

**International Trends in University Governance: Autonomy, self-government and the distribution of authority, edited by Michael Shattock**

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University governance is a specialist topic even for students of higher education – perhaps, you may think, a little dry and procedural: statutes, standing orders, terms of reference, and the like. Actually, as this book – edited by the doyen of the study of higher education governance, Michael Shattock – amply demonstrates, it offers a picture of the beating heart of a university: who makes what decisions, on what authority?

The book provides case studies of the main models of university governance globally: the continental European Humboldtian and Napoleonic traditions (represented here by studies of the former model from Germany, Norway, and Finland, and of the latter from France and Italy); the Japanese model (a European/US hybrid); and the Anglo-American-Australian model (with studies from all three regions). The book shows that changes in governance are taking place in countries that operate all of these models – and this, as Shattock observes, is because higher education, around the world, is itself under strain. Arguably, the higher education system seeing the least amount of change in its governance structures is that of the United States – although that is at least in part because theirs is not a single ‘system’, but multiple state systems interacting with a large private sector, and where a tradition of ‘shared governance’ is strongly embedded; news from US higher education is full of accounts of open and robust exchanges between governing boards and academic bodies. As the author of the US chapter, David Dill, remarks, university governance there is ‘somewhat unique’ (166).

But while questions of governance appear to be at the heart of university affairs, there is a paradox: really, does the chosen model make much difference? After all, there are both excellent and failing universities to be found in all the higher education systems mentioned above. If a particular model of governance offered a powerful means of improving quality, standards, cost-effectiveness, and so on, wouldn’t everyone promptly have followed suit, as with most innovations that appear to work? As Shattock points out in his chapter on the UK, ‘Oxford and Cambridge retain governing bodies that have no lay membership’ (142), and this is clearly no obstacle to them being, in most estimations, in the global top-ten. On the other hand, UK universities with lay-dominated governing bodies have failed in various ways – Shattock cites University College Cardiff in 1987 (to which one might add, later, the University of Wales itself) and London Metropolitan University, but any issue of *Times Higher Education* will provide an example of a UK university with symptoms of dysfunctional governance. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that governance structures are only as good as the people who operate them.

The chapter by Bjørn Stensaker on Norway offers a fascinating case study of a small higher education system founded on firm Humboldtian principles undergoing radical change in terms of governance from around 2000, with greater institutional autonomy being provided by central government in return for a more managerial structure comprising external, Ministry-appointed board members (to simplify a complicated set of arrangements). As so often with government interventions in higher education, the ‘quality reforms’ of successive Norwegian governments were driven by political dissatisfaction with the perceived condition of the universities and a belief that more (or at least, different) management, overseen by different governance, was the answer. Stensaker shows that, in the decade since the ‘quality reforms’ were enacted, the Norwegian system did indeed improve in terms of indicators such as student retention and research output – but other changes in university funding and quality assessment processes had also been introduced in the same period, making it impossible to tell what would have happened if governance had been left unchanged. Stensaker suggests that it was the changes to the funding

regime that had most impact on university behaviour, regardless of the governance arrangements. He concludes that 'increased governance capacity ... seems in this respect to have little relevance' to improving the quality of teaching and research in Norwegian universities (46).

Rather similarly, the chapter on France by Stéphanie Chatelain-Ponry *et al.* argues that the major changes over the last decade or so to university governance there have been based on ideological premises. These changes have been driven in part by 'France [being] a latecomer in New Public Management ... only in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s [was it] that the NPM doctrine really diffused into the French public system' (67), and also by a wider decline in the egalitarian spirit in French life. So this was, in part, governance change as a result of policy-borrowing, with the implied view that stronger central direction and control within institutions would lead to improved performance. Again, one sees an assumption in play that governance change would have beneficial effects on the universities, but on the basis of minimal evidence.

By 2020, the two largest higher education systems in the world (in terms of quantity if not quality) will be China and India. Neither country rates a mention in the index of this book. Can continental Europe and the Anglosphere provide pointers on governance to the developing higher education systems of Asia? Perhaps the book was correct not to press this point.

Paul Temple  
*UCL Institute of Education, University College London*  
*p.temple@ioe.ac.uk*