Working together in governance?
The construction of common purpose amongst university governing body members

Cathy Rytmeister, Macquarie University

Introduction

University governance has, over the last decade, increasingly drawn the attention of government, regulatory authorities, researchers in higher education and the press. Contributing factors are increased competition and complexity in the higher education sector resulting from the largely inter-related trends of marketisation, massification, falling public funding and globalisation. At the institutional level, the rise of executive power since the 1980s (Marginson & Considine, 2000) accompanied by an apparent loss of collegial power (Shattock, 2002), seems to have given rise to a new focus on governance as a mechanism for control and for safeguarding and delivering value in return for public investment.

According to Australia’s National Governance Protocols (Department of Education Science and Training, 2004), the governance role includes ensuring accountability; monitoring performance of both executive management and the institution itself; setting strategic directions; and ensuring financial viability and sustainability. In addition, Protocol 3 requires that the duties of governing body members must be specified in the university’s enabling legislation, including the duty to:

... always in the best interests of the higher education provider as a whole, with this obligation to be observed in priority to any duty a member may owe to those electing or appointing him or her.

Protocol 3 essentially makes the unitary assumption that the “best interests” of the university are clearly defined and well-understood, and that governing body members share this understanding, or at least, should share it. But is this the case? The “best interests” of the university may be contested, not only because of technical conflict of interest, but also because of the diversity and complexity of interests and accountabilities that must be taken into account and balanced in determining strategies and courses of action for the institution.

In recognition of this, Australian university governing bodies (UGBs) include ex officio, appointed and elected members drawn from the university’s internal and external communities. Members bring with them to the task of governance different experiences, assumptions, knowledge, beliefs and values. While it is made clear to them that they are not “representatives” of their stakeholder groups, in the sense of delegation, it is generally accepted that they contribute particular perspectives and expertise to the governing body. The challenge for UGB members is to interpret, understand and balance the various stakeholder interests in order to construct a common purpose and a negotiated position on the “best interests” of the institution.

Several studies have considered different member categories, including specific comparisons of external and internal members (Jones & Skolnik, 1997; Larsen, 2001; Marshall, Rytmeister, & Cameron, 2002). Others have focused on Chancellors (Chairs), Vice-Chancellors (Presidents) and heads of Academic Boards (Kerr & Gade, 1989; Meek & Wood, 1998). Tierney (2004) and Bargh, Scott, & Smith (1996) cast a wider net, interviewing members across different categories. Few of them, however, have reported in depth on how members perceive, interpret and respond to the actions and motivations of others. This paper draws on empirical data from a larger study of how UGB members construct their role to consider how different groups within UGBs perceive each others’ interests and attribute expertise and capacity to contribute to institutional governance.
The study and data

The data are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 36 members of the governing bodies (hereafter termed Councils) of seven Australian universities in four jurisdictions. All membership categories (*ex officio*, appointed and elected) are included in the sample, as are most types of university, including “sandstone” universities and newer institutions established through amalgamations in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both capital city and regional universities are included. Observations of Council meetings and documents such as selected Council papers, minutes, review reports and induction booklets have provided additional depth as well as triangulation of data.

It is important to note that the vast majority of participants in the research saw their Councils as exercising good practice in governance. Several participants with experience in university governance contrasted their Councils’ current practice with previous experiences, either under different leadership at their current institution or at another institution.

How do Council members see each other?

Social identity theory (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995) considers how people categorise themselves and others into social groups, and argues that group categorization, and hence identity, affects how individuals perceive and judge others. I have reported elsewhere (Rytmeister, 2007) on the ways in which Council members perceive their role in strategic processes and argued that this indicates their construction of multiple social identities in Council. The social groups on which these are based are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Key social identities within Council

Due to space limitations, the following discussion focuses on five groups: students; elected staff; external members; Vice-Chancellors and Chancellors. It examines how members in different groups perceive the interests of other groups, and how they judge members’ expertise and capacity to contribute to the governance role. The diversity of views presented indicates the fragility of the unitary assumptions of the National Governance Protocols. An alternative is a pluralist approach that seeks a deep understanding and genuine acceptance of different views and perspectives, and builds respect for different types of expertise. This is proposed as a more effective basis for negotiating the balance of competing interests that best constitutes “the interests of the university”.

![Figure 1. Key social identities within Council](image-url)
**Students**

*Interests:* Students were seen by a number of research participants as particularly important, being the key stakeholder and at the core of the academic mission of the university. Several attributed a high value to the student presence, and spoke with great admiration of the contributions of student-elected members, particularly but not only on issues of central importance to students. They generally did not see this as students inappropriately placing their constituents’ interest ahead of that of the University; rather, it was seen as providing a valuable perspective that is simply not available to others on Council, particularly external members. On the other hand, some interviewees did see students as pushing a particular point of view, whether based on student interests or broader political allegiances. This was not seen as disruptive so much as something to be taken into account, or discounted, when making decisions.

*Capacity/expertise:* Some interviewees, particularly Chancellors and other external members, were concerned that students lacked confidence, were overwhelmed by Council and contributed less than they ought to. Several (including students) observed that the one-year terms for student members made it difficult for them to gain the knowledge and confidence to contribute as fully as they would like.

Some participants doubted students’ capacity to contribute effectively at all: a few took the view that student membership of Council was of little value, on the basis that students did not have the experience or knowledge to be effective at that level. This judgment tended to come from those with substantial commercial corporate governance experience, although it was by no means expressed by all participants in this category.

More positive views of student capacity to contribute were based on their position at the core of the academic business of the university. Some saw this as constituting expertise, not merely a perspective. Students themselves made some claims in this regard, stressing that, because of their broader representative role as student council presidents, they sat on more committees than the Vice-Chancellor, at all levels of the institution. Therefore, they argued, their breadth and depth of knowledge of the internal workings of the university was far superior to that of most Council members.

**Staff**

*Interests:* At the time interviews were conducted, some institutions had recently experienced industrial conflicts around collective bargaining, workforce planning and/or restructuring. In these issues, some participants saw potential conflicts between the interests of staff and those of the university as a whole. In one Council, a staff-elected member’s representation of staff interests was seen as overt and strident, with the member concerned explicitly stating an intention to represent the interests of staff on the basis that these are identical to those of the university. Apart from this case, there were mixed views on whether staff members merely presented a perspective on such issues or were intrinsically conflicted because of their status as university employees and in some cases, union representatives. Some staff-elected members themselves admitted to some difficulties in this regard, but none felt that their position should lead to exclusion from these types of discussions.

On issues other than industrial, attitudes to staff-elected members, as to students, were generally positive: that they provide a professional perspective on the university’s core activities of research and teaching, which would otherwise be unavailable to Council members. The majority of interviewees took the view that staff were entitled to, and welcome to, present the staff perspective, although a number explicitly stated that they would accordingly discount staff contributions to some extent.

Some interviewees commented that staff-elected members provided a balance for, or alternative to, information provided by the Vice-Chancellor. At times this might support the Vice-Chancellor, enhancing explanations of the rationale for various strategic actions or directions in terms of the academic mission. At other times, the staff perspective was seen as useful in managing the risk inherent in the Council’s reliance on the Vice-Chancellor as its main source of information, including advice on strategy and performance.
**Capacity/expertise:** Positive views of academic staff expertise related to the practice of teaching and research in the university as well as knowledge in their discipline area. Notwithstanding the concerns noted above regarding industrial advocacy, union representatives’ direct knowledge of issues concerning staff was also seen as useful by some interviewees, who on occasion sought out these views informally.

Negative attitudes to staff capacity to contribute were argued on similar grounds as those given for students: insufficient levels of knowledge and skills to enable high level strategic thinking and monitoring of institutional performance. Some external members implied that staff-elected members’ excellent knowledge and expertise in their discipline and immediate environment was inversely related to their understanding of the “big picture” issues dealt with at the level of institutional governance.

Staff members, both academic and general, were seen by some interviewees, particularly Executive members, Chancellors and external members, as less able than others to make the distinction between governance and management matters. They were also viewed as more likely to attempt to use Council to bypass internal policies and procedures and sidestep the obligation to deal with management on operational and industrial matters.

**External members**

**Interests:** The interpretation of the interests of external members (other than the Chancellor) is not generally defined by their relationship with the university, as it is for internal elected members. The “external” group is therefore more diverse than the internals, with multiple social groups and identities, and consequently attributions of interest, defined on the basis of perceptions of members’ educational, professional and/or social background, organisational experience, political views or allegiances, method of appointment (Council or Minister) and personal agendas.

An example is the way in which some interviewees explained different members’ positions in discussion of (although not necessarily in voting on) controversial issues such as raising tuition fees. Members appointed on the basis of their financial accounting expertise, or viewed as politically sympathetic to the current Federal Government, were seen by others as taking a rationalist, financial approach to such decisions, while members with an educational background or perceived to be left-leaning in terms of political views were seen as more likely to raise issues of equity and access for students.

Such judgments were made in spite of the expressed view of several external members that their category of membership was fortunate in having “no interests” and “no constituents” and therefore, by default, always acting only in the University’s interests. It is interesting, however, that some of these members (including several in the “financial expertise” group) also spoke of their commitment to the social mission of the university, including provision of education to disadvantaged groups and geographical areas. To them, this was a key interest to take into account in decision-making. However, this was rarely acknowledged by others: only two or three participants explicitly commented on this particular motivation for external members.

There were sometimes perceptions that external members (including the Chancellor) acted to protect or support the interests of the Vice-Chancellor as a proxy for, rather than separate from, the University’s interests. Staff-elected members, especially those who were also union representatives, more commonly expressed dissatisfaction with this than did other member groups.

**Capacity/expertise:** The diversity of external members’ experience and expertise was highly valued by the majority of interviewees, and externals’ capacity and willingness to contribute on these bases generally viewed positively. Contributions based on specialist professional expertise in tandem with perceived personal qualities such as honesty and diligence gave rise to attributions of trust, particularly around financial matters.

Positive views of expertise and commitment were sometimes tempered by concerns about lack of capacity, due to inadequate knowledge of the university, its culture and the complexity of its internal operations and politics. Unsurprisingly, it was internal members who tended to express this concern. Some interviewees
also raised concerns about the perceived narrowness or inadequacy of external members’ conception of the university as an entity, judged in some cases on the basis of their organisational experience and disciplinary background and in others on their perceived political allegiances and views.

The confidence of external Councillors in questioning and challenging the management of the university (in an appropriate manner) was noted by a number of interviewees. This was attributed to their experience in a range of organisations, their status as leaders in their own industries, and/or their greater need for information due to their external status. Some participants observed that, at times, the assertive behaviour of external members needed to be moderated by the Chancellor in order for others to also have their say.

**Vice-Chancellors**

*Interests:* Concerns over the divergent interests of managers and owners date back to the separation of these roles in corporations (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). In considering universities, this tension may perhaps be paralleled by that between managers’ and stakeholders’ interests, with the latter being blended in some way to constitute “the interests of the university” as a whole. Amongst interviewees in this study, there was little perception of divergence between the interests of their current Vice-Chancellors and that of the university as a whole, although the possibility of this was certainly acknowledged by some, based on previous experience or observation of other institutions. Those who did see divergence spoke of management career- and self-interest, including an interest in personal power. The reliance on the Vice-Chancellor as the primary source of information for external members was seen as a potential risk in the case of such divergence.

*Capacity/expertise:* Recalling that most study participants saw their institutions as exercising good practice in governance, it is hardly surprising to find that the majority of interviewees saw their current Vice-Chancellors in a positive light, expressing great admiration for their skills, knowledge, leadership and personal qualities. These include: knowledge of the higher education sector, policy and strategic challenges; competent management and leadership of their institution; an understanding of the values and ideals of higher education; the ability to formulate and articulate a clear vision for the University; and interpersonal and political skills. Advocacy for the University and building relations with external organisations were highly valued by Council members.

Only a few interviewees put forward any concerns about their Vice-Chancellors, although negative views were certainly expressed about previous Vice-Chancellors or those elsewhere. Those who saw limitations in capacity tended to focus on problems with communication, financial management and strategic judgment. A number of interviewees commented on the tension between the desired personal and professional qualities of a Vice-Chancellor, including strength, courage, decisiveness, confidence and vision, and the need for Council to fulfil its role in monitoring the performance of both the university and the Vice-Chancellor. These concerns echo one of the governance paradoxes identified by (Cornforth, 2003).

**Chancellors**

*Interests:* The Chancellor is often instrumental in induction processes, in which members’ responsibility to act in the interests of the university before all others is made quite clear. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that few interviewees questioned or examined their Chancellor’s extramural interests. Members of Council seem to identify Chancellors’ interests strongly with those of the University, perhaps more so than they do Vice-Chancellors’. This view seems independent of internal or external status, although internals were more likely to attribute certain political sympathies to the Chancellor, based on the latter’s professional and/or corporate governance experience and background.

*Capacity/expertise:* The chairing skills of the Chancellor, and his or her ability to manage the boundary between operational and governance matters, ranked as highly important with most interviewees. Chancellors themselves saw this as a vital skill in fulfilling their role. Participants tended to see the professional expertise of the Chancellor as somewhat less important than the ability to chair meetings in an inclusive but efficient way, although expertise was by no means irrelevant. For example, a Chancellor’s experience and knowledge of the higher education sector was most important when the institution had encountered problems with management and/or governance, and need to regain stability after a period of
turbulence. On the other hand, several Council members saw a Chancellor with commercial corporate experience being appropriate for entrepreneurial or growth phases, following the institutionalisation of new strategic directions.

Some external members, in particular those with extensive commercial corporate board experience, saw the Chancellor as perhaps a little too inclusive, being willing to give everyone a say at the expense of efficiency in meetings and decision-making. Nevertheless, they also saw the cultural and political benefits of this inclusiveness within Council. A Chancellor’s erring on the side of a participatory culture was not seen as a major flaw, merely a minor irritation at times.

Most interviewees commented on the importance of the relationship between the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor. Few members were critical of the nature of this relationship in their Councils, seeing them as healthy, productive and necessary for the effective functioning of the Council. Some commented on the need, however, for the Chancellor to have the capacity to moderate or call the Vice-Chancellor to account where necessary, and to ensure that Council members had opportunities to question the Vice-Chancellor in constructive ways. This tension between supporting and managing the Vice-Chancellor was recognised more by external than internal members of Councils. One staff-elected member saw the Chancellor’s capacity to manage the Vice-Chancellor as inadequate and expressed a wish for a firmer hand. Most of the other interviewees, however, saw their Chancellors as providing balance in this regard.

**Conclusion**

If governing body members are to reach a shared view of “the interests of the university”, the impact of their different backgrounds and social identities needs to be understood and the boundaries between them negotiated. Boundaries between social groups are accentuated when the bases of categorisation are salient to the situation (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995). Given the salience of many social differentiators in the context of governance (for example, expertise and relationship to the university) and the diversity of interpretations and judgments outlined above, it seems that these differences may never be fully reconciled. Therefore a pluralist approach that seeks to understand, accept and value diversity, rather than problematising it, is more likely to be an effective pathway to negotiating interests to construct a form of common purpose. The governance and management challenge is to enable this approach while de-emphasising boundary issues and preventing consolidation of interest or social groups into factions.

One way of minimising social distance between groups is the creation and promotion of an inclusive Council culture. I have argued elsewhere (Rymteister, 2007) that a Council’s capacity to build and sustain such a culture requires trust and goodwill, with these in turn largely dependent upon the approach of the Chancellor, the perceived competence and integrity of the Vice-Chancellor and the qualities of individual members. All of these are within the sphere of influence of the Council itself.

An emerging interpretation of the data is that “working together” on the basis of unitary assumptions is unlikely to be achieved under either the current or likely future composition of governing bodies. Consciously shifting the focus from defining and defending boundaries to understanding diversity in both interests and expertise enables acknowledgement that acting on different interpretations of interests is not inconsistent with acting in good faith. It also invites recognition that a difference of opinion, emphasis or focus, rather than constituting a conflict of interest, should be seen as a normal and welcome aspect of the complementarity of skills, expertise and experience needed to fulfil the increasingly complex task of governing a modern Australian university.

**References**


