University Governance, Leadership and Management in a Decade of Diversification and Uncertainty

Michael Shattock, Institute of Education, University of London, shattock@he.u-net.com

Abstract

The last decade has seen an acceleration of change in the way British universities have been governed, led and managed. This has substantially been driven by the instability of the external environment, which has encouraged a greater centralisation of decision-making leading to less governance and more management, but it is also a consequence of the growing convergence of the governance and management models of the pre- and post-1992 universities. The article identifies a rise in ‘the executive’ at the expense of the traditional components of university governance, governing bodies, senates, academic boards and faculty boards, and a growing tendency to push academic participation to the periphery. It describes the dangers implicit in such developments and suggests that they may lead to a loss in academic vitality and distinctiveness.

Introduction

A decade ago (2003) it was possible to relate the British university system quite closely to the 1992 model in which a unified university system nevertheless divided itself between pre-1992 universities that claimed to be research intensive (though sub-dividing themselves into the Russell and the 1994 Groups to reflect the size and quality of research contribution) and the post-1992 that were more teaching orientated reflecting their polytechnic past. Since then there have been two waves of new, ‘New Universities’ with a change of university status criteria, which has allowed a university title to be awarded to institutions very much smaller than previously envisaged. At the same time, the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise revealed that high quality research was
dispersed much more widely in the system than had been realised with 49 institutions having some research in the ‘world leading’ categories in all their subject-based submissions and 53 per cent of the submissions from 118 institutions falling into the two highest grades. Meantime the Russell Group itself had become more widely diversified both as a result of lowering its drawbridge to admit some 1994 Group universities and because the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise confirmed that Oxbridge, Imperial and UCL constituted a super league of research concentration. Not only is it more than 20 years since the Berlin Wall of binary policy came down bringing much greater differentiation within the university sector but differentiation has taken place within both former sectors. When to this is added a small group of private university institutions and 13 UK university overseas campuses of varying legal status and local partnership arrangements it is apparent that generalisations about governance in British higher education, if not about leadership and management, are no longer plausible in the way they were in 2003.

Largely this is because the decade has witnessed a radical change in the structure of university finance in England incorporating a whole new set of strategic and managerial incentives. In 2003, about 60 per cent of the average university’s budget came from the state through the Higher Education Funding Councils. Even then for many of the Russell Group this percentage was only 35 per cent because of the substantial percentage of their income that was derived from research grants and other sources while in some post-1992 institutions, which attracted little outside income except for overseas students’ tuition fees, it was at nearly 80 per cent. By 2015–16, 45 of the latter universities who are not likely to benefit from the Research Evaluation Framework (the successor to the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom) funding will be receiving the same, if not a greater percentage of their income from the Student Loans Company in respect of home tuition fees and will de facto, if not de jure, be no longer subject to higher education funding council control. Whereas in 2003 student numbers were tightly controlled by the funding councils, making the home student related finance predictable, since 2011 we seem to be entering an open market in England where student numbers are virtually uncapped. All institutions, therefore, are subject to greater inter-institutional competition, even in the research intensive universities, and future viability is at risk and dependent on the effectiveness of recruitment policies. The rapid progress from a £3000 ‘top up’ tuition fee introduced in 2006 to a withdrawal of state student funding altogether (except for
STEM disciplines) and the substitution of a variable fee of up to £9000 in 2012 payable via student loans in the major English system, with differing policies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, has produced a situation of great uncertainty that is bound to throw up a significant number of institutional winners and losers. Some institutions are already beginning to look decidedly vulnerable.

This uncertainty is reinforced by a sense that the new financial system is not sustainable in the long run and will require reform by whichever political party or parties win the 2015 General Election. So we have the curious situation where the system as a whole is in handsome surplus and some universities are living through a new financial golden age generated by high tuition fees but the fear that the bubble will burst represents a dominant influence on decision-taking. The volatility of the funding régime over the last decade and the threats implicit in the changes rather than their actual impact, have imposed tensions within institutions that have reinforced hierarchies and authority structures and encouraged a growing centralisation, particularly of finance-related decision-making. In addition, the wider policy environment has become more unstable breeding considerable institutional uncertainty in planning and strategy. Universities have mostly adopted defensive attitudes to the changes rather than embracing the new market philosophy. The effect is to reduce the role of governance and greatly enhance that of leadership and management.

The changing demands on governing bodies
In 2003, the Lambert Report represented a high point in the government’s pressure to encourage university governing bodies to behave more like company boards (Shattock, 2004). The movement had begun with the Jarratt Committee’s call for university councils to ‘assert’ themselves (CVCP, 1985) but was heavily reinforced by the findings of a series of reports on company boards beginning with the Cadbury Report in 1992 and concluding with the Higgs Report on the role of non-executive directors in 2003 (Shattock, 2006). The Cadbury Report, prompted by the investigation into the Robert Maxwell financial empire and evidence that it had drawn on employees’ pension funds to further its business or to repay creditors, was primarily concerned to create conditions in companies where probity was safeguarded and the presence of non-executive directors on the company board ensured that executive pay was somehow matched to performance and that appropriate reviews and audit arrangements were in place to guarantee...
transparency in the way companies were managed. Although a later review of the implementation of Cadbury’s recommendations (Hampel Report, 1998) expressed concern about the extent to which these concerns could descend into box ticking and distract companies from their prime object, which was to be profitable, the stress of a succession of reports was directed towards accountability mechanisms rather than how better to conduct the business of the company. This movement culminated in the publication, in 2003, of the Combined Code on Corporate Governance, underpinned by the Smith Guidance on audit and the Turnbull Guidance on risk.

It was perhaps natural for government to draw an analogy between company boards and university governing bodies especially when, in the 1990s, a series of governance breakdowns at higher education institutions (Huddersfield and Portsmouth Universities and the Southampton and Swansea Institutes of Higher Education), all of which had the Higher Education Corporation constitution, embodied in the 1988 Education Reform Act, which gave institutions a company board-like governing body. The Committee of University Chairmen (CUC) was called upon to issue a Guide on university governance adherence to which was adopted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as the template for its audit inspections of institutions (CUC, 1995). However, there was a tendency to extend the analogy further particularly in the post-1992 institutions where the Higher Education Corporation constitution encouraged a more top down governance structure than was present in the pre-1992 universities. This was to equate governing bodies with company boards of directors in creating and driving institutional strategy, as distinct from being the guardians of accountability. Thus the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) refers to institutions requiring ‘excellent governance [by which it meant the governing body] to steer the institutions towards its strategic direction’ (NCIHE, 1997, para 15.37) and HEFCE’s ‘Financial Memorandum’ stated that one of the governing body’s responsibilities was ‘determining its (the institution’s) future direction’ (HEFCE, 2010 para 18). The thinking behind this development was the belief that well-informed lay governors were likely to be more experienced and effective at determining the future strategic landscape than those actually working in the institutions. A new chair of CUC giving an inaugural interview to the Times Higher Education in 2012 defined the role of a governing body firmly as setting ‘the strategic framework within which the executive under the vice-chancellor work and to hold them to account for delivery’ (Morgan, 2012).
literally, this distinguishes clearly between the strategic role of the governing body and the delivery role of the executive. Interestingly, this statement was made by the chair of a pre-1992 university. It confirms the signs that, after 2003, governing bodies saw themselves as seeking to exercise a larger role in determining strategy and of holding vice-chancellors to account for successful implementation and that this was not restricted to the Higher Education Corporation-constituted universities.

However, the model of the effective company board has begun to fray badly since the onset of national austerity. In the first place, the banking crisis shattered the too ready belief that the much-vaunted private sector boards offered a governance analogy that universities should be encouraged to follow. When the boards of Barclays, Lloyds and the Royal Bank of Scotland could be charged with the inability to control headstrong or maverick chief executives or to regulate their remuneration effectively and with a failure to understand the detail of the business that banks had moved into—all criticisms that could be and were levelled at university governing bodies—the idea that private sector governance structures and practice were somehow automatically superior to university governance became highly questionable. Any university complacency, however, was punctured by a new series of university governance breakdowns (Leeds Metropolitan, London Metropolitan, Cumbria and Gloucestershire Universities and the University of East London) where governing bodies were also found to be wanting. Indeed, the London Metropolitan University, which had been chaired by a chair of the CUC, was found to be guilty of malpractice in its student returns to HEFCE, which might be seen as a modest analogy to the manipulation of Libor practiced by banks unseen by their boards; the repayment required by HEFCE offered a further parallel to the fines levied on the banks.

The London Metropolitan University affair coupled with the breakdowns at other universities undoubtedly tarnished the picture of governing body effectiveness nurtured on a decade of guidance from the CUC and reinforced by a detailed technical report on what constituted an effective and high performing governing body prepared for the Leadership Foundation (Schofield, 2009). However, the role of governing bodies in strategy has also been undermined by the changes in government funding policies. Governing bodies have never been able to play any serious role in determining strategy for research or for Research Assessment Exercise submissions although the funding and reputational outcomes were so important for so many institutions. The obvious
reason for this was that they lacked the necessary expertise and a sufficiently detailed understanding of the research environment. At first sight they might have been expected to play a more substantial role in setting tuition fee levels. There is no evidence, however, that any governing body played a significant role in determining that their institutions would charge the maximum £3000 fee for the 2006 entry and, in the case of the only university not to do so, (Leeds Metropolitan University) the strategic decision to charge only £2000 was the recommendation of the vice-chancellor. Moreover there is no evidence in the sector of any governing body playing a significant role in setting tuition fees for international students or in designing an international strategy.

Governing bodies appear to have been even more marginalised by the decisions of the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, both in respect to the fee levels to be charged and the assessment of the recruitment market, or in respect to what actions might need to be taken in the event of recruitment shortfalls. The new funding régime has, in fact, greatly strengthened the initiating role of the executive, where the expertise might be expected to lie, and reduced the role of the governing body. In what has constituted the most searching strategic decision that universities have had to make, governing bodies have been entirely dependent on the recommendations of their vice-chancellors and executives for determining tuition fee and bursary levels and on their assessment of the market in which their universities operated. A report to the Leadership Foundation based on a selected interview sample conducted in 2011–12 states that governors ‘were almost sidelined by most top management interviewees’. One interviewee made the point that many governors did not understand ‘ “H.E. business” ’ and were therefore reliant on senior management, another noted that ‘3–4 days a year does not allow intelligent engagement with a complex organisation’, another ‘dismissed governing bodies across the sector as both too small (not representative) and too big (not efficient)’ (Jameson and McNay, 2013).

We thus have the paradox that at a time when the higher education environment has come to replicate private sector conditions in its market orientation, more than at any time since the First World War, the private-sector company governance model seems to be the least appropriate. Governing bodies have been left behind by the changes; they have spent too much time on effectiveness reviews and process reform and not enough on adjusting to the new strategic imperatives. The consequence is that they have too often become simply reactive to
the proposals of their executives and are much less able to play the role of the ‘critical friend’. Governing bodies seem simply to be wearing the emperor’s clothes; in the post-2010 world of university strategy and executive action are intrinsically linked and the governing body is just too far away from that action and too lacking in expert knowledge to contribute effectively to the policy decisions that have to be taken.

Links between governing bodies and academic communities

This heavy dependence on the executive, with the correlating absence of significant challenge at governing body meetings, is strongly reminiscent of boards of directors in the banking industry before the banking crisis. The danger of this situation is that the governing body is not made aware of alternative policy options or is not confronted with alternative views as to the policy environment. One way in which governing bodies might open up channels of alternative thinking would be to engage in closer links with the academic community. For Higher Education Corporation governing bodies this is more difficult than for the pre-1992 because academic representation is restricted to two, or at most three, members usually elected on an institutional franchise and who are not necessarily integral to or conversant with academic board business. (Many senior respondents quoted in the Report to the Leadership Foundation, referred to above, regarded academics elected to post-1992 governing bodies as being ‘treated badly’, ‘not trusted on key issues and so excluded from debates’). In the pre-1992 universities, on the other hand, representation is normally as high as one third of the membership and is directly representational of the senate. In a survey conducted in 2005 by the Office of Public Management for the Schofield (2009) study of effective governing bodies responses were sought on the extent to which a constructive working relationship existed between governing bodies and academic boards or senates. Just under half of governors and a third of senior managers reported that they did not know what they were or that there were ‘not at all’ or ‘rarely’ or only ‘sometimes’ constructive relationships between the two bodies (Schofield, 2009, para 2.23). Schofield goes on to state that some governing bodies do not even receive academic board or senate minutes and are thus both cut off from the core business of the university and are entirely dependent on the executives’ interpretation of academic priorities and expectations. This isolation from the people who do the research and teaching on which an institution’s reputation is based, and who recruit the students whose tuition fees contribute anything from 50 per cent to 80 per cent of a university’s income, is reflected in a statement by the chair of CUC
quoted above: ‘If I’m honest, quite often if I go round Queen Mary, people won’t have a clue—and I’m talking about academics—what the governing body does. It doesn’t loom large in their eyes. This is as it ought to be’ (Morgan, 2012). What this suggests is that there is a considerable communication gap between the governing body and the average academic and that this chairman, at least, sees no particular reason to try to bridge it. The consequences can be overreliance on a single source of advice and information from the executive, a too limited understanding of the core business and a growing gap and potential breakdown of trust between the academic community and those who are seen as the decision makers.

The decline of senate influence

Idealised pictures of university councils and senates working in partnership (Moodie and Eustace, 1974) assume that academic governance is conducted through a stable organisational structure with clear representative channels for consultation and the communication of views. This, however, is no longer the case even in the pre-1992 universities. Whatever the weaknesses from a representational point of view of a senate made up primarily of heads of departments who were normally professors, the members had a common interest in the effective running of the institution and could act as a significant, if sometimes conservative, break on vice-chancellorial enterprise or policy initiative. The effect of the 1981 cuts and the subsequent reductions in the unit of resource in the 1980s and 1990s was to move decision-making about resource questions away from these bodies where self interest at faculty or departmental levels was too engrained and embedded. (The Jarratt Committee’s recommendation for a joint planning and resources committee was widely followed). The smaller quasi-elected senate pioneered by the 1960s new universities proved to be more robust in this respect and was more pro-active in reacting to new ideas or promoting them themselves but the influence of both models has been undermined by the pressure of complex business, mostly driven by government imposed regulatory or funding changes, which have required detailed technical discussion in smaller executive bodies. Retaining senates’ involvement in policy issues, which are dependent on a detailed background knowledge of technical funding machinery such as changes in research council grant machinery, changes in Research Assessment Exercise funding formulae or the levels of bursary payments to be offered to widening-participation applicants, has proved to be beyond the capability of most central management
teams and inevitably decision-making powers over key policy matters have moved to much smaller bodies that have developed more expertise and that can meet more frequently.

Thus, even in the pre-1992 universities with charters and statutes that spell out a bicameral structure of governance, the effectiveness of the senior academic body has been reduced as an organ of academic policy making and opinion. Attendance levels have fallen, particularly in the larger senates and business has become much more formal. In the Higher Education Corporation institutions where the intention from the beginning was to exclude academic boards from an institutional policy-making role (Shattock, 2012) boards have in any case been much more restricted in their agendas to technical academic issues and are often dominated by ex officio members from the senior management team, so that they rarely find themselves in a position to express a decisive academic view on a key policy issue. The decision of the Warwick senate to oppose a decision already endorsed by its council to open a campus in Singapore and to force the abandonment of the project would be inconceivable in a Higher Education Corporation. The sense of corporate responsibility for the affairs of the institution has never been as strong in the academic community in the Higher Education Corporations as in the chartered universities and has been weakened by over-rapid expansion, less favourable staff:student ratios and a greater dispersal of campuses.

The reorganisation of academic structures
This general weakening of internal corporate commitment has undoubtedly been reinforced by the mania for reorganising academic structures, which has been a feature of the last decade and a half and which itself is a reflection of the uncertainty of context that has afflicted university policy making. Two investigations by Hogan (2005, 2012) emphasise the instability of the academic workplace. Between 1993 and 2002 he showed that in one investigation 74 per cent of 81 institutions and in a second analysis 75 per cent of 51 institutions engaged in a restructuring of faculties (usually reducing their number but sometimes abolishing them altogether or re-establishing them as colleges) and departments (sometimes merging the latter into schools with or without faculties above them). Such restructuring would also normally be accompanied by changes in internal resource allocation methodology and variations in budgetary devolution. Only two post-1992 universities did not undergo an academic reorganisation in this period.
In a later piece of research covering the period 2002 to 2007, Hogan (2012) found that the rate of reorganisations had accelerated. Of 72 universities he was able to study in this latter period 65 per cent underwent a significant academic restructuring and the proportion of universities restructuring was split more evenly between pre- and post-1992 institutions. In both, one of the key drivers was expansion, with staff numbers in the sector growing by 28 per cent in the first period and 19 per cent in the second, with the reorganisations being aimed at ‘a smaller number of bigger units’ (Hogan, 2012).

Hogan went on to suggest that a common organisational structure was emerging of teaching units organised into 15 to 30 departments or schools within three-to-seven faculties or colleges. The effect of such structures has inevitably been to push academic staff further away from central decision-making and, where departments have been merged into schools, to encourage a weakening of the intimacy of the traditional disciplinary based relationships, a tendency that is also reinforced by the adoption of modular based teaching programmes. The collegiality of working within a disciplinary-based framework has increasingly been replaced by academics working as individuals within larger open systems, which are managed by a core group of non-academic personnel answerable to an appointed academic head. The fact that such restructuring has uniformly been imposed top down, often with only cursory consultation with grass-roots academic staff, has emphasised the distance that has grown up between staff at the periphery and staff at the centre of the university.

A key element of the creation of larger units especially when established as colleges has been a measure of financial devolution, sometimes but not always involving local resource allocation decisions on academic staffing, and the creation of a new cadre of posts carrying the title of pro-vice-chancellor in place of dean. Increasingly these posts are publicly advertised and the appointees are recruited through head hunters and not from the ranks of existing staff members. They, thus, constitute a wholly new element not only in the governance but also in the power structure of the institution. Normally, the creation of a college with an executive dean/pro-vice-chancellor has been accompanied by the dissolution of the predecessor faculty board(s) thus at one and the same time imposing what Deem calls a ‘manager-academic’ (Deem et al., 2007) with significant resource allocation and other powers and also substantially reducing the participation of the academic community in matters of academic management closely related to their fields of activity.
Another consequence is that these appointees, normally appointed for a limited term and without a departmental base, are more likely to view their prime loyalty as being to the centre than to the academic areas where they serve so that in sensitive issues like subject rationalisation and departmental mergers they are more likely to be bringing messages downwards than they are carrying them upwards. Previously flat decision-making structures are being replaced by hierarchies where initiative at the periphery is either pre-empted or severely constrained by a strong centre. One important argument for this devolution of authority has been that, as institutions expanded, the centre was suffering from decision-making overload; devolving decision-making to levels closer to the coal face, particularly about resources, improved the sensitivity of the decisions to the conditions on the ground. This argument for subsidiarity would have been more convincing, however, if it had not been coupled so often with the importation of new leadership cadres from outside the university to the exclusion of internal participation and if the implementation of such structures had been restricted to large universities where real problems in the management of size were apparent. Hogan (2012) though, quotes the arguments advanced for such a change in two small-to-medium sized pre-1992 universities that, rather than asking themselves what they might be losing in the new structure, seem simply to have been motivated by a wish to follow current management fashion or a desire for an apparently tidier model. Too often the advantages of subsidiarity have been vitiated by the perception at the academic grass roots that instead of providing a faculty voice at the top table they have produced a situation more resembling the appointment of a satrap from the centre to bring order to an unruly province.

The impact of national austerity together with the implication of financial risk in the substitution of marketised tuition fees for recurrent grant linked to planned student numbers has reinforced the centralisation of decision-making. A good case for promoting subsidiarity could always be made in an expanding situation but the prospect of retrenchment encourages the withdrawal of critical resource decisions back to the centre. In many universities, the virtual centralisation of student recruitment and selection and the creation of centralising mechanisms to make devolved financial decision-making subject to central influence and approval have served to neutralise the new local centres of decision-making that the revised structures were designed to create. In effect, the perception of risk and of the volatility of the financial environment has led to a re-centralisation. This is
reinforced by the impact of the Research Evaluation Framework where, in the pre-1992 universities, the routine employment of a pro-vice-chancellor with responsibility for research, has imposed a limitation on the powers of college heads who may have expected that they were being recruited to take on this role within their own college or faculty bailiwick. What has occurred, therefore, is first, the creation of a new senior echelon of ‘manager academics’ whose appointments subsumed what were traditionally seen as being within the competence or sphere of influence of the faculties and second, by the re-centralisation of financial decision-making while leaving the restructuring architecture in place. Linked to these ‘manager academic’ appointees, it must be remembered, there will also be a train of administrative support (college registrars or senior administrative appointments) whose role has been to professionalise and bureaucratise the position of the new appointees but whose impact has been further to distance the management of academic affairs from the involvement of the academic staff.

The growth of the managerial team

Evidence for this new element in the internal governance of universities comes from the sheer growth in the numbers of deputy and pro-vice-chancellors. Shepherd shows that numbers have expanded in the pre-1992 universities by 40 per cent between 2005 and 2012 (Shepherd, 2012) thus seeming to confirm Hogan’s (2012) conclusion that the pace of restructuring in the pre-1992 universities has come to equal that of the post-1992. (It is perhaps worth adding that 75 per cent of these new deputy and pro-vice-chancellors are male (Shepherd, 2012)). Comparable figures do not exist for the post-1992 universities but the figures produced by Shepherd give credence to the picture of a growing convergence of pre- and post-1992 models towards a managerial model inherited from a polytechnic past.

One perhaps contrary tendency is to identify one administrative post, whether or not the post holder is a unitary registrar (that is, responsible for all the functions within the administration including finance) as chief operating officer so that an institution is headed by a chief executive officer and a chief operating officer. One interpretation of this might be of an institution making a choice between reliance on a non-unitary executive pro-vice-chancellor model and a unitary ‘civil service’ model equating to a permanent secretary/minister arrangement. (In two cases in pre-1992 universities the registrar has been designated deputy vice-chancellor or deputy chief executive). However, there seems to be no
correlation between the creation of the title of chief operating officer and the number of pro-vice-chancellors. Rather, the distinction that seems to exist is between institutions with executive pro-vice-chancellors and institutions where pro-vice-chancellors do not have explicit executive responsibilities and are expected to continue with some academic duties. In the latter cases, which are found almost exclusively in the pre-1992 universities, executive management continues to fall to the ‘administration’ and the role of the chief operating officer is to coordinate it and provide a unified management service across the whole institution. Such a post also clearly implies, however, a degree of authority over the non-academic side of the management of the university that represents an implicit delegation of responsibility from the vice-chancellor.

A second trend is for there to be an increase in the status of the director of finance. In uncertain times the role of the director of finance has inevitably expanded both as an adviser to the vice-chancellor but also to the governing body that is tasked by the Financial Memorandum to be responsible for institutional solvency, borrowing levels and ensuring that the institution has sound systems of financial control. A governing body may turn more readily for reassurance to the director of finance than to a vice-chancellor. Within the politics of a central management team the finance director has assumed an increasingly powerful position to the extent that in some post-1992 universities the post carries the title of pro-vice-chancellor with virtually the power of veto within an executive pro-vice-chancellor team. Finance directors are playing an increasingly influential role in institutional development and, because of their unassailable technical role, are substantially sheltered from any form of academic scrutiny. It is no longer unusual for the finance directors’ financial plan to be not only drawn up separately from the institutions’ strategic plan but to ignore it and be regarded as the superior document by the governing body.

The decrease in academic participation in governance, particularly at senate or academic board level, has produced a vacuum that the ‘administration’ has stepped in to fill, benefitting from the role models provided by chief operating officers and their senior subordinates. The term ‘leadership’, which was once solely associated with vice-chancellors, deans and heads of departments is now freely used in respect of administrators. Thus a post-1992 university advertising for second and third level administrative posts in the registrar’s and the quality assurance offices introduces the posts as described as being ‘to enhance leadership of our governance and quality provision across our
University as key members of the Secretary and Registrar’s and Director of Quality Assurance’s leadership teams’ (Guardian, 2013). This is a reflection of institutional size and the development of the technical business of university management that has emphasised the contribution of specialist professional expertise in, for example, student record systems that are outside academic control. Morgan, quoting Higher Education Statistics Agency data, suggests that the numbers of professional managers rose by some 30 per cent between 2004–05 and 2008–09 (Morgan, 2010). Hogan provides data that shows that between 1994–95 and 2008–09 the proportion of university expenditure on administration and central services had grown from 12 per cent to 14.8 per cent at the expense of a decreasing percentage on academic departments (Hogan, 2011). The size of the administration, which Whitchurch (2012) calculates now comprises 20 per cent of the total work force, represents an important element in the balance of power within institutions.

The centralisation of decision-making

Increasingly, therefore, university governance and management are falling into the hands of ‘management teams’ that are less and less either accountable to, or working in partnership with, the rest of the components of the institution. The business of piloting a university through the uncertainties and volatilities of the present policy environment and assessing the home and overseas tuition-fee market on which institutional financial stability is based is proving to be beyond the capabilities of governing bodies that are becoming entirely dependent on their executives. The executive itself, reinforced by a new cadre of externally recruited pro-vice-chancellors whose role is increasingly to transmit policy injunctions downward rather than to recommend policy recommendations upwards, together with a core of administrators who see themselves as working closely in tune with the executive rather than with the academic community has, therefore, accrued power both at the expense of the academics in the Higher Education Corporations who never had much but also in the pre-1992 universities where senates and faculty boards once held sway. Senate executive or steering committees have given way to executive or management boards or senior management teams whose accumulated professional skills give them increasing protection from external scrutiny either at a governing-body level or by the academic or student community. Universities have become more hierarchical and the academic voice has become distanced from central institutional policy debate.
In one sense this is understandable, a hedgehog-like reaction to an uncertain and volatile external environment: there is simply not time to discuss every twist and turn of the policy environment with governing bodies that meet four times a year or with a diverse and inevitably self-interested academic community. However, the weaknesses of an enclosed policy process that can result are only too obvious: the closing off of new ideas and initiatives; the absence of constructive challenge; the dangers of ‘group think’; the loss of intellectual vitality in charting the future. Perhaps the greatest weakness is the danger posed by the dominant vice-chancellor surrounded by a compliant group that he or she has largely recruited. In part, one can see this reflected in the mania for restructuring much of which has been stimulated by the arrival of a new vice-chancellor or by the belief of an existing vice-chancellor that only restructuring would sweep away obstacles to meeting the centre’s strategic objectives. What is lost sight of in the academic churn that inevitably accompanies reorganisations is the impact on academic culture, the alienation of staff and the lack of alignment with teaching and research interests in favour of apparent managerial efficiency and more directive resource allocation systems. The effect of these changes is to dilute the involvement of the active teaching and research community at a time when it could be argued that universities need to become more inclusive and when governance, leadership and management will be more effective if it is open to bottom-up influence and to an influx of new ideas and initiatives.

The nature of the instability and uncertainty may well demand a tighter more focussed central management group but it should remain open to influence from outside through some elected membership, automatic circulation of minutes and key papers or an active policy of consultation with senates, academic boards and heads of departments. Senates and academic boards themselves need to be reinvigorated to be organs of well-informed and serious policy debate. The illusion that governing boards can be competent to direct institutional strategy needs to be put on the backburner but, by the same token, governing bodies should not be ‘side lined’ by senior management and for two important reasons: the first that they carry legal responsibilities that must be discharged and the second that the process of exposing the arguments behind strategic decision-making to a senior body of lay people and considering their advice and counsel represents a critical element in preventing executive strategies becoming too inbred and self referential. A frequent reference by lay governors to potential external risks and to what the bottom line might look like in five years’ time can impose a
useful discipline on powerful leadership egos. To be effective governing bodies need to avoid being swamped by statistics from the executive and be encouraged, through joint committees and social occasions to create links with the academic community. Chairs of governing bodies should not be anonymous figures on a university campus any more than vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors and deans.

Surveying the British higher education sector what is striking is the sense of institutional diversity, rather than of the more rigid differentiation of the 1990s. What this article has sought to do has been to identify trends in governance over the system as a whole but if one was seeking to establish a spectrum of different practice it is possible to find institutions that maintain most, if not all, of the features of collegiality and participation that characterised the pre-1992 universities in the 1980s as well as institutions that have reinforced the strongly managerial culture that was embodied in the 1988 Act to guide the polytechnics in their transfer from local authority control. A collegial, participative culture is no longer, however, exclusive to the pre-1992 universities just as a top-down strongly authoritarian régime is not exclusive to those institutions with Higher Education Corporation constitutions. However, an uncertain, unstable environment is a forcing house for the concentration of decision-making powers into smaller groups. Those universities that are able to resist such pressures are likely to emerge with a more distinctive academic culture and a better academic product.

References


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