

University governance and quality assurance: what is at stake?

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Abstract:

The growing institutional autonomy and the expansion of university missions have often been accompanied by the emergence of governance guidelines. In parallel, most countries have created national or regional quality assurance systems and prepared codes or principles that encompass institutional governance. Governance and quality issues are intertwined.

The presentation derives from an examination of a selection of nation- or region-wide governance arrangements and quality assurance guides, codes and set of principles designed by ministries, founding authorities, quality assurance agencies, rectors' conferences and associations of institutions.

The presentation shows the various types and purposes of governance arrangements, and underscores the binding nature of quality assurance guidelines while most governance arrangements are advisory in nature.

It will discuss the opportunity to define appropriate guidance for institutions at a time of increasing institutional autonomy and development of quality assurance frameworks.

Questions for the debate: *Can quality assurance adequately address governance arrangements? As institutional autonomy increases, do institutions need guidelines of any kind? Is QA a control of the quality and of the management or is QA a management tool?*

Introduction

Recent developments in higher education have led to a twofold and to some extent contradictory development in several OECD countries. While higher education institutions have been criticised for not reacting in the sufficient way to society's needs and hence are target of measures that improve accountability it is likewise recognised that the best way of making higher education institutions more responsible to the public good is by granting stronger institutional autonomy. The former is visible in the growing importance of internal and external quality assurance and the latter refers to what Georg Krücken and Frank Meier (2009) describe as the genesis of the university as an actor through the transfer of decision making powers to institutions and financial autonomy. Both trends emphasise institutional responsibility and shift the success of policy-reform from the sound reform-concept to the capacity of the institution to respond appropriately. The growing importance of effective institutional settings and governing procedures is reflected in the concept of governance as an analytical tool for political analysis (see Kennedy, 2003). Other than a strict top-down structure *governance* comprises a "complex web" of legislative framework, characteristics of the institution, financial regulation and fund-raising as well as formal and informal structures and relationships of actors which steer and influence behaviour (OECD, Santiago *et al.*, 2008).

As a practical response recommendations and guidelines have been drafted, that aims at making governance more effective. If they solely address governance and are not part of a broader external evaluation process we use the term *governance arrangements*. Are they interwoven into guidelines

that have been issued by quality assurance agencies we use the term *quality guidelines*. In a way they reflect the mentioned tension between growing institutional autonomy and the need for external supervision and accountability. In the following we argue that this tension may indeed cause problems if used as a further strict regulation tool but it can likewise be used productively to make higher education more effective and ensure quality provision in the wake of an upcoming knowledge economy.

Methodology

The authors¹ drew up a list of eleven governance arrangements in the following countries: Australia, United States of America, Denmark, Israel, Netherlands, Russia, Ireland, United Kingdom, Quebec (Canada). They opted for the term “arrangements” which may encompass guidelines, codes, principles or set of precepts defined independently or collaboratively by governments (usually by Ministries of Higher Education), national/regional quality assurance agencies, rectors’ conferences, funding authorities, councils for higher education or associations of institutions.

Secondly, the authors looked at how well quality assurance processes (such as quality assessment, institutional and system accreditation, quality audit) address governance issues through the guides prepared by quality assurance agencies (usually in collaboration with the institutions and the state). The authors concentrated on 25 quality guidelines issued by six United States regional accreditation agencies, on Indian (accreditation), Japanese (accreditation), South African (accreditation), Hong Kong quality guidelines (accreditation), United Kingdom (audit) and French quality guidelines (institutional evaluation). Audit guidelines from Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Russia and Ireland were analysed as well as accreditation guidelines from Germany, Norway and Switzerland.

Reasons for the emergence of governance arrangements and quality guidelines

Governance arrangements are a rather new product in higher education discourse and reflect the decreasing regulation of higher education through state law. They provide guidance toward autonomous institutions and diffuse knowledge and expertise gathered from experience. In a broad sense the review identified three reasons for the publishing of governance arrangements. The first type of governance arrangements result from the will of institutions to show they can make good use of the autonomy given to them. They aim at increasing trust in higher education institutions and hope for further deregulation. In short this means: “better governance = more trust = less regulation” (Fletcher, 2007). A second type of arrangements aims to help institutions adopt corporate governance in line with the New Public Management (NPM) philosophy. Such arrangements often refer to companies’ law or comparable guidelines from corporate governance. Finally, a third category of arrangements is a response to protect institutions from fraud or mismanagement by framing their autonomy and providing advice. After severe individual problems that arose out of the granting of institutional autonomy in OECD countries, governance arrangements were a way of reinstating guidance and trust without taking away the newly gained institutional freedom. All three categories of governance arrangements approve the need for stronger institutional flexibility while aiming to maintain public trust.

The addressing of governance issues in quality assurance is also a rather new trend. During recent years all OECD countries have implemented sound quality assurance mechanisms in order to improve educational provision and make it more comparable. While in several cases this initially referred to individual programme evaluation and its accreditation, procedural aspects and the functioning of the broader structural framework have risen in importance. Such structural analysis can take the form of quality assessment, audits or system accreditation and thereby differ in conduct and the degree of compliance. The switch toward structural evaluation now more and more introduce governance issues into quality guidelines. Such guidelines are used both by institutions (*e.g.* to prepare a self-evaluation) and by external bodies and range from definite points to consider to best practice examples.

¹ For an in-depth analysis see Hénard and Mitterle (OECD, 2010) www.oecd.org/dataoecd/14/18/46064461.pdf

Issues addressed in governance arrangements and quality guidelines

Governance arrangements and governance issues addressed in quality guidelines play a similar role in making institutions more effective. Governance arrangements concentrate on providing a trustworthy setting out of which competitive but culturally diverse institutions can arise. Their main aim is to clarify institutional structures and procedures. Especially the governing boards seem to be the addressee for such arrangements. This is visible in the importance set on the role and composition of the governing board members, their relationships to the institutional administration and stakeholders and the proper delegation of power toward committees and chairs. This is because governing boards in most of the reviewed countries play a major role in defining institutional responsibilities and have an important supervisory function concerning the institution. Notably the inclusion of extra-institutional members into the work of the governing board and their honesty concerning their assigned role are crucial to ensure the well-functioning of the institution and hence public trust. The advisory character of the arrangements is further visible in frequent cross-referencing to relevant documentation and laws in order to outline the framework on which higher education institutions can be built and sustained. Questions of risk management as well as the fostering and codification of ethical and academic values conclude this thrive for good institutional governance.

Governance issues in quality guidelines address similar aspects. They however set a stronger spotlight on the planning processes and the nurturing of a quality culture. In fact, while governance arrangements clarify on the fundamentals of good institutional governance, most of the reviewed quality guidelines focus less on the institutional setting² and more on the improvement of procedural aspects. This is explicit in the emphasis set on the formulation and sound implementation of an institutional mission as well as the participatory inclusion of stakeholders and actors in decision making procedures. Similar to the governance arrangements ethical values and transparency are underlined.

Even though some structural differences can be seen between the ways governance is addressed in several of the quality guidelines (notably European) and governance arrangements, the detailed structure of the US-American quality guidelines in a way obliterate clear differences. The difference is hence less apparent in the content but in the role they play in higher education.

Advisory vs. binding character

It is clear from the reviewed documents that most governance arrangements are advisory in nature, which allows the institution to use them in its own way. To some extent, they represent a cautious approach to help institutions progress without hampering the diversity of higher education.

In comparison, quality guidelines have a rather binding character and may demand compliance from institutions looking for full accreditation. Ultimately, quality guidelines endorse an external position on how the assessed university should work, although the criteria against which effective governance will be assessed remain undefined. Some may become quite strict (notably for programme accreditation) and leave little leeway to institutions. Acceptance of these quality frameworks implies acceptance of the criteria used by the quality assurance agency, the ministry and institutions (Witte, 2008).

At this point the mentioned tension between stronger institutional autonomy and external control becomes quite clear. While governance arrangements by law are reduced the development of a regionally and culturally embedded governance structure may be hampered through new restraining quality instruments. Such an approach to governance would just produce another regulatory instrument next to funding, planning and steering (Singh, 2007).

² The detailed description of institutional arrangements issued by US-american accreditation agencies are an exception

Are governance arrangements and quality guidelines useful instruments?

In the eyes of these structural aspects, the question arises whether governance arrangements and quality guidelines are useful instruments to foster good governance and improve quality. Taken aside the extremes of lax and overregulation, such tensions can have a productive side that ultimately resolves them in a mutually benefitting way. The challenges higher education institutions are facing are enormous regarding the role they play in a developing knowledge society. The pace of reforms and changes can in some cases be quite difficult for institutions to manage. In a time where more efficiency *and* effectiveness is expected from HEIs, mismanagement and frauds not only become a problem but receive greater attention from media and the public. Defining and proposing governance arrangements may therefore be an opportunity for the State, the intermediate bodies (quality assurance agencies, councils for higher education, funding authorities) and institutions to discuss the fair level of autonomy and accountability and to define areas of responsibility. Such arrangements could broaden the enforcement of nation-wide regulations, explore levels of autonomy for institutions and pinpoint vital elements facilitating efficient governance.

Quality guidelines could act as governance arrangements – and hence replace them – if they specified ultimate goals (*i.e.*, thoroughly defined expectations and criteria of quality assurance regarding governance). They could also set out clearer objectives for improvement and play a stronger pedagogical role.

Good governance guidelines and arrangements on the other side could be a starting point to examine regulation to make institutional autonomy more explicit. They could help new leaders understand where autonomy and accountability lie. For current leaders, it might be useful to occasionally refer to guidelines as a reminder, or as a collection of inspirational benchmarks. However, guidelines and arrangements must not be fixed in stone, as higher education institutions operate in an interactive and multi-player system. Any guideline or arrangement should be regularly updated and discussed with all parties involved.

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1. List of governance arrangements reviewed:

Governance arrangements (abbreviations)	Responsible institution	Position of publishing body in national higher education governance	Year [first edition]	Enforcement
Irish Guidelines	HEA IUA	Semi-state body Stakeholder (universities)	2007 [2007]	low (non-alignment has to be explained)
Quebecois Guidelines	IGOPP	Expert (think tank)	2007 [2007]	none
Danish Guidelines	University Boards in Denmark Committee	Expert (Committee for the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation)	2003 [2003]	none
Dutch Guidelines	HBO-raad	Stakeholder (<i>Hogescholen</i>)	2006[2006]	low
Australian Guidelines	DEST	State	2007/8 [2000]	high (connected to funding)
UK Guidelines	CUC	Stakeholder (governing boards)	2004 [1995]	low (non-alignment has to be explained)
AGB Guidelines AGB Trustee Guide	AGB	Stakeholder (governing boards)	2001 [2001]	none
AAUP Guidelines	AAUP	Stakeholder (academics)	1990 [1966]	none
Israeli Guidelines	CHE	Semi-state body	2004 [2004]	high (law-like character)
Scottish Guidelines	SHEFC	Semi-state body	1999 [1999]	low
Glion Declaration	Glion	Stakeholder/Reputation of individuals (international declaration)	1999 [1999]	none
Magna Charta Universitatum	Rectors of European Universities	Stakeholders (declaration by European institutions)	1988 [1988]	none

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