

Governing Quality: The shifting role of the academic profession in decisions of academic quality and standards

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Abstract. This paper discusses recent reforms to university governance and international trends in terms of changes to the academic profession to illuminate how both of these shifts are decreasing the role of the professoriate in academic decision-making. The author argues that there is a need to maintain the relative autonomy of public research universities in order to ensure that those with the appropriate expertise continue to be responsible for governing quality in higher education. The paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges to academic governance in public research universities and identifies a number of possible approaches to maintaining and strengthening academic self-governance.

Keywords: university governance, academic profession, higher education reform, quality

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to discuss the intersection of reforms to university governance and international trends in the academic profession, and to argue that shifts in both areas have negative implications for the role of the professoriate in academic decision-making, in particular, decisions related to the quality and standards of higher education. The core argument is that there is a need to maintain the relative autonomy of public research universities in order to ensure that the academic profession continues to play a significant role in academic decision-making, and that governing quality in higher education means maintaining, or in some jurisdictions reasserting, academic self-governance over institutional decisions related to the production and dissemination of knowledge.

The paper begins by briefly reviewing key themes associated with reforms to university governance and then provides a parallel review of trends related to the academic profession. The paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges to academic governance in public research universities and identifies a number of possible approaches to maintaining and strengthening academic self-governance.

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Trends in the reform of university governance

Universities have become positioned as central institutions for the economic and social development of nations. Universities educate the highly-skilled human resources that are essential to knowledge societies. They are a core component of national research and innovation systems through the creation and dissemination of knowledge, but also through their role in educating the next generation of researchers, leaders and knowledge workers who will contribute their talents to industry and the public sector. Given these key roles, it is far from surprising that governments around the world have paid increasing attention to the issue of university governance, both in terms of system-level decision-making, and in terms of how decisions are made within these key institutions (Austin & Jones, 2015).

Reforms to university governance have been heavily influenced by shifting views of both higher education and the role of government (Ferlie, Musselin & Andresani, 2008). Participation rates in higher education have increased around the world and the expansion of universities means that public higher education has become more expensive, politically visible and strategically important in terms of national economic development. There has been a decline in trust in public institutions, including universities, and a growing belief that the market represents an efficient mechanism for decreasing costs and allocating resources. The rise of neoliberalism has had a tremendous impact on the perceived role of government and notions of public management, based on tenets of deregulation, reducing taxes, and privatization in order to strengthen the role of the market (Nef & Robles, 2000).

In many jurisdictions, the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) within public administration has shifted the view of governance and underscored reforms. As De Boer, Enders and Schimank (2005) have noted, NPM shifts the role of the state towards steering and goal setting, and away from direct control. It emphasizes market mechanisms, including governance approaches that encourage competition for resources, and views the involvement of stakeholders in governance as strategically important for institutional development. It also emphasizes the importance of strengthening institutional leadership and management.

While one might argue that reforms to university governance have emerged in response to global shifts and common pressures, these reforms have taken place within the unique context of national contexts, involving quite different institutional forms, cultures, historical traditions, and political systems. There have been significant differences in policy reforms to higher education governance at both the system and institutional levels by jurisdiction, and while one might argue that there has been a certain convergence in these arrangements, there continue to be important national differences in governance structures and arrangements (Austin & Jones, 2015).

While major differences exist in governance arrangements by country and institution, a common element across almost all systems (with China being perhaps the most prominent exception) has been

the assumption that decisions about academic quality and standards should be made through some form of academic self-governance. There have been different traditions and structures associated with these decision processes, but the most common manifestation has been the existence of an academic council or senate with responsibility for decisions on core academic matters. The underlying assumption has been that academic decisions, especially those associated with issues of academic quality and standards, should be in the hands of academics, that is, the individuals with the specialized expertise and experience needed to make those decisions.

Even in some of the early comparative research on university governance transformations in Europe it was clear that reforms were diminishing the traditional role of academic governance arrangements. In many countries within continental Europe, direct state control of key decisions was replaced with the notion of state steering and regulation, with individual universities asked to assume greater authority over their institutional direction and management decisions. The assumption was that decentralization of authority to more independent universities would increase institutional responsiveness to societal needs and increase community and industry engagement. There was a move towards greater stakeholder participation in university governance. In general terms, institutional governance mechanisms frequently shifted authority away from traditional academic governance arrangements and towards more corporate governance and management structures.

Recent reviews of the literature on university governance confirm the continuation of these basic trends (Austin & Jones, 2015). While there are certainly exceptions (Pennock, Jones, Leclerc, & Li, 2015), a general theme within the literature on governance reform has been the increasing management authority of university leaders, the increasingly corporate nature of university governance, and the diminishing role or authority afforded to traditional academic governance mechanisms. In short, there have been major reforms to how quality is governed within public research universities in many countries.

Shifting academic careers

The central role of universities within national research and innovation systems has also been an important factor underscoring increasing interest in studies of the academic profession. The expansion of participation in institutions of higher education, as well as the increasing importance placed on the creation and dissemination of knowledge in the context of knowledge societies and economies, have raised important questions concerning the nature of academic work, and the structure of the academic profession. While much of this work continues to focus primarily on academic work within a national context, there has been a growth in comparative research in this area, including the Changing Academic Professions project that collected data on the perceptions of academic workers in 18 countries (Teichler, Arimoto & Cummings, 2013), and the current Academic Profession in the

Knowledge Society (APIKS) project which will include the participation of more than 30 national research teams.

Comparative studies of university governance illuminate important differences in government arrangements but suggest some common themes or trends associated with recent reforms. Similarly, comparative studies of academic work reveal major differences in academic career structures and pathways by jurisdiction, but they also suggest that there are common themes and patterns that seem to underscore changes in academic work. Several of these themes are particularly important to this discussion.

First, comparative studies of academic work confirm the increasing importance of management in academic decisions within universities and, in many of the jurisdictions included in the CAP study, many faculty do not believe that they have a major impact on important academic decisions within their university, especially those decisions taking place at higher levels of the institution (Locke, Cummings & Fisher, 2011). In other words, studies of academic work confirm at least some of the trends that have emerged from the governance literature, especially the diminishing role of, or perceived faculty impact on, academic self-governance, and the increasing importance of management authority and corporate governance structures.

Second, the increasing importance placed on research in many jurisdictions is a key factor underscoring changes in academic careers and career pathways. In a recent study of academic career pathways in ten countries, Martin Finkelstein and I have noted how the valorization of research has led to increasingly hierarchical relationships within the academic profession (Finkelstein & Jones, in press). In some systems the nature of academic work and academic career pathways may be quite different for those located within a high-status research university, compared to those within the same higher education system who are located in institutions that are teaching focused. Government policies and funding supporting the development of “world-class universities” clearly plays a role in furthering institutional stratification, and there are important differences in academic work and research opportunities depending on one’s location within this stratified structure.

In general, some changes in academic work can be understood in terms of the increasing fragmentation of the academic profession (Jones, 2013). While one might argue that the profession has never been “whole” or homogeneous, recent changes have served to increase both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of this fragmentation. Some elements of horizontal fragmentation are a natural extension of the growth of knowledge and specialization within academic work. As knowledge grows, academic research becomes increasingly specialized; one is no longer simply a physicist, but a member of a much more narrowly defined sub-field within the discipline, and so the discipline of physics becomes increasingly fragmented through the natural expansion of knowledge.

Horizontal fragmentation also takes place through the emergence of new categories of academic workers located in parallel to more traditional academic units. Student affairs professionals now play an important role in academic counselling and the development of co-curricular academic programing

at some universities. Educational development units support the teaching function and frequently provide educational programming and mentorship for faculty. Educational technology units educate both faculty and students on the use of new technologies and these units may make key decisions on the adoption of technologies that have a direct impact on teaching and research activities. In short, in some universities a range of new categories of academic worker play a key role in the educational mission of the university, sometimes assuming roles that might once have been associated with the professoriate.

Vertical fragmentation refers to the emergence of new categories of academic workers often located within traditional academic units (Jones, 2013). In the context of expanding enrolment and financial challenges, there appears to have been a growth in the utilization of precarious workers in many systems, often individuals who are directly engaged in teaching or research, but with conditions of employment that are quite different than university professors. There may be specialized research staff or new categories of university teachers with different career pathways than the more traditional professoriate. These other categories of academic workers are often assigned lower status, and frequently receive lower levels of remuneration, even though they may be fulfilling many of the same functions as professors.

Given the increasing importance of research in many systems, vertical fragmentation also refers to the increasing stratification of the professoriate. Even within the same academic unit, professors of the same rank may differ substantially in status and prestige, a growing phenomenon in environments where research performance is closely monitored and valorized.

Research on the academic profession, therefore, illuminates key changes in academic work that have implications for governing quality in higher education. There are concerns related to the spread of managerialism within institutions of higher education, and faculty in many countries believe that they have only modest influence on key academic decisions. Finally, the rising horizontal and vertical fragmentation of academic work raises important questions for academic governance. There has been an increase in the categories of academic workers in some jurisdictions, including an increase in precarious workers, and there is growing stratification, both at the institutional level in the context of higher education systems, and in terms of status hierarchies within the professoriate. The increasing fragmentation of the professoriate raises important questions about “who decides” in matters of academic self-governance, and since broadening stratification within the profession is largely based on research outputs and productivity, the role of service (and contributions to academic self-governance) may be reducing in importance in the context of academic work.

The challenge of relative autonomy

As I have noted, reforms to both university governance and shifts in the nature of academic work have implications for academic decisions, especially those related to academic quality and standards. The

solution is not, I believe, to push back reform, but rather to conceptualize the problem as one of meeting the challenge of relative autonomy¹.

Pierre Bourdieu (1993) distinguished between fields of restricted cultural production (where producers with considerable autonomy create cultural goods for other producers), and fields of mass or large-scale production (investments are driven by markets and the quest for profit; production addresses external needs; producers are subordinate to those who control the mechanisms of production). Understanding these two very different fields of activity illuminates some of the key challenges of contemporary university governance. Many of the reforms to university governance can be seen as strengthening the corporate capacity of universities in terms of mass higher education, as well as creating market mechanisms and governance structures that are designed to reinforce the role and influence of external stakeholders. Governance reforms have frequently been designed to create an environment that stimulates greater institutional responsiveness to the needs of government, markets, and other external stakeholders.

Drawing on these concepts, one might then argue that one of the great challenges of university governance, especially for public research universities, is to find ways of maintaining relative autonomy. As public institutions, universities need to respond effectively to the expectations of governments and other external stakeholders in order to secure resources, and as the beneficiaries of public funds, it is reasonable that they be held accountable. The modern public university must be responsive to the society in which it functions; it must contribute to social and economic development and address the needs and expectations of its students.

At the same time, however, the university must strive to maintain the relative autonomy needed to fulfill its role in terms of the production and dissemination of knowledge. Universities need to support an environment in which academic freedom is protected, and where academic expertise and judgement informs decisions on key academic issues. In short, university governance must somehow balance the need to respond to external stakeholders with the need to maintain the relative autonomy required for restricted cultural production, namely governing quality in terms of key academic issues related to research and teaching.

The challenge is how to reconcile these requirements. How can universities be responsive and accountable to stakeholders while fostering the exercise of academic judgment and academic freedom? If governance reforms have pulled universities towards the former, how can universities maintain the autonomy needed for the latter, especially given some of the broad trends and changes associated with the academic profession?

¹ This notion of “relative autonomy”, drawing from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, emerged from conversations with my colleagues Julia Eastman, Claude Trottier, Olivier Bégin-Caouette, Sharon Li and Christian Noumi as part of a research project on university governance in Canada. This was a national study of governance at selected Canadian universities, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Governing quality: approaches to strengthening academic governance

Traditional forms of academic governance appear to be threatened by the introduction of governance arrangements that valorize corporate approaches and strategic management, and these changes have important implications for governing quality within institutional decision-making. There are, however, at least three approaches that might aid in shifting this balance and reasserting the importance of academic self-governance over key policy issues influencing the dissemination and production of knowledge within public research universities. The first is to reassert the distinctive nature of academic decision-making, the second is to professionalize academic governance work, and the third is to emphasize the importance of professional development for academic leaders.

University governance is different

As Ferlie, Musselin and Andresani (2008) have noted, many of the reforms to university governance can be understood as a product of or response to broader trends in public management. Neoliberalism and New Public Management are not specific to higher education, but have played a role in the transformation of a wide range of government practices in almost every sector of public policy within many jurisdictions. The underlying assumption in at least some systems is that university governance will be strengthened if their governance structures more closely parallel those of other corporations, and, intentionally or not, these shifts have served to weaken more traditional academic governance structures.

One can argue that there are many elements of university decision-making where corporate approaches are entirely appropriate, but universities are distinctive organizational forms, and it is their unique role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge that positions them as key institutions within national research and innovation systems. Introducing western NPM concepts into governance without recognizing the special nature of academic decision-making (and one can find evidence of this in some reforms in East Asia, for example), can have negative consequences for decisions about academic quality and research. This distinctive role requires an appropriate approach to institutional governance, and there is a long history of academic councils and senates with responsibility for making key decisions on academic quality and standards.

The assertion that “university governance is different” may seem obvious to leaders within the academic community, but the corporatization of governance structures has led, in some jurisdictions, to new structures and the increasing involvement of external stakeholders who may not be aware of the distinctive nature of the university as an organization. External members of university bodies may not understand the unique nature of the university, or the importance of academic self-governance, and simply assume that university governance should closely resemble the structures and arrangements that are associated with private corporations.

Universities need to assert and advocate for the distinctive nature of their governance arrangements. External board members and other stakeholders need to be educated on these differences through orientation programming and other professional development opportunities. The objective is to find a balance in which the relative autonomy of the university over key academic decisions is maintained, and finding this balance means explicitly asserting and defending autonomy when orienting external members to their roles on governing boards and in other governance structures.

Professionalizing academic governance work

The doctorate has become the standard entrance credential for academic careers in many jurisdictions, and yet it is widely acknowledged that doctoral programs focus primarily on educating the next generation of academics as researchers, while placing little emphasis on providing new scholars with the skills they will need in other important aspects of academic work. It has been frequently noted, for example, that junior academics may not receive the background preparation they need to be effective teachers prior to their first appointment.

In many respects the “academic profession” is quite different than other more traditional professions such as law and medicine. As Burton Clark (1987) noted more than three decades ago, the academic profession has never been homogeneous; there has never been a singular professional culture for the professoriate that dominates the university environment, in contrast to the manner in which the cultural norms of the medical profession dominate the hospital. In many respects the professoriate, working in the context of national systems, has become even more differentiated. As noted earlier in the paper, the academic profession has become increasingly fragmented along both horizontal and vertical planes. The academic profession has become less “whole” in the face of increasing stratification, specialization, and the emergence of new categories of academic workers.

Given this increasing fragmentation, there is a danger that academics will increasingly see themselves as atomistic, independent workers rather than as members of an academic profession, however broadly defined. This may be especially true in the context of increasing competition for research and prestige, and the related stratification of the professoriate that can be found in some jurisdictions.

The failure to recognize that the professoriate has a collective responsibility for academic self-governance has become an acknowledged problem (Pennock, Jones, Leclerc & Li, 2016), and yet academic self-governance clearly assumes that academics must be engaged in institutional decision-making, that there is a professional responsibility to participate in these processes, and to utilize their academic judgement and expertise to govern quality. This may seem like a responsibility of minor importance in the context of increasing pressures for research productivity or growing responsibilities for teaching in the context of mass higher education. However, engaging in academic

governance processes is a key assumption underscoring the distinctive nature of university governance, and the participation of the professoriate is a necessary condition if universities are to maintain the relative autonomy needed to balance external demands while maintaining the conditions required for the production and dissemination of knowledge.

Members of the academic profession need to understand their professional responsibility to contribute to academic governance. This role should be discussed whenever faculty are introduced to their responsibilities as academics: as part of their educational preparation for the profession, as part of their orientation to their role as academics within universities, and as part of their ongoing professional development. The need to understand this professional responsibility is particularly important in the context of a profession that is becoming increasingly fragmented and differentiated. The responsibility for governing quality must be asserted and shared.

The professional development of academic leaders

The roles and responsibilities of academic leaders in higher education institutions are clearly changing. The traditional role of academic leaders as “first among equals” within at least somewhat collegial governance processes has been shattered by the new organizational realities of the public research universities. The massification of higher education and the new demands for specialized research facilities has led to the development of large, complex institutions. Academic leaders now have significant financial responsibilities, and must oversee the day-to-day activities of institutions that are engaged in a plethora of specialized research and teaching activities. They are frequently assisted by a growing number of professional staff who have the specialized knowledge needed to maintain and support the complex financial and administrative systems associated with the contemporary university.

A common critique found in the literature on university governance reform is that universities are becoming increasingly managerial, that the ideology of management now permeates the culture of decision-making in some institutions (Amaral, Jones & Karseth, 2002; Austin & Jones, 2015). In some respects managerialism within administrative decision-making can be seen as operating in parallel to increasing corporatization in university governance, a belief that management or governance practices viewed as successful within private industry can also be applied to decision processes in higher education. Universities are increasingly viewed as “managed” institutions, in part because of the realities of the increasing complexity of the university as an organization, and in part because governance reforms have been premised on the notion that universities must have the capacity to respond to the demands of their external environment. In this context, the president is now positioned as the chief executive officer in some jurisdictions, and more commonly selected on the basis of leadership acumen, rather than elected as “first among equals.” Similar trends have been noted in the changing role of university middle-management (Meek, Goedegebuure, Santiago & Carvalho, 2010).

While there is little doubt that increasing emphasis is being placed on “management” within the contemporary university, surprisingly little attention has been given to the question of the continuing professional development of academic leaders. How does one acquire the skills and knowledge needed to assume an important leadership position within a university? How do universities support and develop the next generation of chairs, deans and senior leaders that will shape and determine the future direction of the institution?

The answer, for many universities in many jurisdictions, is not very well (Meek, Goedegebuure, Santiago & Carvalho, 2010). There are certainly examples of professional development programs for university leaders, but in many universities the reality is that academic leaders are expected to acquire the skills and knowledge that they need on the job, with little if any professional development support from their institution, or from the higher education system. Given this environment, one might argue that it is quite natural for academic leaders to turn to private sector examples and the robust research literature of management to find possible solutions to the problems that they are trying to address.

Academic leaders, just like external members involved in university governance, need to understand the distinctive nature and role of the university and it is inappropriate to assume that these ideas are simply acquired by working within a university environment. University leaders need to understand the importance of self-governance in key academic decisions, and they need to understand their role in facilitating and supporting the relative autonomy of the university. This is perhaps the strongest argument for investments in the continuing professional development of university leaders: the need to ensure that individuals in leadership positions understand the distinctive nature of the university as an organization and make informed decisions about which management practices will work to strengthen the work of the university, and which practices may threaten the ability of the institution to establish the necessary conditions for the production and dissemination of knowledge. We need to provide our academic leaders with the continuing professional learning opportunities that they need so that they understand and appreciate the unique ways in which these institutions govern their quality and standards.

Conclusions

This paper has provided an overview of broad international trends related to the reform of university governance and changes to the academic profession. These trends and changes suggest that the traditional mechanisms for governing quality in higher education are being threatened, at least in some jurisdictions. The challenge is to find ways of balancing the need for institutions to respond to external stakeholders while at the same time protecting the relative autonomy needed to protect academic self-governance, and the exercise of academic judgement needed to support the production and dissemination of knowledge.

Addressing this challenge requires that those who are involved in university governance recognize the unique nature of the institution, and the distinctive ways in which certain decisions must be made. There needs to be a recognition that “university governance is different,” especially when compared to traditional corporate forms of governance. External members of university governing bodies should be oriented to this distinctive governance arrangement. Members of the academic profession need to understand that they have a professional responsibility to engage in institutional decision-making and academic self-governance. Attention should be given to the continuing professional development of academic leaders so that they understand the unique role that they play in supporting the relative autonomy of the university.

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