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Making Governing Bodies

More Accountable

to Students and Staff

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The central role of university governing bodies is to hold institutional managers to account, and in difficult times that responsibility matters more than ever. But university governance has drifted away from accountability to students and staff. It has become insular, corporatised and preoccupied with financial concerns at the expense of educational ones. The research evidence points to an urgent need for more open, accountable, and ethical forms of participatory governance.

SUMMARY

No-one who works in higher education needs to be reminded of the size of the challenge facing the UK. The sector is chronically underfunded; it is mismanaged and poorly governed; and it is being overseen by a failed model of regulation.

University governance varies significantly by institutional age and type, and according local controls, but all wield substantial authority over strategic and financial decisions, having the final say on course closures, redundancies and senior pay. Despite this, governing bodies remain largely invisible to the staff and students whose professional lives they affect. Modern governance is influenced by regulatory requirements and a compliance-focused governance code, and tends to treat finance and risk as its primary concerns, with education and public purpose often coming second.

Recent research supports this reading. Interviews with current and former governors describe hierarchical boards, filtered information and pre-determined agendas. This matters because governing bodies hold ultimate power over the institutions where UCU members work.

UCU believes governance should be accountable first to staff and students.

Governing bodies should:

- ➔ reflect critically on the type of independent knowledge they need, and draw more directly and openly on academic expertise
- ➔ actively encourage staff and students to engage with governance, as a way of hearing alternative perspectives, and welcome staff and student members onto key sub-committees
- ➔ publish unredacted minutes of all meetings promptly, so it is clear how decisions were reached
- ➔ change board practices to make governance more inclusive and less inward-looking, normalising sustained challenge to the executive
- ➔ engage meaningfully and widely before taking decisions that fundamentally affect the workforce.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The operational crisis unfolding within university governance is not a bureaucratic footnote. It is a structural failing that fundamentally threatens the working conditions of staff, the learning conditions of students, and the civic mission of the sector. A programme of state-sanctioned marketisation has systematically reshaped higher education institutions into quasi-corporate entities. At the same time, governing bodies – which are known variously as councils, boards of trustees, or courts – have moved away from their traditional roles as custodians of an educational community, instead focusing on ‘risk’ and mimicking the cultures, discourses and practices of their private sector counterparts.

This matters acutely to higher education students and staff because the sector is navigating an era of prolonged financial instability. We know that when institutions face budgetary deficits, executive leadership teams default to blunt austerity measures.

Entire academic departments can be dismantled, and redundancy notices issued. With meetings of the main governing body increasingly functioning as a rubber stamp for senior management, not an independent check on executive power, these life-altering decisions can be signed off with alarmingly little critical scrutiny.

For the wider community, the university's role as a public good is compromised. For governing bodies, the uncritical shift to market-based thinking has largely backfired. If institutional resilience is to re-emerge, it is likely to be through rejecting executive overreach and returning to robust, democratic oversight.



KEY MESSAGE

- ➔ Who governs the governors?
- ➔ Can governing bodies keep accumulating power unchecked while remaining unaccountable to the staff and students whose lives their decisions shape?

EVIDENCE

A number of recent academic studies have drawn on interviews with current and former university governors to show how governance actually happens in practice. The principle is straightforward: staff, students and lay members work together to provide strategic oversight, protecting the institution's reputation and freedoms. The reality is often very different: decisions are taken behind the scenes, and main boards are increasingly performative spaces. Members do not have equal status, with those from financial or legal backgrounds assuming the greatest authority. And accountability is distorted, with students and staff typically kept at a safe distance from decision-making.

Governance and management are also becoming inseparable: the executive heavily influences the recruitment of external governors and the appointment of the Chair, and those governors in turn play a central role in appointing senior payrolled staff. But evidence suggests that academic input is vital to navigating a crisis of under-funding and a sustained loss of public trust. Universities may have bigger turnovers than ever, and require different kinds of stewardship, but they are more than corporate entities operating in a competitive market. Students and staff are key to recovering the sector's status as a valued public asset.

The Collapse of Executive Accountability

Official higher education codes of practice assert that university boards exist to provide independent strategic oversight and hold executive teams to account. Primary research reveals a wide gap between this principle and day-to-day institutional realities. Empirical data shows that boards are highly susceptible to capture by small,

elite, internal cliques, typically made up of the Vice-Chancellor, the Chair of Council and the heads of key sub-committees, such as Finance or Remuneration. These groups effectively control the flow of information and set the limits of what can be questioned. As a result, other governors report feeling marginalised and disempowered. Lay governors in particular depend on heavily curated data packs prepared by the executive team, and often lack the alternative sources of data needed to challenge top-down narratives

The Over-financialisation of University Governance

Under the current regulatory framework, university boards have become hyper-focused on financial compliance and risk mitigation. In this climate, the educational and public purpose of the institution is treated as an ancillary metric. This corporate focus creates an environment where an academic programme with immense social, cultural, or regional value can be terminated overnight. Governors themselves express frustration that they are expected to spend hours debating financial audits, asset management and commercial risk registers, while little time is left to discuss pedagogical impacts or the quality of students' experiences. Education can effectively be eliminated from boardroom conversations, replaced by the language of corporate accounting.

Bureaucratic Barriers and the Marginalisation of University Staff

The structural machinery of modern university governance deters critique and democratic challenge, and suppresses student and staff views. Board papers are routinely hundreds of pages long, full of complex corporate terminology, and circulated too late for meaningful scrutiny. This creates an information asymmetry that advantages the executive, and disadvantages governors (particularly members who do not come from corporate, legal or commercial banking backgrounds). Staff and student members are often treated as token additions to the board, or as inherent conflicts of interest. The effect is to silence the people who often have the deepest understanding of how the university actually works.

The Possibility of Democratic Reform

Despite these entrenched structural barriers, sector-wide evidence points to a strong and growing appetite for systemic change among all categories of governor. A significant proportion of governors, including many lay members from outside academia, are concerned about the lack of transparency and the aggressive corporate drift of their institutions. Decision-making will improve only when governing bodies break up their cliques, diversify their lay membership, and begin to replace

bought-in consultants with academic expertise. Ethical, participatory governance can foster more stable institutional cultures and greater collaboration across the sector. Staff and students deserve better than to be treated as passive stakeholders to be managed through public relations.

Indicative Evidence Base

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UCU'S POSITION

UCU believes that university governance is failing the institutions it is meant to protect. Governing bodies should be accountable to the whole university community, not just to the sector regulators and financial auditors. The current funding and jobs crisis is, in part, a failure of governance.

What is happening now

Since the creation of the Office for Students, governing bodies have taken on far greater regulatory and financial responsibilities. Governance has increasingly become a matter of risk management. Some governing bodies embrace the wrong kind of compliance culture. Hierarchies and in-groups determine who is heard, and many members feel their contributions are under-valued. Nominations are sometimes seen

as a rubber-stamping exercise, and decision-making protocols can be opaque, even to those around the table. At most universities, the staff whose expertise and livelihoods are most directly affected by governors' decisions are routinely treated as stakeholders to be consulted rather than partners in governance.

What should happen instead

The sector urgently needs governance that is open, inclusive and morally grounded. Specifically:

- ➔ a code of ethical governance that actively encourages governors to protect the interests of students and staff, and defend the public value of higher education
- ➔ the recruitment of lay governors to be more transparent, so that different kinds of candidates, with a broader range of backgrounds and views, can be appointed
- ➔ the publication of all board papers in a timely fashion, including unredacted sub-committee minutes and the explanations of the reasoning behind major decisions
- ➔ a new protocol for governance effectiveness reviews, making them genuinely independent and more direct in their assessment.

Why this would be better

Governing bodies that hear a wider range of perspectives scrutinise decisions in more informed and balanced ways. Major outcomes, such as redundancy programmes, are tested by those who understand the extent of their operational and educational consequences. Good governance also acts as a check on under-confident leadership. Transparent, ethically grounded boards are better placed to rebuild trust in the sector, improve industrial relations and avoid costly disputes. Governance that reflects the values of university students and staff is more likely to secure the long-term health of both the institution and the sector.

DEVOLUTION IMPACT

Higher education is a devolved policy area, so UCU's recommendations apply differently in each nation. This gives us a chance to learn from comparison and to push for the most robust model.

England has the most market-driven and centralised regulatory framework, where the compliance culture is most damaging. The Office for Students sets governance expectations for providers, and the sector's own governance code is voluntary.

Scotland has a stronger statutory footing. The 2012 review of governance recommended greater involvement of staff and student unions in governance, and subsequent legislation introduced elected chairs, together with staff and union representation on governing bodies.

Wales has a new regulator, Medr, and a statutory duty of social partnership. There is an opportunity to embed trade union involvement in university governance through regulatory conditions and Welsh Government expectations.

Northern Ireland has few institutions and a funding system under severe strain, with decisions largely taken through the Department for the Economy.

Across the UK, UCU seeks a common floor of principles covering staff and student interests, open appointments and transparency, while allowing each nation to operate independently where appropriate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UCU is calling for:

- 1. A statutory right to elected staff members on every governing body.** Staff should sit as full members, with at least one place reserved for a nominee of the recognised trade unions. Those who deliver teaching and research understand the consequences of decisions before they are taken, and their involvement should not depend on institutional goodwill. Governments and regulators in each nation should set minimum requirements for student and staff membership.
- 2. Awareness of the CDBU Code of Ethical University Governance.** Any sector code should be co-produced, and require governors to consider the interests of students, staff and the public value of higher education alongside financial and regulatory duties.
- 3. Open and contestable appointments.** Lay vacancies should be advertised publicly and nominations processes made transparent, with clear criteria and a diverse range of backgrounds on the board. Rubber-stamping and in-group formation should be replaced by processes the university community can see and trust.
- 4. Transparency in decision-making.** Governing bodies should publish the reasoning behind major decisions, including redundancy programmes, senior pay and

financial strategy, and do so in good time. Staff, students and the public should be able to scrutinise institutional thinking while they can still influence it.

- 5. Independent reviews of governance practices and cultures, with published findings.** Effectiveness reviews should examine how the board works in practice, including whether dissenting and minority voices are heard and acted upon. Reviews should be independent of executive team members and their connections, and their conclusions and action plans shared with staff and students with a clear timetable for implementation.

GET INVOLVED

Governance reform needs pressure from members. Find out how your governing body works: who sits on it, how governors are appointed, and what is published. Raise governance in your branch, ask your staff governors to report back, and share what you find with UCU. Consider standing for election to academic bodies like Senate, and then to the governing body. Contact your branch officers or regional office, and use our campaign materials when lobbying governors, MPs and devolved governments.

About UCU Briefs

UCU members are at the heart of the campaign for a different future for higher education.

Over the coming months, we will publish more briefs that explore in depth the topics outlined above and continue to push our vision. Higher education belongs to all of us and we all have an interest in making it sustainable and accountable into the future.

To do that, we need more of you. If you work in higher education and are not yet a member, join UCU www.ucu.org.uk/join and help shape the future of UK universities.

We also welcome interest from members in contributing to our briefs series.

Get in contact via email at policy@ucu.org.uk

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