



*Council for the Defence
of British Universities*

“Whose Universities?”

A Symposium on Academic Governance

Hosted by the Council for the Defence of British Universities
(CDBU) and Influencing the Corridors of Power (ICOP)

Tuesday 11 July, 2023

Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, SOAS, University of London, Russell Square,
WC1H 0XG



On Tuesday 11 July 2023, the Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU) hosted a symposium on the subject of academic governance at SOAS, University of London in collaboration with Influencing Corridors of Power (ICOP).

The aim of the day was as follows: to examine and critique the state of the governance of UK universities through collegial discussion between expert speakers and members of the audience.

This report contains summaries of the talks supplemented by testimonies from participants.

CDBU is currently drafting a policy document on academic governance based on the discussions and findings of the symposium, in collaboration with ICOP.

SESSION SUMMARIES

Professor Adam Habib, Director, SOAS – Introductory Address

Professor Habib opened the symposium with a rousing defence of academic autonomy. He also called for a 'social pact' between organisations representing the profession such as the CDBU and UUK to present a united front taking on the government. Speaking from his experience in both "building and breaking institutions", firstly as an activist in apartheid South Africa and now as a Vice-Chancellor and Director of a British university, Professor Habib put forward "four provocations" in the context of the debate surrounding academic governance in the UK. The first, "You cannot think about academic autonomy without thinking of public accountability", argued for a university that is not driven by the short-term constraints of a balance sheet or wider constraints. There is a difference between state accountability (to the government of the day) and accountability to the public. Consequently, we need plurality in governance to represent the interests of a broad public. The second provocation, "The UK university is under threat because the academy has failed in its duty to speak frankly. Since taking up his post at SOAS he has often been advised to refrain from stating his view. Government interference in universities has been facilitated by "internal intolerance" and confusion over academic freedom. Next, Professor Habib argued that "The business model of UK universities is morally broken" and unsustainable. 40% of teaching for home students is funded by international fees which include, in some cases, a 500% markup on the cost of their tuition. Villagers in a country like Malawi cannot be expected to crowd-fund UK students when they sponsor one of their own to study in Britain. In the fourth and final provocation he stated that "British universities and unions alike have developed a self-serving definition of social justice", where hiked international fees are accepted "in service of the British working class", but "damn the people of the South". Professor Habib closed with the hopes that British universities will enter a period of self-reflection, to "recognise that [they have] agency to determine [their] own future", and that the symposium is a sign that those working within and around universities want an honest conversation about the future of Higher Education.

Professor Michael Shattock (UCL) – University governance in the UK: is there a way back?

ABSTRACT: There is widespread dissatisfaction with the 'business model' that currently dominates the practice of university governance in the UK chiefly on the grounds that its priorities are managerialist and insufficiently academic. It is customary to blame this on external forces, on governmental, financial and

market pressures and we can add the growth in size and complexity of our institutions. It is undoubtedly true that these pressures have changed the internal governance cultures of universities. What can universities do to resist them? My argument will be that there is much that universities can do within their own self-governance to reverse the trends of the last two decades if they choose to do so. But is this part of the problem?

Professor Shattock spoke about the “subordination” of academics in UK universities, which has resulted in an “institutional disempowerment” and a dominant “business model” approach to university governance. Marketing and HR are the shock troopers of this revolution. Meanwhile we have institutional autonomy: the University Grants Council (UGC) was abolished long ago, its role now played by a regulator (the Office for Students or OfS) with the result that there is no intermediary between Government and universities. Governing bodies are not critical friends. He offered two solutions to resisting the business model: 1. Emphasise the Vice Chancellor’s role as an academic leader, rather than a business manager, and; 2. PVC’s and Deans should be appointed from the inside, answerable to the academic community rather than their “business manager” boss, which would reintegrate the academic voice to the governance process.

Professor Steve Jones (Manchester University) – Reimagining University Governance: preliminary findings from CBDU research

ABSTRACT: For most university staff, governance is a secretive and distant activity, something that happens without their consent or understanding. Yet the greater power invested in governing bodies means that their approaches - and the ideologies that inform them - now impact everyone on campus. This paper reports on a 2023 project funded by the CBDU that involved interviews with a range of past and present governors at UK institutions. New and critical insights into practice are offered, together with practical recommendations for more participatory and context-sensitive forms of governance.

Steve Jones reported on the fruitful interviews conducted with Council members, including lay governors, student governors and academic representatives on governing bodies, many of whom are confused about their roles and about the business matters conducted at the meetings they themselves attend. Meanwhile senior leadership teams want to box items through with minimal critical discussion. CBDU will publish a full report on the findings of Professor Jones’ project in the autumn.

Gill Evans (University of Cambridge) – What protects academic autonomy?

ABSTRACT: The Higher Education and Research Act of 2017 defines ‘autonomy’ as ‘the freedom of English higher education providers within the law to conduct their day-to-day management in an effective and competent way’. Where is ‘academic autonomy’ in that view of a university’s independence?

Offering a concise overview of the different governing bodies which make up a UK university, and the statutes and regulations that bind them, Professor Evans echoed the sentiments of Professor Shattock by advocating for a “strong, cohesive, self-critical academic community” which underpins the university, while also bearing in mind that the academic community needs the time and security to act as such - which for many academic staff is unfortunately not the case.

Melody Stephen (former NUS sabbatical officer and student governor, Manchester University) – Revisiting the Role of Students in Higher Education governance

ABSTRACT: This contribution is an experience-based exploration of how governance can alienate the student ‘voice’ and create factions within the governing body at the expense of the student experience. Since Covid, the demand on universities has increased, and there is a greater awareness and critique of leadership from students, which means that invisible decision-making in oak-panelled rooms is insufficient. The need to bridge the gap of trust between the student, the academic, the professional, and the lay governors, on the one hand, and the executive is imperative but the task strains under the weight of historical and performative traditions. Universities are slow to change and the repercussions can be dire for the most disadvantaged students.

Offering a valuable insight into the student perception of university governance, Melody described the “tribalism” taking place at Council meetings between academic staff and management, which “undermines and distorts” meaningful progress on issues which affect students. Meetings lacked transparency, diversity, and when decisions were made they were buried beneath a complex web of committees. Melody advocated for a more transparent, mainstreamed approach to governance where students are meaningfully involved and informed about how universities are governed.

Alex Bols (Guild HE) – What role should governing bodies have in academic governance and assurance?

ABSTRACT: University boards of governors/Councils are expected to play an active role in seeking assurance that academic governance is robust and effective. Increasing numbers of institutions have independent board members observing academic board/senate, have joint senate and council meetings or are developing academic governance committees of the board. Do governing bodies have the capability and capacity to undertake this role effectively and how does this avoid duplicating, or overstepping, internal academic governance processes?

Dr Bols raised the question, “Is autonomy automatic, or does it need to be earned?”, if the higher education sector as a whole wishes to avoid further external intervention, it must ask itself about the robustness of governance processes across each institution. Without equally robust processes, the sector will be unable to move away from questions about degree quality, standards, and metrics. Perhaps an ‘internal academic mapping document’ is the way forward?

Professor Peter Scott (UCL, and former VC, Kingston University) – University governance at its widest extent and in its wider context

ABSTRACT: To paraphrase a famous resolution passed by the House of Commons in 1780 the corporate character of the university has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished. But how? Professor Scott’s argument is in two parts. First, institutional governance (councils, courts and governing bodies) is best viewed through a wide lens - as one element in a complex eco-system within which strategic and operational decisions get taken. As well as institutional governance, this eco-system includes national and system-level governance (Government itself and assorted intermediate agencies); executive leadership (senior institutional managers); and academic governance (not only formal bodies such as Senates and Faculty Boards but also the influence exercised by academic ‘tribes’ and professions through new-fangled assessment instruments and old-fashioned peer review). Second, this governance eco-system, including institutional governance, must itself be viewed through the lenses of mass higher education and the wider political economy, with their own complex synergies and contradictions. Too often this has been reduced to a series of hurrah and/or boo words – efficiency, modernisation, accountability, corporatisation, marketisation, managerialism and the rest. A more subtle reading is needed.

Professor Scott argued that universities have spent “too much time focusing on the minutiae of governing bodies, and too little understanding the wider environment in which they operate”. As a member of six governing bodies, he questioned why so many of those bodies were so similar, when institutions themselves have become more diverse. He argued that governing bodies are “cautious and reactive” and plagued with “ideological polarisation”, and, echoing the calls for transparency made by Melody Stephen, said it was often impossible to find out who members of governing bodies even are, as their details are buried so deep on university websites. He concluded by asking if the entire eco-system and eco-structure of the university was to blame for the corporate overreach currently taking place in UK higher education, rather than the governing bodies.

Lord David Willetts (Resolution Foundation) – How is the character of the university changing?

ABSTRACT: Lord Willetts will briefly review previous accounts from Bruce Truscot's *Red Brick* (1943) which was an attack on the role of local worthies in running the civic universities and A.H Halsey arguing that public funding liberated academics from such dependence. Now the responsibilities of governing bodies are increasing, reinforced by OfS regulation. The biggest risk to the character of the University would be if OfS decided that universities should be treated as public sector bodies. There is also a danger that growth in student numbers will lead to very large universities indeed unless we create new higher education institutions which is also an opportunity to promote greater institutional diversity.

Lord Willetts argued that there “never was a golden age of the university as a self-governing, academic community without external pressures”. He touched on the civic responsibility of universities to take on local students, which has been hindered by the highly mobile, choice-based system of choosing a university in the UK, which looks odd in comparison with our European counterparts. Institutionalised by UCAS and successive reforms, this mobility has seen British universities suffer a lack of home students, an over-reliance on international students, with no “globally operational British university chain” to fall back on. He finished by touching on the “culture wars” which have taken hold of British universities and wider society, arguing that universities could help us move forward (despite being the source of such ‘wars’) by welcoming divergent opinions, being respectful of others, and being a place where freedom of speech is exercised rather than constrained.

Dr Rowan Williams (former Master, Magdalene College Cambridge, chair of Trustees, CDBU) – Cultures of Mistrust: the Threats to Critical Thinking

ABSTRACT: The crisis in academic governance, reflected in the practical and financial crises in so many institutions, is the working through of a culture that assumes intellectual activity as such has no independent justification and no capacity for self-scrutiny. This needs resisting; but it needs resisting in ways that take the argument to the basic level and address the needs of a viable democracy.

Dr Williams made a series of important observations and raised questions about the cultures of mistrust within the British university, with regard to governance and accountability. What does good governance look like? In whose interests do higher education institutions work? Good governance, according to Dr Williams, should be about accountability first and foremost, so one knows who to challenge when malpractice occurs, and should also allow for a diversity of interests which can be “explored, probed,

challenged, or argued for, with no disproportionate emphasis on policy". Universities should refocus themselves by prioritising the shared interests of the student and the researcher: "There would not be higher education institutions without the interlocking expectations of students inducted into intellectual practice and the practitioner having the time to conduct such an induction", and the universities' social interests, too, should be broadened, whether that be towards regional or civic government, third sector work, or social health and welfare. A convergence of these interests and the needs of the student, wider society and the researcher, would make the university a place of shared critical reflection, which could help "prevent society slipping back into unchallenged prevailing forms of power".

Professor Ronald Barnett (Emeritus Professor of Higher Education, University College London, CDBU Executive Committee) – Summing-up and concluding reflections

Professor Barnett, member of the CDBU Executive Committee and organiser of the event, offered the following concluding remarks for the report:

"The day was a great success, with distinguished and expert speakers coming at the matter of academic governance with considerable authority and each from a particular perspective.

A number of interconnected concerns had motivated this event, namely that (a) UK higher education had adopted business models for its governance arrangements, serving a narrow set of stakeholders (located very broadly in the economy and the state and according a severely diminished role to academics); (b) students occupied an ambiguous position; (c) governance arrangements endorsed a top-down model of management; and (d) insufficient account was being taken of wider voices of society and the world. In short, academic governance was running counter to movements in the public sphere and civic society – where an ever-wider array of voices are being heard on matters.

Four specific issues arose through the day: (i) What agency is available to universities? (ii) Might the voices of the academics and of the students be more encouraged? (iii) Which voices are to be heard? What of heeding the voiceless, of the entities of Nature? (iv) Can academic governance be remodelled so as to promote collaboration rather than competition across institutions?

However, there were in addition two foundational matters simmering under the surface of the day's proceedings:

- The constitutional issue – who guards the guardians – or who governs the governors? From where do they derive their legitimacy? In whose interests should they act?

- The adequacy issue – does the present set of models supply governance arrangements that are fit for the C21, that have a proper balance between the two functions of overseeing the present direction of travel and sighting new horizons?

It is a century after all that is faced with planetary degradation, increasing conflicts not only between the wealthy and poorer nations but within nations, populism, and a schism between those who have experienced higher education and those who have not.

Our present governance arrangements are keeping a foot on the brake, fearful of the kind of massive reorientation that is required of our universities, when they should be assisting universities to be wise institutions, hearing a much larger array of voices from the world.

So, the conclusion (if there is one) is that the matter of academic governance is of fundamental importance not just to universities but to society and even the wider world. It is, therefore, a matter that we should go on worrying about and struggling with, individually, institutionally and collectively.

TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS

“The event underlined the urgent need for a rethink of university governance. Most remarkable was the extent to which speakers with very different perspectives - from a student governor to a former minister - reached similar conclusions about the nature of the problem and the size of the challenge.”

– Professor Steve Jones

“It is becoming increasingly clear that the clauses in the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) requiring the institutional autonomy’ of all higher education providers cannot easily continue to apply in the traditional way. Alternative providers do not have many (or any) research-active staff able to ensure academic independence and protect quality and standards. Government policy has been putting an emphasis on increasing provision of Levels 4 and 5 in a very limited range of employment-related courses not including the full range of subjects which can make transition to a university at Level 6 straightforward. It also confuses the distinction between further and higher by encouraging the provision of higher education in Further Education Colleges and provision of a new category of Level 4 and 5 Higher Technical Qualifications accredited by the Institute for Advanced Technical Education.”

– Professor Gill Evans

“One of the problems with discussing university governance is that there is an almost irresistible urge to focus on what is perceived as the golden age when university autonomy was near absolute, academic governance still held sway (even if a growing number of academics were second-class citizens) and the State provided generous funding, (almost) no questions asked. But the system has been completely transformed - students are counted in millions not the low hundreds of thousands, the number and types of institutions have exploded and even the most traditional research intensive universities have become large complex organisations with proliferating missions. If we are serious about defending universities against excessive managerialism and the encroachments of the State, as we must be, we have to start from where we are now not where we imagined we were two generations ago.”

- Professor Peter Scott

“Teaching, quality and research are the core activity of universities and so governing bodies shouldn’t completely exclude themselves from this activity as a matter of principle. There are a number of clear roles that governing bodies have in relation to academic governance including assurance, compliance and setting

strategy. There have been many benefits of having university Councils getting more interested in these issues, including having a semi-independent group considering the robustness of the processes and holding the feet of management to the fire to ensure that issues are investigated and followed-up.”

– Alex Bols

“Governance whether it is at a national or at an institutional level is an underrated topic yet it plays a key role in creating the climate in which academic work is carried out. The current regime is not conducive to the best teaching and research—too much weight is placed on competition, as a result universities are becoming too authoritarian and managerial instead of participative and the state is increasingly interventionist and regulatory, it appears, on overtly political grounds. Good governance is in short supply. Universities need to recapture the principle that they are first and foremost academic institutions and that their governance should reflect this in spite of any pressures to do otherwise exercised by the state.”

– Professor Michael Shattock

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Professor Adam Habib (SOAS)

Professor Adam Habib is the Director of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He is a Professor of Political Science with over 30 years of academic, research and administration expertise, spanning five universities and multiple local and international institutions. He also served as Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, Africa and is one of the co-founders of the African Research Universities Alliance, an affiliation of research-intensive universities on the continent.

Professor Michael Shattock (UCL)

Michael Shattock is a Visiting Professor at UCL and an Honorary Research Fellow at Oxford; he was Registrar of Warwick 1983-99; he is an OBE and has five honorary degrees. He is leader of the governance research group in the Centre for Global Higher Education at Oxford. Publications include (with Aniko Horvath) The Governance of British Higher Education—The impact of governmental, financial and market pressures, Bloomsbury, 2020.

Professor Steven Jones (Manchester University)

Professor Steven Jones is Head of Manchester Institute of Education, which is part of The University of Manchester. He is particularly interested in how the marketisation of English Higher Education has impacted on staff and students, and he is one of the most prominent commentators on English universities, having written op-ed pieces for the Guardian and other newspapers, and made regular contributions to WonkHE, HEPI, the Times Higher and the Conversation. Professor Jones's newest book, Universities Under Fire, was published in June 2022.

Gill Evans (University of Cambridge)

G.R.Evans is Emeritus Professor of Medieval Theology and Intellectual History in the University of Cambridge. She served as a member of the Cambridge University Council and ran the HEFCE-funded Improving Dispute Resolution Project.

Melody Stephen (former student, Manchester University)

Melody Stephen is a Law graduate who was elected General Secretary of the University of Manchester Students' Union as well as a Board member of Governors of the University of Manchester (2020). She is currently a board member at UCAS and UCAS media board representing 700000 students and at the National Union of Students. She is also a member of the Strategic Advisory group at Advance HE and an executive member of Bridging the Bar, a charity aimed at increasing diversity in the legal profession.

Alex Bols (Guild HE)

Dr Alex Bols is Deputy Chief Executive of GuildHE, which represents over 60 universities and colleges. He is an experienced university and school governor and has worked across the sector including at NUS, Universities UK, European Students Union and the 1994 Group.

Professor Peter Scott (UCL, and former VC, Kingston University)

Peter Scott is Emeritus Professor of Higher Education Studies at University College London. Previously he was Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland (2016-2022), Chair of the Council of the University of Gloucestershire (2012-2015), and Vice-Chancellor of Kingston University (1998-2010). He has also been a member of the board of the (former) Higher Education Funding Council for England, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Education at the University of Leeds. In a much earlier life, he was Editor of (what was then) The Times Higher Education Supplement.

Lord David Willetts (Resolution Foundation)

The Rt Hon. Lord Willetts FRS is the President of the Resolution Foundation. He is a visiting Professor at King's College, London and an Honorary Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford. He was Chancellor of the University of Leicester. He served as Minister for Universities and Science (2010-2014) and previously worked at HM Treasury and the No. 10 Policy Unit. His book "[A University Education](#)" is published by Oxford University Press.

Dr Rowan Williams (former Master, Magdalene College Cambridge)

Dr Rowan Williams grew up in South Wales and has worked in various universities including Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol and Yale. After serving as Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012, he spent

eight years as Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and has been Chancellor of the University of South Wales since 2013.

Professor Ronald Barnett

Ron Barnett is a member of the Executive Committee of the CDBU and Emeritus Professor of Higher Education, University College London – having been Pro-Director for Longer Term Strategy at the Institute of Education. He is also President of the Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Society.



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