

Still unwieldy, male, pale and stale?
Isomorphic influences on
English university governing bodies

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Why does this matter?

The regulatory regime re-enforces the role of governing bodies, with English university governing bodies responsible for all aspects of university governance.

Trends towards “boardism” and “corporatization” along with “laicization” have been identified (Meek & Hayden 2005, Trakman 2008, Christopher 2012, Kretek et al 2013, Stensaker & Vabo 2013, Veiga et al 2015, Shattock & Horvath 2020).

Historically, corporate and academic governance split between the Councils and Senates in universities established before 1992.

However, concerns have been raised re. the failure of “shared governance” (Dearlove 2002, Shattock 2002, Lapworth 2004, Taylor 2013).

Compared to European counterparts, English universities are seen as having greater autonomy, with the UK seen as relatively good practice with respect to the engagement of the academic community.

Institutional isomorphism

Isomorphism: “once a set of organisations emerge as a field, rational actors make their organisations increasingly similar as they try to change them” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p 147)

Three isomorphic processes (not mutually exclusive):

- 1. coercive** – stems from political influence and need for legitimacy (usually the State)
- 2. mimetic** – results from standard responses to uncertainty (structural changes most noticeable)
- 3. normative** – associated with professionalism (professional networks span organisations and fields)

Predictors of change: **dependence** on other organisations/the State, **uncertainty** regarding the relationship between the means and the ends (inputs and outputs), **participation** in trade associations

Institutional isomorphism – in higher education

Previous studies in higher education note States' attempts to diversify provision usually results in greater homogeneity (and stratification).

- Frank & Meyer (2020) re. the global knowledge society
- Huisman & Mampaey (2018) re. branding in UK universities
- Klenk & Seyfried (2016) re. quality management in German universities
- Croucher & Woelert (2015) re. academic structures in Australian universities
- Morphew (2009) re. diversity in US HE provision
- Van Vught (2008) re. mission diversity (*includes summary of previous works*)
- Huisman, Meek & Wood (2007) re. cross-national system diversity
- Stensaker & Norgard (2001) re. U of Tromso positioning
- Gornitzka & Maassen (2000) re. organisational change in HE
- Marginson & Considine (2000) re. Australian universities
- Van Vught (1996) re. HEIs and their environment
- Birnbaum (1983) re. diversity in US HE provision

Research to date re. isomorphism in HE has largely overlooked governing bodies.

Research questions

1. Can one identify isomorphic influences on the composition of English university governing bodies?
2. If so, what are the consequences?

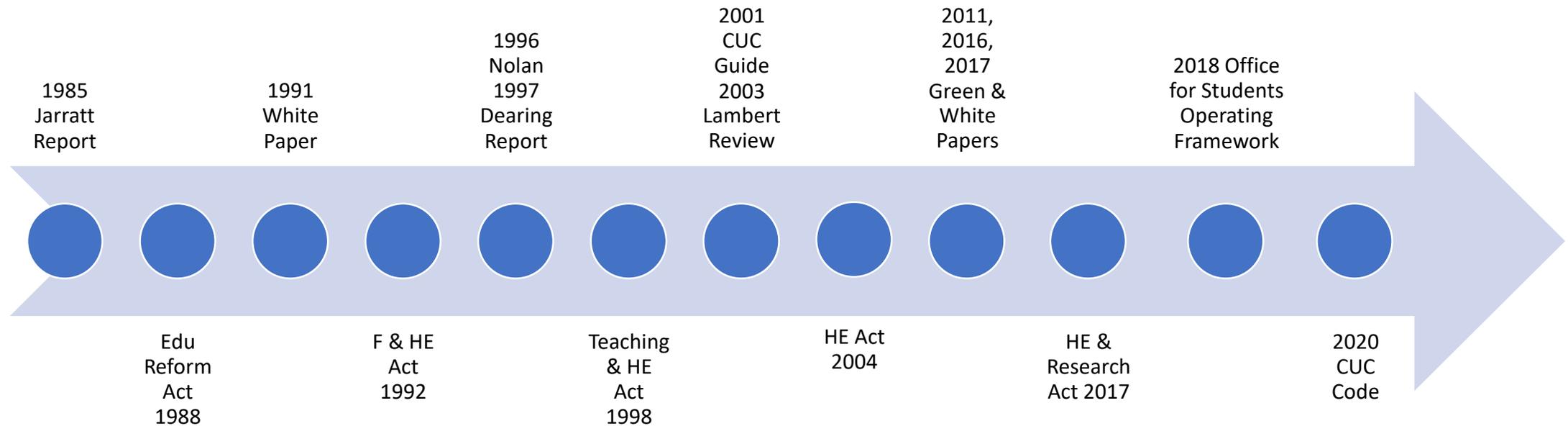
The analytical framework combines thematic review of sector-level documentary evidence and changes to governing body composition over time.

Levels, actors & evidence

Level	Actor	Documents
State – direct	UK government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HE policy papers – “Green” & “White” • Legislation – Acts of Parliament
State – direct	Privy Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approves governing documents
State – indirect	Regulatory body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding Council’s Financial Memorandum • Office for Students’ Operating Framework
	Sector reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports/reviews
Sector	Committee of University Chairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various guides re. governance • Higher Education Governance Code(s)
	“trade assoc’ns”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eg. UUK 2014 Guide to Strategic Fundraising • LFHE’s Governor Briefing notes
	Advisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectiveness review reports

Institutional-level data was aggregated to see the impact of isomorphic pressures.

Isomorphic pressures over time



The straight line does not reflect the inter-related nature of the pressures brought to bear by different actors in the context of “institutional autonomy”.

Eg. the new English regulatory regime (2018)

Coercive elements:

→ Successful registration requires self-reflection and reporting re. management and governance arrangements, including public interest governance & effectiveness reviews

Mimetic elements:

→ Lack of guidance and positive prohibition on seeking advice increases uncertainty for providers who seek to reduce the risk around registration

Normative elements:

→ Sector bodies provide guidelines & other professionals conduct effectiveness reviews to a somewhat “standard template”

Governing body composition areas of focus*

Area	# of documents with explicit references	Comments
Governing body size	9	Smaller; fewer than 25 members
Mix of internal/external members	9	Lay majority, ideally with mix of characteristics & skills/experience**
Types of internal members	8	Academic & support staff & students; not representative
Types of external members (Post-1992s)	2	If any co-opted members, one must be external educator
Tenure	6	Any term limit will do!
Other external posts	1	Senior Independent Governor should be considered

Source: researcher's review of 17 documents from 1985-2020

*Excludes Oxford & Cambridge since Lambert 2003

**note; Scotland's Gender Representation on Public Boards Act of 2018 requires 50% female non-executives

Consequences?

As part of this study, institutional-level data has been collected, collated and analysed across 120 English universities regarding governing body composition including size, structure, and lay member characteristics as of Spring 2019.

Here, the consequences with regard to **governing body size and structure are considered to detect evidence of isomorphism**. To do so, one needs a “baseline” from which to detect changes.

Governing body composition – baseline(s)?

Three potential sources with regard to governing body composition;

1. Bastin (1990) study of the Governing Bodies of 51 Higher Education Corporations (pre-cursors to Post-1992 universities)
2. Bargh, Scott & Smith (1996) study of 24 UK university governing bodies
3. CUC (2004) study of 79 UK institutions' responses to the Dearing Report

The second provides less data on governing body structure and more on characteristics but across a smaller sample.

Composition of “Post 1992” university governing bodies

In 1990, Bastin published data regarding the governing bodies of the 51 Higher Education Corporations created by the ERA1988*.

- All 24 of the former polytechnics became stand-alone universities;
- 18 of the former colleges formed 17 stand-alone universities, six merged with local universities and three remained colleges;
- This resulted in a population of 41 universities which exist today.

Bastin’s study provides data regarding;

- Governing body size, lay membership, other nominated members, including local authority representatives, academic and other nominees.
- Lay member and Chair characteristics, primarily gender and sector backgrounds.

*The Act specified the model Articles of Government, including governing body composition parameters

Composition of “Post-1992” university governing bodies

Comparison of Governing Body composition for 41 HECs, 2019 v. 1990

	Avg # total members	Mode	Range	Std dev		Avg # Lay members	Mode	Range	Std dev
1990	20	25	13 to 25	3.43		11	13	7 to 13	1.84
2019	17.7	17	13 to 24	2.83		12.5	13	8 to 17	2.26

Source: Bastin (1990), researcher’s database (2019), like-for-like universities

The governing bodies have **decreased in size**, with less variation, **and much lower mode**. All but one of those with 20+ original members decreased in size whilst only seven increased in size. This indicates *a degree of isomorphism*.

The **lay majority has increased**. In part because of the removal of local authority membership (other than as co-opted members) in the 1992 Act. The higher range on lay membership appears to relate to succession planning.

The diversity of lay members has also increased, with **twice as many women** (from c. 20% to c. 40%) and a **smaller majority from industry**.

Governing body characteristics

In 1996, Bargh, Scott & Smith published findings from survey of 10 Pre-1992 and 14 Post-1992 UK universities (plus four colleges).

- Found “the majority of members were white, male, aged between 46 and 65 and full-time professionals who had qualified to at least first degree level” (p46).
- 18% female and less than 2% ethnic minorities.
- Pre- and Post-1992 universities not very different.

Composition of “All” UK University Governing Bodies

In 2003, the Committee of University Chairs conducted a study regarding institutions’ responses to the Dearing Report of 1996. The scope included **reviews of governing documents, governing body composition, lay member characteristics**, committee structures, # of meetings and attendance, and whether conducting effectiveness reviews.

79 of 114 UK universities participated

- 51 Pre-1992 universities (excluding Oxford & Cambridge)
- 28 Post-1992 universities

Compared these 79 UK universities to the 83 (47 Pre-1992 and 36 Post-1992) English universities established by 2003.

Governing Body Composition...16 years later

Type & members	2003 Avg #	2003 range	Std dev		2019 Avg #	2019 range	Std dev	comments
<i>Pre-1992</i>	<i>n=51</i>				<i>n=47</i>			<i>excl. Oxbridge</i>
Total	32	20-72	7.70		20	14-25	3.08	much less variation
Lay	18	11-26	3.24		12	7-17	2.07	Lay majority of smaller #
<i>Post-1992s</i>	<i>n=28</i>				<i>n=36</i>			
Total	22	17-27	2.36		18	13-24	2.93	Slightly greater variation
Lay	15.5	11-19	2.14		12.5	8-17	2.41	Lay majority & succession
<i>Total</i>	<i>n=79</i>				<i>n=83</i>			
Total	28	17-72	8.03		19	13-25	3.32	Much smaller with more similarity between Pre & Post 1992s
Lay	17	11-26	3.11		12	7-17	2.57	Fewer lay governors; greater %

Source: CUC (2004) report on UK unis & researcher's 2019 database on English unis; **not like-for-like**

Governing Body Gender...16 years later

	2003 Pre-92s	2003 Post-92s	2003 total		2019 Pre-92s	2019 Post-92s	2019 total	comments
# of unis*	51	28	79		47	36	83	
# of lay members	918	434	1352		564	449	1013	Fewer members
<i>% female lay members</i>								
<i>Fewer than 5%</i>	6%		4%					
<i>10-20%</i>	29%	14%	24%		6%	3%	5%	
<i>20-40%**</i>	65%	86%	72%		45%	53%	48%	
<i>Greater than 40%</i>					49%	44%	47%	
<i>Average</i>	?	?			41%	40%	40.5%	<i>Pre92s caught up on gender diversity</i>

Source: CUC (2004) report on UK unis & researcher's 2019 database on English unis, **not like-for-like**

*2003 data for UK universities & 2019 for English universities

**2003 data was only greater than 20%

UK university governing body characteristics (2019)

Area						comments
Gender	59% male	41% female				
Ethnicity (% of declared)	88% white	5.5% Asian or Asian Brit	3% black, African, Caribbean	2% mixed or other		16% undeclared
Age	6% <26	12% 26-45	25% 46-55	33% 56-65	24% >65	

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency Staff Records 2018/19 – all UK universities.

Provision of governing body data is finally mandatory as part of Staff Return, however, reporting is patchy (16 universities had more than 30% of their governors without ethnicity data) and data cannot be disaggregated.

Chair Characteristics (2019)

Gender: 25% female (Deputies 51%)

Sector: 45% corporate, 22% civil and public service, 14% professional, 9% academic and 6% not-for-profit

Sector background varies by type of institution:

- Civic, Early and former Polytechnics much more likely to have corporate backgrounds (55%+ each)
- 1960s universities much more likely to be chaired by former civil servants (40%)
- Cathedral dominated by religious, public service or educational background
- Specialist more professional or academic chairs

Career stage: 33% still active executives – similar across all but Civics (21%) and Specialist (54%)

Source: researcher's database of 120 English universities

Other Lay Member Characteristics (2019)

Gender: 40% female

Sector: same as Chairs, except fewer Civil Service and more professional (18%) and education/academic (14%)

Lay academics:

- 69 in total (five Chairs, four Deputies)
- Uneven distribution by type – fewer in Civics and Former Polys; more in new universities
- 45% had any lay academics

Alumni:

- 154 in total (six Chairs, nine Deputies)
- Very uneven distribution by type – Civics and 1960 universities have 3.5 and 2.5 on average.
- 55% had any alumni (*note; two had seven, one had six and three had five*)

Source: researcher's database of 120 English universities

Isomorphism in English University Governing Bodies?

Documentary evidence provides ample examples of isomorphic pressures regarding English university governing body size & composition.

- The areas which have coincided with (?) greater homogeneity include **smaller governing bodies, a lay majority, and more consistent staff and student membership.**
- Using historical and more recent governing body composition data, **greater homogeneity in governing body composition can be detected across Post 1992 universities (Bastin 1990 v. 2019) and much greater across universities established by 2003 (CUC 2004 v. 2019), indicating isomorphism.**

Limitations: not like-for-like data and not explored motivations for changes or exact processes.

*English university governing bodies are no longer **as** unwieldy, male nor stale, but remain relatively pale. Lay members have wider sector backgrounds.*

Further points to consider

Are smaller governing bodies more effective?

- Explore case studies of those which have altered, and sometimes, changed back.
- Consider in relation to committee structures/ways of working.

Consider governing body composition in the context of governing body roles, including staff and student governors and changes in lay characteristics.

What, if any, pressures might result in further reshaping of governing body composition? More student members? Lay academic members? Others?

Better data capture & reporting required across the sector.