just any participatory decision making (c.f., Mansbridge, 2009). As a distinct example, Boden and Rowlands (2022, p. 263) use “deliberations” in referring to the content of committee meetings that determine Vice-Chancellor remuneration, but do so without defining the term or unpacking its components, possibly using it as another term for the “debate” that they reference just prior.

The variation across strongly theorized and ambiguously defined invocations of deliberation reveals some issues with undefined references to these terms that, as noted above, are common. Certainly, there is nothing that requires authors to define every term they use in their writing. However, part of the challenge with deliberation in the context of university governance is that, definitionally, the term can also refer more loosely to things like individual reflection or consideration, which are distinct from the kind of deliberations relevant to democratic or political theory (*Deliberation*, 2026). Relatedly, and depending on how one conceives of deliberation in the latter context, it may be that deliberation is conflated, as is sometimes apparent, with distinct or more minimal notions of debate or mere rational discussion (Kennedy & Pek, 2024). In such cases, scholars might speak past each other, using distinct understandings, or may develop scholarship on university deliberation in ways that are varied—and even inaccurate—but not explicitly so. A lack of clarity with respect to the intended meaning of terminology might also inhibit the field’s ability to identify necessary components of deliberation within the university or ways in which they can be realized.

c. Practice-Oriented Research on Deliberative Governance

The research we canvassed in our review points to numerous ways deliberation has or might be practiced in ways that broadly relate to university governance. We distill these into three main categories for ease of presentation; however, we note that there is some inevitable blurriness and overlap among the categories.

The first is *deliberation within existing university governance bodies*. Several studies we reviewed describe bodies, including library councils (Revitt & Luyk, 2016), university senates (Pennock et al., 2016), and advisory councils (Mignot-Gérard, 2003), as potential sites of deliberation. For example, Baldrige and Kemerer (1976, p. 392) argue that university senates, when they perform according to their potential, “are the arena where faculty and administrators meet as educational professionals to deliberate on matters of shared concern, providing the forums for the academic community’s deliberations in curriculum matters, budgetary issues, and other professional activities.” However, many of the studies discussing deliberation in these bodies suggest that deliberations therein may be challenging. For example, some participants in Pennock and colleagues’ (2016) study on Canadian university senates’ performance highlighted concerns including expansive agendas with insufficient time for deliberation, power imbalances among participants, and deference to the university administration’s viewpoints. Other research

points to a role for deliberation within various stakeholder organizations that contribute to university governance (Vukasovic, 2018).

We term the second *deliberative consultation*. By this, we mean deliberate attempts to incorporate deliberation into formal consultations with one or more university stakeholders. Here, there is a wide range of specific practices. We highlight several examples to illustrate this variety. Hampton (2013) discusses efforts to make policy development on issues within the domain of teaching and learning more deliberative. For example, to support the development of policy about student equity, a series of “deliberative workshops”, grounded in data and a discussion guide, were held across the university. Escher and colleagues (2017) report on a three-month case study of online deliberation focused on developing standards and policies pertaining to the granting of doctoral degrees. The process was iterative and unfolded in multiple steps, beginning with an open stage in which participants could propose, vote on, and discuss proposals and culminating in consideration by the department’s faculty council. Mallory (2010) describes how the University of New Hampshire undertook significant deliberations on topics including diversity, alcohol consumption, and university governance. For example, the university’s deliberations on diversity included multiple “study circles” aimed at articulating a shared vision that accounts for a seminal court decision on affirmative action. Delbecq and colleagues (2013) overview a collaborative governance model at a liberal arts college in the United States, which is centered on University Policy Committees that comprise a small number of individuals representing core stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty) who deliberate and make recommendations about policies. As a final example, Locke (2019) overviews Brown University’s comprehensive deliberations focused on the contentious issue of developing action plans on diversity and inclusion, which included a large number of deliberative forums across faculties.

The third category is *deliberative mini-publics*, which we defined in the introduction. They have been proposed by scholars including Dienes (2023) and Kennedy and Pek (2023) as a way of improving university governance. Dienes (2023) argues that deliberative mini-publics could help improve the quality of decision-making in universities and proposes various alternative governance models that use deliberative mini-publics in different ways. Kennedy and Pek (2023) argue that deliberative mini-publics can be used to engender student participation in university governance that has a higher degree of deliberative capacity than traditional alternatives like student representation on governance bodies. Beyond scholarly calls to action, deliberative mini-publics have been used in practice at a growing number of universities, including Western Sydney University’s (2022) student panel charged with developing recommendations on improving student voice. After deliberations spanning two months, the thirty-two panelists made numerous recommendations, including the creation of an online forum allowing students to confidentially voice issues that would be considered and responded to by administrators.

Across all of these and other examples, the literature focusing on deliberation vis-à-vis practice does so in two different senses. On one hand, a segment of the literature that invokes deliberation in the context of university governance does so in an explicitly normative sense – that is, it argues that university governance *should be* deliberative, without claiming that it *is* currently deliberative. Indeed, some works, such as Dienes (2023), proceed on the basis that governance is not deliberative enough and seek to help make it so through reforms.

At times, however, the literature expresses a claim or makes an assumption that university structures are in fact deliberative in nature – a *descriptive* rather than normative claim. On the explicit side, Aidnik (2024, p. 96) provides a clear example in claiming “[d]eliberation is currently part of university decision-making, existing at various levels from the department to various committees or working groups.” In other cases, it seems assumed. For example, Carey (2018, pp. 11–12 emphasis added, see, also, 2013a; McMillan, 2017) comments on student engagement policy in saying that “[a particular agency’s] vision for engagement is expansive, with a clear expectation that activity is embedded into a *university’s deliberative structures*.” This statement, therefore, seems to proceed on the basis that universities do indeed *have* deliberative structures – a descriptive claim.

Likewise, it seems fairly common within the literature on university governance to refer to various bodies within the structures of governance as being “deliberative” bodies. This is so with respect to various committees (Carey, 2013b, p. 1294) but is especially common with respect to university senates and comparable bodies across jurisdictions. For instance, Jones and colleagues (2001) employ this language in Canada, Heaney (2010) uses it in the United States, Boffo and colleagues (2008) use it regarding France and Italy, and Schwaag Serger and colleagues (2015) use it in discussing university governance in China. In such cases, the terminology suggests these bodies are, in a descriptive sense, deliberative.

To be sure, in at least *some* cases this terminology might be employed to suggest that the *idea* behind these types of bodies is that they are deliberative, even if they fail to be so in practice. Accordingly, Pennock and colleagues (2016) point to university senates’ roles as “deliberative” bodies while acknowledging the tendencies that undermine their deliberative quality. Absent these kinds of qualifications, however, literature often implies, if not directly claims, that senates are deliberative in nature. In some cases, scholarship seems to use descriptive and normative claims simultaneously. For example, this is the case in Agunza’s (2024) writing on Nigerian university governance, when they characterize governance as a “deliberative process” but also indicate that councils are “expected” to deliberate.

Descriptive claims about university governance being deliberative are notable for at least two reasons. The first is that it reinforces the idea that deliberation does hold some notable place in university governance thought. Just as the sheer number of references to deliberation in the field was taken above to suggest an intuitive connection worthy of exploration, the explicit characterization of core university governance bodies as deliberative emphasizes the at least loose or intuited importance of deliberation within university governance. Presumably, there is a reason why universities would have “deliberative” bodies at the core of their design. Indeed, in Heaney’s (2010) case, this deliberative approach—albeit one not defined in the work—is touted as key in universities’ ability to withstand pressures exerted on them. The second, and more directly actionable, reason that these descriptive claims are notable is that draw into sharp relief the lack of empirical research on whether these descriptive claims are accurate.

Certainly, research on the aforementioned categories of practices varied in terms of the extent of description and evaluation. Some research, particularly in the case of deliberation within existing university governance bodies, suggests that certain practices are deliberative but doesn’t discuss their deliberative character substantively (e.g.,

Baldrige & Kemerer, 1976). Other research, such as Mallory (2010) and Locke (2019), provides more or less in-depth descriptions of deliberative practices, but does not study them empirically. Finally, some research empirically investigates specific practices, largely in terms of new initiatives aimed at enhancing deliberation specifically. In the case of deliberative consultation, Escher and colleagues (2017) assessed their online deliberation's quality and legitimacy using multiple data sources. As introduced earlier, Pek and Kennedy (2025) assessed a student mini-public using Dryzek's (2009) concept of deliberative capacity. Saleh and Gamar (2024) bridge more in-depth description and empirical study by presenting a case study of a committee they themselves were involved in, based on their own observations.

4. Future Research Directions

Based on our review, we see a number of promising directions for future research on deliberation in university governance. Indeed, the issue of deliberation and university governance is still a very much nascent intersection for research, yet also an important one warranting scholars' attention. This attention can be directed along both practical and theoretical lines.

With respect to practical dimensions, it is clear that there is considerable room for empirical research on deliberation in university governance. This is relevant not only to higher education scholars who pursue a strong normative vision of deliberative governance, but also those who continue to rely on descriptive claims of deliberation as a baseline for their research. Given the frequency with which existing governance bodies and faculty dynamics are characterized as deliberative, it is essential that these assumptions are tested—and thus bolstered or challenged—by empirical research. The significance of existing bodies like senates and committees to university governance across jurisdictions should make this a priority.

First and foremost, research here can assess whether or to what extent conventional governance bodies are in fact deliberative. This is a question for which we currently have very few answers. While research in higher education might be approaching this kind of research anew, there do exist methods from other fields that have assessed comparable questions in other areas. Accordingly, scholars interested in deliberative university governance might conduct empirical studies using frameworks like the Discourse Quality Index and others to determine the quality and inclusiveness of discourse in these bodies (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Mockler, 2022), and how that fits into broader pictures like overall deliberative capacity (Dryzek, 2009). Adding to some more theoretical accounts, scholars can also assess factors that preclude or support deliberative approaches, and how.

So too can these empirical approaches target less conventional initiatives that seek to improve deliberation in university governance. Our review indicated that there is some work along these lines, but it provides only initial indications. More research, and in different contexts, is necessary to develop a fuller understanding to guide future efforts. Relatedly, then, scholars should consider various approaches along the lines of action research, whereby practical initiatives are launched alongside an intention to study them. This was the case, for instance, in Kennedy's (2023) study of a mini-public in a law school. As Aidnik (2024, p. 97) notes, this is both natural and something universities are well-placed to accommodate: "Democracy should have an element of experimentalism about it. Universities can accommodate the more experimental and spontaneous dimensions of a direct democracy and still be able to function as modern organizations."

At the same time, this empirical research should be complemented by theoretical work that can help anchor, synthesize, and systematize the literature and the questions it deals with. As one element of this, work might more clearly distinguish how deliberation is distinct from or relates to other common modes of decision-making and political interaction within universities. While higher education research should not be anchored to one conception of deliberation, it would benefit from clarifications that can more readily help authors position and express their claims about deliberation. In particular, work might be done to distinguish deliberation from some ideas (more) common to university contexts, just as critique, debate, collegiality, and academic discourse (e.g., Aidnik, 2024)

More systematically, research in this area would benefit from rigorous modeling, whereby deliberative governance can be situated against or within existing theoretical frameworks and models of university governance. This work might be either or both descriptive and normative, but it is essential that deliberative university governance itself be positioned as a legitimate framework for elaboration and study, rather than only discussing the practice in relation to pre-existing models like collegiality or shared governance. Indeed, this is a direction that we intend to pursue in building on this review. Again, scholars might draw on the more developed fields of political theory and science in thinking this through—for instance, by drawing on literature around “deliberative systems” (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012)—while at the same time acknowledging any differences in context and adapting or leaving aside that which may not be appropriate in higher education.

5. Conclusion

Deliberation is a frequently referenced and increasingly explored feature in university governance. Yet while the theory and practice of deliberative approaches may be well-researched in governance more broadly, it is still part of an emerging field of scholarship in higher education. References to deliberation indicate that many scholars believe that conventional bodies are, in fact, deliberative while others suggest that they ought to be. However, there is little empirical research that indicates whether this is the case. While research on innovations in governance have had more of an empirical focus and should continue to be subject to experimentation and study, it is essential that the field is able to take stock of the most common and influential bodies within its structures. At the same time, research is not just needed in empirical form; foundational understandings of deliberation, how it relates to other modes of engagement in universities, and its place within or amongst different models of governance is also needed. Accordingly, higher education scholars should also pursue dedicated theoretical projects in this area. While this review itself only takes modest steps toward a more established field, our hope is that it emphasizes the relevance and need for further research and lays an initial stepping stone from which higher education scholars can pursue a more established field. There may be much to do, but there is much to learn and gain otherwise; indeed, given the fact that university governance in turns affects researchers and their work, progress in this area may continue to pay dividends.

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