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University Boards:

A critical view on board
transformation and
effectiveness

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Changes in University Governance (1)

- Gornitzka et al. (2017) – key developments at European level
 - Replacement of democratics councils by executive boards
 - Increased formal external involvement in university governance
 - Centralization of formal decision-making power
 - Shift from collective to individual responsibility
- However, formal national reform ambitions are not necessarily what is implemented in practice at institutional level
 - Absence of institutions adopting a pure executive governance mode
 - Democratic representation is still noticeable
 - More hybridity as a result?

Changes in University Governance (2)

- Changes in university governance takes place in parallel to changes in university organization and organizing
 - European universities as «complete» organizations?
 - Increased professionalization of (administrative) staff
 - Increased specialization in university administration and new tasks and functions being established
 - External stakeholders and agencies strongly linked to specific parts of university organization
- Maassen & Stensaker (2019): From organized anarchy to decoupled bureaucracy?
 - Strengthened hierarchy may not necessarily imply improved horizontal coordination
 - A more complex organization requires new forms of integration at institutional level (expanded leadership teams, etc.)

University boards – What are possible functions?

- Realizing national political ambitions
- Shaping institutional vision and mission
- Shielding institutions from outside (political) pressure
- Linking institutions to the wider society (and to particular stakeholder groups)
- An arena for interest articulation
- An instrument for (more) powerful institutional leaders

University Boards: What do we know from empirical studies (1)

- Huge variations in board characteristics in Europe (Pruvot & Estermann (2018):
 - External representation a key characteristic (although their share of members in the board may vary)
 - Students and non-academic staff often represented
 - Mixture of «unitary» and «dual» (senate-type) boards structures
 - Variation also in board size (national regulation vs. Institutional autonomy)
- Studies suggests that external representation may strengthen corporate influence (Taylor et al. 2022), but also social embeddedness (Edlund & Sahlin 2022)

University Boards: What do we know from empirical studies (2)

- A number of studies suggest that board representatives often have particular elite characteristics (...especially in leading research universities)
 - External representatives are often CEOs, leaders of civic organizations, distinguished professors, etc.
 - As external representation has been strengthened over time – connectivity to other societal organizations has increased – in the US studies show stronger ties to the finance industry
 - Some studies from Europe suggest direct political representation is reduced, and that public and civic sectors are often represented – alongside private sector companies

University Boards: What do we know from empirical studies (3)

- Are there particular characteristics associated with board performance?
 - Large boards with private sector connections associated with better performance (US studies...see Harris 2011)
 - Important with clear internal regulations: Conflict of interest rules; independence; nominating committees for board selection
 - Relationship between board and the president/rector
 - Board agendas – the danger of the agenda being dominated by routine matters and oversight issues – reducing the strategic capacity of the board
 - The ability of the board to work towards a joint agenda (culture...)

University Boards: What do we know from empirical studies (4)

- What is the relative importance of different types of boards (Frølich et al. 2018)?
 - Analysis of boards with external and internal board chairman suggest that there is little difference in their strategic orientations and work modes
 - As universities (in Europe) are affected by national reform agendas, they have to adapt to relative similar accountability expectations, reducing the strategic capability of university boards
- Many university boards in Europe have little impact on decisions related to teaching and learning (Kretek et al. 2013) – running the risk that board are «passive» and de-coupled from core university activities

University Boards: What do we know from empirical studies (5)?

- A recent trend in Europe (and Asia) is the establishment of strategic advisory boards at central level – «informal» boards appointed by the institutions themselves (Stensaker et al. 2021)
 - Although such strategic advisory boards might have different functions, they tend to be more focused on academic issues – representing a form of «shadow governance»
 - Are strategic advisory boards an attempt by the institutional leadership to balance out the influence of formal university boards, and the representative characteristics of existing formal boards - reinventing older collegiate (elite) form of governance?

Discussion (1)

- Empirical research demonstrate considerable diversity in university board composition, roles and responsibilities
 - External representation in boards a dominant trend
 - External representation can be interpreted in different ways – as «corporate» and/or as «representative» influence
 - In Europe – representative influence is partly related to the transformation of universities into «normal» public sector organizations
- The focus on external influence might overshadow a more important issue – that more academic issues are downplayed at board level
 - Possible implications: Boards de-coupled from core functions, and that new governance formats perhaps have less impacts on the inner life of universities?

Discussion (2)

- When analysing governance of higher education, there is a danger that emphasis on certain elements in the governance system (boards, changes in institutional leadership) reduce focus on the functioning of the system as a whole
 - We need to understand changes in formal structure and developing organizational practices
 - Need for more studies on the interconnectedness of governance measures (funding, organization, legal framework, etc.)

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